



IN BETWEEN

An exhibition by
Corinne Colombo

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland
Sunday 6 February – Sunday 6 March 2011

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Ours is a world in flux. Cultures and populations are increasingly on the move and identities becoming more fluid. The reasons for this global movement are complex, but each of those caught in its momentum carry with them a story of individual endeavour shaped by the people, places and circumstances they have encountered. Just as speaking a different language changes the way we think, new environments change the way we see life. Now finding herself resident in Australia, artist Corinne Colombo has been drawn to ponder the path her own life has taken. Her exhibition, *In Between*, provides a very personal insight into the experience of a migratory life. Exploring and extrapolating on the way in which life and attitudes are constantly shaped and re-energised by such peregrinations of the globe, these works allow us to share and reflect on the ways in which migration marks contemporary life.

Colombo was born in Richmond, Virginia, in the United States, the only child of Swiss parents. By the age of three, having moved with her family first to New York, and then to Lausanne in Switzerland, the pattern was set for the peripatetic life that would characterise her art work. Central to migrant life is the need to reorient oneself, and to quickly come to terms with new surroundings. With English as her first language, Colombo vividly remembers the childhood shock of her sudden immersion in a French-speaking world. With her Swiss-German mother on one hand, and her Swiss-French father 'with Italian blood and religion' on the other, some of her earliest recollections are of the complex negotiation of cultural identity that was necessary, even amongst her own family, in her new home in Switzerland. Always an observer as a child, Colombo still recalls the feeling of being acutely aware of the differences – often as subtle as her accent or the way she wore her clothes – that distinguished her from her peers.

Those early memories continue to run deep. They have engendered an analytical cast to this artist's work. In the role of artist-observer that she naturally assumed, their effects can be seen to constantly resurface as accents in her work. *Almost paradise* (2010) for example, with its lamp, table and suggestions of other furniture items,

breaks with the usually circumscribed view of an everyday interior. Here the composition is broken up as the artist endeavours to show the viewer, with a sweep, all that exists beyond our immediate field of vision, pushing past the frame of the window and through the rustling palm fronds and branches until we break out into the glistening expanse of sunlight and sea beyond. *The sunny night* (2010) also demonstrates Colombo's instinctive understanding of the structures we all construct for ourselves, that create the mental and cultural environments in which we dwell. Like her other works, these are unique in their ability to represent a sense of the internal and external worlds, that which is felt and that which is seen, that we simultaneously inhabit.

The artist's ability to bring such spaces to life, and to highlight the existence of constructs which most of us take for granted, is the product of rigorous training. During five years at art school (Ecole cantonale des beaux-arts, Lausanne), in a milieu which encouraged academic excellence, Colombo underwent a programme of instruction based on the mastery of the traditional principles of painting and drawing. Evidence of a focus on printmaking in her final year, in the highly disciplined atmosphere of the Pietro Sarto studio, is to be found in the delicate boxed prints included in this exhibition. Expectations were conventional and inflexible though. Not unusually in such establishments, they led to a crisis of self belief for this artist. Determined to reaffirm her commitment to art away from the strictures of the academy, Colombo moved for a time to Italy – to a new environment and a new language – to make her way as an independent artist. A similar desire, sparked by the need to break out and experience the new and the unknown, also brought her to Australia.

Many of the works in this exhibition, like *Finally fresh air* (2009) and *Wonderful evening* (2010), speak of the open spaces and freedom, and the sense of new beginnings which Colombo has found living as part of the bayside community of Brisbane. Although at times feeling like two different people in one skin, conscious of a tug-of-war between the fresh ideas that inspire her and the rules by which she was once governed, Colombo now proceeds as the master of her training rather than its servant. Freed of the strictures of old categorisations, and with the encouragement and camaraderie found in several local artists' groups and friendships, the artist feels free to use her drawing skills as part of a creative exploratory process. A renewed



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confidence in her own instincts now imbues her practice, and, buoyed by success in several Queensland art competitions soon after her arrival, Colombo now feels driven to use her skills to navigate more experimental areas of practice.

Even as an emerging artist, though, Colombo's penchant to push boundaries was evident. Recalling some early work, she has described the moment of revelation that occurred when she inadvertently captured her own reflection while taking pictures through the glass of a train door, so that her own ghostly image was caught 'in between' the real interior of the train and its representation through the lens. It was, for the artist, a moment that confirmed her instinctive awareness of the way in which our day-to-day view of the world ignores the complex layering of existence that envelops us at any one time. Wanting to take this insight further, Colombo's work has since attempted to further challenge the autonomy of art and engage the world beyond the frame. At times she has achieved this by painting on reflective surfaces, or working both sides of a canvas, while in *I try to 'bee have'* (2010), she breaks the integrity of the picture plane by drawing attention to its constitutive elements. There, stretched into bee-hive frames and suspended in space, the recycled past and the environment become incorporated into the artwork's margins as ephemeral content.

Certainly, Corinne Colombo's work is an exploration of built space. Architectural constructs, with their stacked and grid-like structures, have obviously always held a fascination for her. But equally the artist uses this formal idiom as a metaphor for the spaces which we construct for ourselves, and in which we conduct our lives. Her work is, therefore, as much about the fabrications of the unconscious mind as it is about the literal places we consciously inhabit. In particular she is intrigued by the way in which these two arenas intersect. Although they derive from memory for Colombo, they are not attempts to reproduce the past but are rather creations of a personal architecture built from her own experiences. In *The soft curtain* (2009), using engraving and watercolour on paper, Colombo records impressions formed at the edges of her sight and in the depths of her vision. Like the after-images of a scene, they appear as fragments which, once imprinted in the mind, continue to gather momentum, refract, collide, and connect anew like the synapses of the brain.

In works like these we witness the way in which the mind takes what is new, and compounds

it with fragments of the past to produce a momentary world view in the present. In the re-imaging and exploration of such moments, a constant theme in this artist's oeuvre, Colombo has pushed into new realms in this exhibition. This has largely been made possible by the openness she has found in Australia, where she has the freedom not only to pursue possibilities as they emerge, but to develop the daring necessary to accommodate her ever expanding range of working styles and interests. These range from the technically challenging, such as the depiction of the sun's slanting rays as they catch the eye at the end of the day in *Leaving for the island* (2009) to a fascination with new materials and approaches that is evident in *In the shaded garden* (2010). In the latter, through her use of unusual media, Colombo has been able to combine traditional perspective to suggest the illusion of deep pictorial space with the actual experience of that space in reality. With the screen draped over the painted surface beneath, depth is made physically part of the work through the layering of its components. Through their interrelation, the layers constantly and subtly redefine the parameters of the work, highlighting the material quality of the space that both separates and unites things.

Working instinctively, Colombo explores the spaces between, around, in front and behind things, places, people and cultures that have made her the artist she is. Hers is a fascination with momentary glimpses and facets – of traces of people and places – which come together to define a location or a time in our minds. Her works, like glimpses from the corner of an eye, are reminders of the shifting palimpsests of observations and memory that reveal the breathtaking breadth of life in our constantly changing world. They should, therefore, be appreciated not only as self-contained art objects, but as traces of creative activity that enact our contemporary condition through the processes of art making. As much as the ideas they represent, they are their own subject, created in between the known and the unknown for both viewer and artist to explore.

Susan Rothnie
December 2010



Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of Redland City Council, dedicated to the late Eddie Santagiuliana



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Images

- Cover *Almost paradise* (detail) 2010
Oil on canvas
1. *Wonderful evening* 2010
Pencil on paper
 2. *I try to 'bee have'* 2010
Mixed media and bee-hive frame
 3. *The soft curtain* (detail) 2009
Mixed media with engraving
 4. *The sunny night* (detail) 2010
Synthetic polymer paint on fabric
 5. *Leaving for the island* 2009
Watercolour and pencil on paper
 6. *In the shaded garden* 2010
Synthetic polymer paint on flyscreen and fabric
- Images courtesy of the artist.

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

Cnr Middle and Bloomfield Streets, Cleveland Q 4163
Monday to Friday 9am – 4pm
Sunday 9am – 2pm
Admission free
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