

Marion Borgelt and Paul Selwood: brave lives; bold artworks

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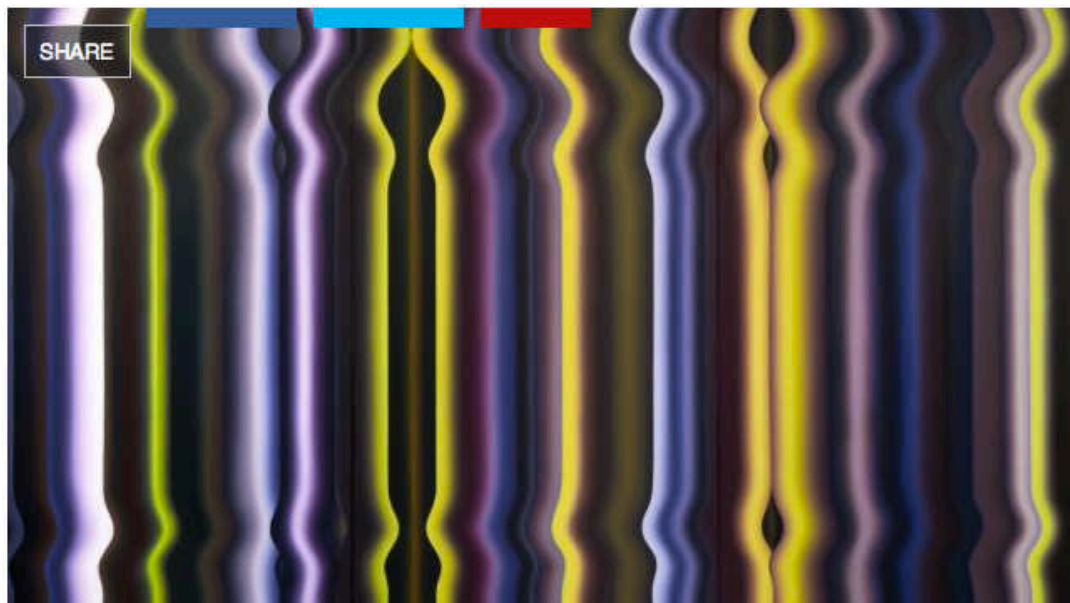


Ever since former Newcastle lord mayor Jeff McCloy decided that Newcastle Art Gallery couldn't afford a renovation and didn't need a director, the place has been as lively as a wet weekend in Minmi. This has been a disaster for one of Australia's leading regional galleries. Perhaps only Ballarat and Bendigo could claim to have more important collections, but with a population three times the size of its Victorian counterparts, Newcastle should be at the top of the heap.

The property developer-mayor stepped down in August 2014 after a bruising encounter with the Independent Commission Against Corruption, but Newcastle has yet to repair the damage. There is still no permanent director, and the institution is a pale shadow of what it was three to four years ago.

Worse still, the contagion has spread, with ignorant, short-sighted councils all over the state thinking it's a great idea to replace gallery directors with a manager of cultural services. Instead of saving a dollar they are destroying a major tourist asset, alienating donors and supporters, removing programs that promote public education and social cohesion. Let's give this process a name: vandalism.

Newcastle will not be fixed until the position of gallery director is re-established and money is spent refurbishing and renovating the building. The gallery staff are making heroic efforts to restore normal service but everything looks tired, dark and dingy.



Marion Borgelt's Persian Strobe No. 1. Photo: Supplied

I was drawn back to Newcastle by the exhibition, *Marion Borgelt: Memory & Symbol*. This is a survey of work from 1993 to the present by an artist who should be better recognised for her invention, consistency and versatility. The show has been put together by NAG curator Sarah Johnson, who can take credit for the selection, but can't be blamed for the lighting, which is woeful. There is a room brochure rather than a catalogue, which is forgivable; but no complete list of works.

Borgelt has spent much of her career experimenting with shaped canvases, optical effects, unusual surfaces and materials, but to appreciate such efforts good lighting is crucial. In the *Icons and Emblems* series of 1995, she set textured surfaces in vivid red against a black backdrop, but the red needs light for the painting to be seen to best advantage.

By the early 1990s Borgelt's work had undergone a radical transformation. While her early paintings had been ragged, all-over grids, the new works were dominated by a severe geometry with symbolic overtones, and a palette that had become almost monochromatic.

Looking at these works today, they remind me of the cosmic diagrams scholars of the Elizabethan era would use to illustrate theories that were a mixture of science and superstition. They also resemble extreme close-ups of plant or crystalline forms, while the pervasive red suggests blood and the body. One presumes the symbols are left deliberately open-ended, inviting the broadest range of interpretations.

Borgelt's techniques are incredibly neat and precise – a tendency that has developed over time until it's hard to decide whether we are dealing with art or design – if that distinction has any validity. Borgelt has occasionally satirised her own obsessive sense of design, but it has become a trademark that tends to divide audiences between those who admire the sharpness and ingenuity of her inventions, and those who find them too contrived. Personally, I would prefer something a bit more expressive, but I can't deny the intelligence and sheer class of these pieces.

A sculptural installation such as *Tsukimi Slice Sequence B* (2008-09), consists of 10 smooth spheres of pine wood that have been bisected and laid out in a line, so the two parts of the solid seem to become progressively separated.

Tsukimi is the Japanese term for moon viewing, and this is self-evidently what Borgelt is alluding to in this sequence. What makes viewers stop and stare is the superb craftsmanship that has gone into the work, from the smoothly carved spheres to the flat surfaces coated in fragments of pale blue duck egg. I doubt that Borgelt has the skills to do this, but she is always happy to bring in collaborators. It's the final product that matters, not the touch of the artist's hand.

Even in her large paintings there is little room for improvisation. *The Strobe* series of 2007 features canvases covered in parallel lines of colour that have been blurred with an airbrush. The skill of these works lies in the discipline required to keep each line straight, until a dip arrives, like a blip on a cardiogram. There is no room for error.

In the *Liquid Light* series of 2014 canvases have been sliced into thin strands and slightly twisted to give an optical effect. As you walk past the circular form of *Liquid Light Butterfly No. 17*, the colours seem to move with you.

With a late painting such as *Lunar Tango No. 1* (2015), which resembles a forest of dimly illuminated tubes and spheres, Borgelt has been fastidious in the way she has added the illusion of a third dimension to her abstract forms. I looked into this forest longing to discover an errant brushstroke, but there was nothing to disturb the smoothness of the surface. It would be impossible to tell such a perfectionist to take it easy, as I'm sure she believes the quality of the art is bound up with the quality of care expended in its making.

From Newcastle I drove to Maitland Regional Art Gallery, a venue that is bucking the negative trends sweeping through the state's regional galleries. Since its major refurbishment in 2009, the MRAG has never taken a backward step. It has an excellent cafe and shop, and manages to host at least five exhibitions simultaneously.

I was there to see *From Matter to Manner*, a survey by sculptor Paul Selwood, who turned 70 this year. The show, which is devoted almost entirely to outdoor work, ranges across 50 of those years.



Marion Borgelt's *Liquid Light Butterfly No. 17*. Photo: Supplied

In all that time Selwood has never ceased exhibiting, usually at Sydney's Watters Gallery. He tends to work in series, with pieces in a show sharing various family traits. Inevitably there is an element of repetition, but Selwood also has the knack of springing surprises.

Unlike most of his peers who make abstract welded metal sculpture, Selwood is rarely tempted by the found object, the sensuous curve of a piece of pipe, or the hint of figuration. Among the works showing in Maitland, only *Transfigured Night* (2004) has this kind of complexity, but even that piece is dominated by flat planes from which sections have been cut and folded.

Most of the other works have been produced entirely by this cutting and folding. The process begins with a maquette made from cut paper, but the final form will be altered as the piece evolves. These sculptures can feel more like screens, even though they are made to be viewed in the round, not from any one angle.

Works such as *The Museum* (2013) and *Dark Steps* (2014) are architectonic in character: the bare essence of a building from which details – and most of the volumes – have been removed. By contrast, the bunched, interlocking forms of a work such as *Green Mountain* (2006) make clear allusions to landscape.

As with Borgelt, it seems that a lot of the work that goes into these sculptures takes place in Selwood's mind. He begins with a firm idea of the piece he is going to make, like a scientist preparing to test a hypothesis in the laboratory. Experimentation allows for deviations from the original plan, but the conceptual framework remains intact.

Selwood is the antithesis of Borgelt in his use of plain, utilitarian surfaces; and just as distant from sculptors such as Ron Robertson-Swann or Michael Le Grand, who give their works an immaculate appearance. For Selwood, the idea appears to take precedence over the material artefact. It doesn't matter to him if the paint is flat and dull because it is the form, not the finish, that is paramount. In this artist's view of the world a sculpture represents an act of persuasion, not seduction.

***Marion Borgelt: Memory & Symbol* is at Newcastle Art Gallery, until October 23; *From Matter to Manner: The Sculpture of Paul Selwood* is at Maitland Regional Art Gallery, until November 6.**