

NICHOLAS FOLLAND LIKES PLAYING TRICKS. MANY OF HIS WORKS OFFER UP PERTURBING PUZZLES AND TEASES, ALL DIRECTED AT THE NATURE OF ART AND ITS VALUE, WRITES **EDWARD COLLESS**. PORTRAIT BY **MICK BRADLEY**.



When Nicholas Folland was studying in Rotterdam on his 1999 Samstag Scholarship, he built a feeding ground for the city's pigeons on the art school's rooftop: a patch of wild grass in that tidy city's otherwise sanitary, if windswept, rafters. But this was not quite as sweet a gesture as it sounds. Pigeons are classified as vermin by Dutch authorities, and feeding them is illegal: presumably, as with other stateless entities whose food supply is withheld, they would move out of the territory. That scrap of grass might have the symbolic grace of a United Nations food drop to refugees in a desert, but an artificially induced miniature of parkland is hardly a cosily sustainable habitat and clearly wasn't meant as one. If pigeons are like flying rats, then Folland's grass – more an enticement to these birds than a charitable provision, and one that was luring them specifically into a designed and designated art precinct – was the premise for an infection, not a cure.

The mischief in this act doesn't exactly measure up as a political intervention; it's much more directed, and effectively so, at the nature of art than at nature itself. Folland had even devised a modified bird-feed that would colourise (like domestic canaries) those hapless Dutch pigeons who were attracted to the art school, making them more amenable to Dutch visual taste. It didn't work, but there's nonetheless a wicked edge of comedy in this, as well as a wry aesthetic game.

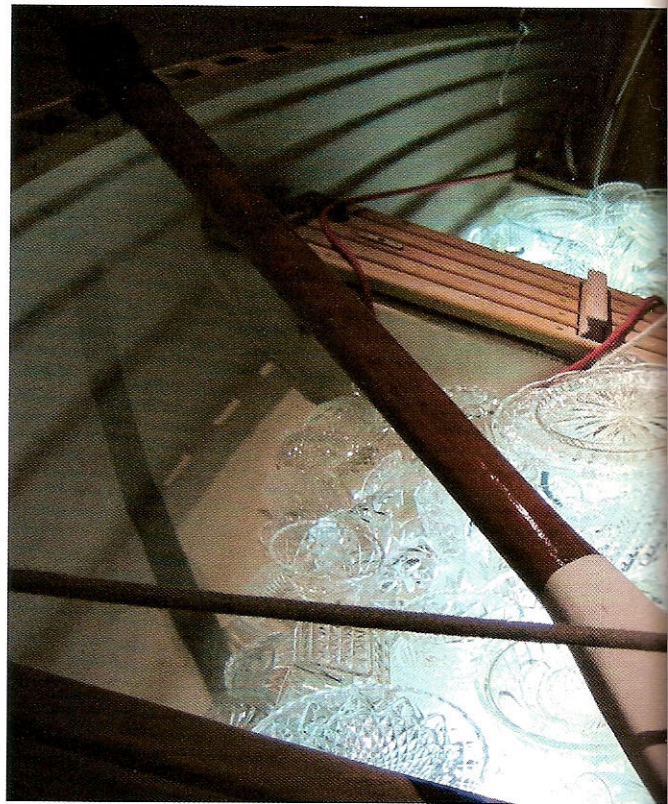
Attracting the unwanted in order to make it attractive: is this not

art's dutiful social effect? Like the gentrification of urban waste, art configures outcast nature into the convenience of décor. But Folland turns this formula backward, against nature. Before the Rotterdam trip, in 1997, he modified sixteen green padded sofa stools on castors, each with a slightly different height and inclination, to fit into a tight rectangular grid that formed a gently rising hillock. It looked as benign as a manicured grassy slope on a golf course, but it was more pointed as a kind of huge geometric toy, an alluring but perturbing puzzle like a rubik's cube.

Folland has accented this sort of puzzlingly dysfunctional artefact as a poignant fable about art's value: a sailing boat is marooned in a gallery as if by a retreating tide and, left high and dry, it's filled with an aesthetic relic of the medium that once supported it – the sea has become an exquisite luminous icy glass wave, frozen as it floods the boat's interior but turning the piteous object into an extravagant lighting fixture.

Or, inversely, a fully decked out bathroom installed in the gallery – with the same awkward tilt as the stranded boat – has all its plumbing incontinently running so that the bathtub, sink and toilet endlessly overflow, like a madly salivating mouth. None of this water will ever launch the boat: it drains away as it rots the bathroom's wooden floor.

There's a perverse sexual – perhaps Duchampian – tease embedded in the elegance of these gestures. A cluster of boulders, for



instance, each with an electrical heating rod neatly but quite evidently inserted into a finely drilled hole, sit heavily on the floor, plugged into the gallery's power points. The sexual connotation of this less than efficient heating system is hilarious: these lumps of inert nature warmed up to body temperature by a phallic intrusion and excitation show that art can be hot stuff, but that it runs off the mains supply of its venue. The double entendre can be subtly poised too. Folland's most recent work, shown at Gertrude Street Contemporary Art Spaces in its annual *Octopus 8* exhibition, was an exquisitely functionless chemical still, made from cut crystal resembling a fantastically intricate perfume bottle or decanter in the unmistakable diagrammatic form of female reproductive anatomy. What kind of scent or liquor could be dispensed from this apparatus?

One of Folland's most memorable objects gives something of an answer. In the National Gallery of Victoria's vast survey show of contemporary Australian art, titled *2004: Australian Culture Now*, an ornately decorated cut glass chandelier, skewed at an angle by being hooked up with tubes to a refrigeration device, grew a huge tumour of ice at its centre. In its frigid plumbing, this fantastic mechanism recalled Duchamp's notorious bride stripped bare. The refrigerator seemed to both be a clinical as well as domestic apparatus – a life support system attached to the chandelier – but also a parasite. ■

The Nicholas Folland exhibition will be showing at Greenaway Art Gallery in Adelaide from 15 October to 16 November 2008.

Previous page:

Nicholas Folland, *Untitled (boat 5)*, 2008, detail, crystal decanters, timber, resin, florescent light, 28 x 32 x 28cm.

This page from above left:

Nicholas Folland, *Doldrum*, 2005. Boat, crystal crockery, florescent light, dimensions variable.

Nicholas Folland, *Doldrum*, 2005, detail, boat, crystal crockery, florescent light, dimensions variable.

Nicholas Folland, *Speechless*, 2007, detail, 300 found trophies, dimensions variable.

Nicholas Folland, *Untitled (boat 5)*, 2008. Crystal decanters, timber, resin, florescent light, 28 x 32 x 28cm

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND GREENAWAY ART GALLERY, ADELAIDE



WENDY WALKER ART CRITIC

In *Artlink* in 2006, Adelaide-based art writer and critic Wendy Walker wrote on Folland's work: "There are a number of...parallels with the work of German-born Neudecker, who has habitually drawn on the tradition of German romantic painting in her interpretations of landscape.

"Folland has from the outset expressed an affinity for the stripped-down, poetic metaphor and in his idiosyncratic repertoire of signs, a 'grid' of sixteen, massed green footstools on castors, a tall kitchen unit or a vast agglomeration of Bohemia crystal glassware may refer to a mountain peak (or a sofa, a raft and so on).

"The undisclosed genesis for *Speculative Knowledge* (2001) – one of Folland's most subtle, yet compelling works – was the Antarctic journals of Robert Falcon Scott, in which he repeatedly commented on the difficulty of excluding draughts from

the expedition's tents. Unconnected to electricity, the three wall-mounted industrial fans of *Speculative Knowledge* might be viewed as non-functional, as irrefutably becalmed objects. For the duration of the 2001 exhibition, the fans were mounted on a wall, adjacent to the entrance of Greenaway Art Gallery. Each time a visitor entered the gallery space – thereby creating a current of air – the fans were momentarily activated, thus performing (however ephemerally) their designated function. Accordingly, in this most slyly understated of Folland's installations, the spectator physically and quite unwittingly, completed the work. It is precisely the sort of playful ploy – the materialisation of the intangible, the transformation of the undesirable into the functional – that marks Folland as an artist of uncommon vision."

Ruth Skilbeck





PAUL GREENAWAY DIRECTOR, GREENAWAY ART GALLERY

Like climate change, it may have taken awhile, but the time has now come for public recognition of **Nicholas Folland's** dramatically nuanced sculptural works and installations, which use visual metaphors to suggest open-ended narratives of humans' blighted cultural interaction with the natural environment.

After several years as an artist's artist, steadily attracting the attention of national curators, there is now a growing buzz of collector anticipation around his work, says **Paul Greenaway**, Director of Greenaway Art Gallery in Adelaide, which has represented Folland since 1999. Folland's distinctive articulation of the zeitgeist has followed a sure path through the art world. Over the past ten years he has received awards including the 1999 Samstag International Scholarship, which took him to The Netherlands, and the Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship in 2005, which led to an exhibition at Artspace in Sydney.

But the "single most significant shift in the way people saw him was his inclusion in the National Gallery of Victoria's exhibition 2004: *Australian Culture Now*," says Greenaway. Evoking anxieties about climate change, Folland's installation, *I think I was asleep* (2003) displays

a chandelier partially covered with encrustations of ice provided by a visible refrigeration coil.

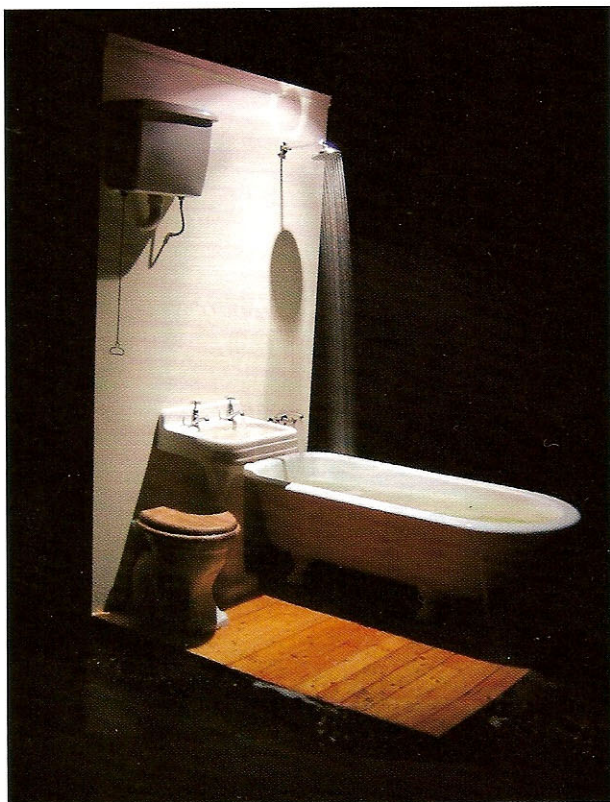
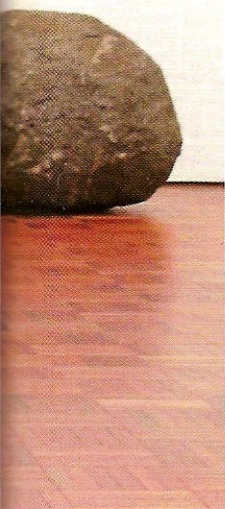
"I think the sort of ideas that he works with demand a high level of skill and I am grateful that the art world has finally matured enough to allow skill to come back into the equation," says Greenaway.

For artists living in South Australia, Greenaway says: "You need to have things happening in two or three states at least to gain widespread attention from curators. After the NGV exhibition, according to Folland, all of a sudden curators around Australia knew who he was."

In the current lead-up to Folland's show in October, Greenaway says: "I've noticed already people ringing and asking. This is the first time we've had that kind of anticipation. It's great to see. He's just had a piece in an exhibition, *Octopus 8*, in Melbourne. We had several people wanting [to purchase] that work."

To give an indication of prices, "smaller works will start around \$800 and go up to large installations around \$18,000 to \$22,000. The average work will be between \$6000 and \$7000."

Ruth Skilbeck



From far left:

Nicholas Folland, *The door was open...*, 2005. Refrigerator, chandelier, ceiling rose, dimensions variable.

Nicholas Folland, *Mt Hopeless (hot-rock series)*, 2001-5. Granite boulders, hotrod heating systems, dimensions variable

Nicholas Folland, *Raft*, 2005. Bathroom fittings and furniture, water pump, water, Grieg's *Holberg Suite*, Op. 40 Air, dimensions variable.

Nicholas Folland, *Encounter*, 2008. Glass and stainless steel, 23 x 110 x 23cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND GREENAWAY ART GALLERY, ADELAIDE