

AUSTRALIA

Adelaide

Regine Schwarzer and
Catherine Hewitt
at Prospect Gallery

R*hupos*, a successful, conceptually based collaboration between respected mid-career artists Regine Schwarzer and Catherine Hewitt, derives its inspiration from the idea that in both art and life we humans tend to overlook the so-called 'ordinary', the unassuming, mostly inorganic, passive and inert 'things' that comprise a significant part of our visual field. Schwarzer's work, which comprises jewelry, wearable objects, and small-scale sculptural works, has been created using non-precious metals and fossilized corals. Complementing Schwarzer's three-dimensional works are Hewitt's very fine works on paper, mostly referencing forams or little shells.

A Greek word, 'rhupos' was brought into currency in the visual art world by the American writer Norman Bryson, who initially applied the concept to still life painting, a visual art genre considered by many to be a lower form of art, pedestrian and trite, scarcely worthy of consideration, let alone detailed critical attention. Arguing that we virtually fail to 'see' such omnipresent, seemingly mundane 'matter'—the 'rhupos' of our everyday lives—on account of its pervasive, quotidian, and (superficially) unremarkable nature, Bryson focused attention on the fact that still life painting had been done a profound disservice as a result of people's disparaging attitudes toward it.

Subtitled *Accentuating the Overlooked – an individual and combined delving into particular rock formations; structures, complexity and interconnections*, Hewitt and Schwarzer's *Rhupos* does Bryson's concept proud. Both artists feel drawn to natural base elements, and to the aesthetics of the beautiful, recursive patterns that are found in the



Regine Schwarzer, *Corallaceous* series, 2011. **Clockwise from top:** brooch, gilding metal, etched, enamelled, 45 x 48 x 16 mm; brooch, sterling silver, etched, fossilized coral, 62 x 54 x 15 mm; and brooch, gilding metal, etched, patinated, fossilized coral, 52 x 58 x 17 mm.

unassuming (subject) matter of everyday life. In Schwarzer's case, the crystalline structure of rocks and minerals and fossilized coral are the primary attractors, whereas Hewitt is primarily drawn to the visual structures of foraminifera (oceanic protozoa

that mostly have shells), coral reefs, and limestone.

Photographer, digital, and multimedia artist Catherine Hewitt's embossed works on white paper are stunning. In these, specific reference is made to foraminifera (literally 'hole-



Catherine Hewitt, *Lithos II*, 2011, photopolymer etching on Fabriano rag paper 280gsm, 44 x 56.5 cm.

bearers', on account of each small, oval, marine organism having a hole in its middle), known as 'forams' in abbreviated form. These little shells or forams, of which there are almost 300,000 species globally, and which are regularly washed up on beaches, are comprised of calcium carbonate and sometimes agglutinate into highly compressed, sediment particles. In Hewitt's exquisitely embossed works on paper, equally inspired by lithography and the natural grid patterns relating to coastal Australia, the artist draws our attention to 'that which lies beneath' the obvious. In so doing she rescues these small but perfect organisms from the fate of oblivion.

In her work Regine Schwarzer also engages with the 'rhupos' concept at a formal level, particularly by means of her wonderfully left-of-field juxtapositions of diverse materials. For example, in her *Corallaceous* series of wearable art, as with her sculptural installations, Schwarzer places non-precious metals and fossilized corals in daring, dexterous, and aesthetically pleasing proximity. Schwarzer's fascination with fractal patterning has led her to re-context these objects as significant cultural products that simultaneously address the concept of 'rhupos' while embracing existential matters. As cultural objects they bridge the divide between the animate and inanimate, and ultimately, the nature/culture binary. In creating these delightful objects, the artist draws our attention to the science of contrasts and to the beauty of the ordinary—a beauty that we can and do so often overlook. Regine Schwarzer's work, like that of her collaborator Catherine Hewitt, shows that art has the capacity to make us see, and therefore understand, our world differently.

The underlying curatorial concept of 'rhupos' is reflected in both artists' carefully considered, deliberate choices of raw materials. By bringing into play references to the natural, recursive etchings and patterns on rock, crystalline, and shell formations, ubiquitous

materials in our lives but which so often escape our conscious attention, the artists redirect our understanding through their art-making. Their insistence on the value of the handmade further reflects their shared artistic value systems.

Furthermore, in *Rbopos*, Hewitt and Schwarzer do more than simply direct our attention to the aesthetic beauty that resides in the mundane materials of everyday life: they also provide audiences with a significant social and cultural counter-narrative. Their artistic counter-narrative contests dominant, contemporary social values based on consumerism and valuing 'things' only in terms of their monetary value (for example, tiny marine organisms that over millions of years become transformed into saleable products like oil and petrol). This social counter-narrative transcends any economic value that may be attached to 'things', thereby causing us to re-evaluate hegemonic values. In *Rbopos*, therefore, the artists offer us not only their commitment to 'pure looking'—seeing those undervalued things that often remain unnoticed, flying under the radar as it were—but also challenge their audiences by offering us an alternative value system.

The playwright and poet Oscar Wilde, through his character Lord Darlington (in *Lady Windermere's Fan, A Play about a Good Woman*, first staged at St. James Theater, London,

in 1892), lamented those individuals in his society who he described as "knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing." *Rbopos* urges us to seek the priceless, underlying and intrinsic value of ordinary things. It also leaves us wanting to see more collaborations and exhibitions of work by these two talented artists.

Christine Nicholls

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Sydney

Dale Frank at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery

Dale Frank has long proven himself to be one of Australia's finest abstract artists. Walking into this exhibition one was surprised and excited by its freshness and its rigor for continued experimentation. With an obscure title, *Wacky Duck Fluffy Tom* (a common trait of Frank's when titling his artworks), these paintings were void of the flippant humor that its title suggests. Rather it was an extremely erudite and somewhat exhausting private experimentation; this obscurity offering a forced disconnection from our compulsion to 'read' images in favor of the 'felt' engagement.

Painted in two standard sizes [a powerful 200 cm-square format and slightly larger 200 x 260 cm], no one painting dominated or demanded more



Dale Frank, *Erythrina Caffra Three Legs*, 2011, varnish on canvas, 200 x 200 cm. Images: Courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

attention. More blatant, rather, were the bilious yellow-colored gallery walls that at first glance repel the viewer. It was a device used by Frank that caused his paintings to punch off the walls with great energy, working against the leaching effect of a gallery's 'whiteness.'

It was particularly alert in showing up a new spidery line that spun across Frank's fluid signature abstractions like strands of windblown hair. As a gesture it largely lacked the frenetic pace we associate with action painting, rather extending the delicate marbling within the pools of merging varnish, pulling out that line and giving it greater presence. A stunning example of which is *Albizia Julibrissin Wacky* (2011), its red and black scribbles looped and ribboned in every direction, lacey on the surface, emanating from a black mass that dissipated before our very eyes. A white varnish mid-ground submerged an earlier, more brightly colored painting, confidently erasing form while building layers. It had a ghosting effect that could be translated as an abstraction of memory and time.

For over 30 years, Frank has experimented with color and materials; varnish dominating the past decade. Signature in his career are the thick luscious varnishes that run, hug, and

pool on the surface. We again get plenty of them with this new body of work. In *Cussonia Spicata Steven Stroke* (2011) emerald, jade, violet, sapphire, and lurid red lock as masses that seemingly slide and collide over a pristine white canvas. The highly reflective varnish plays off against the texture of the canvas, the varnish weighty against this flighty new line.

Typically Frank's varnish flows in unspecified directions, playing with chance and control, confidence and vulnerability, defining the perimeter and articulating space—both planar and ascribing depth. It is a nuanced sensitivity found from working with this difficult material for more than ten years.

Call it skill or luck or brilliance, Frank's paintings are palpable in the way that they embrace the viewer with their energy, their movement and their reflections. There is a cathartic pleasure in moving across these Frank paintings, unburdened by the frames of so much of today's art, albeit social, economic, environmental, or politically toned.

To step back a little into a laconic haze and sheer pleasure in a material as it reacts with a surface perhaps offers the greater statement or challenge to our times. Any one of these



Dale Frank, *Albizia Julibrissin Wacky Fluffy*, 2011, varnish on canvas, 200 x 260 cm.