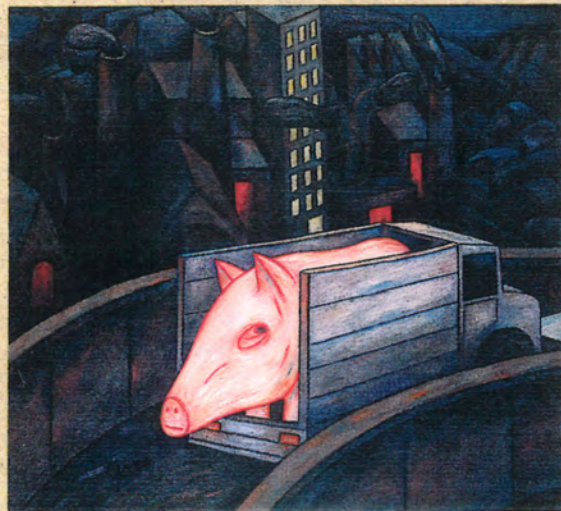


CONTEMPORARY GIPPSLAND ARTISTS



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EUAN HENG

Perhaps it is only his pronounced Lanarkshire accent, but an encounter with Euan Heng and his pictures prompts immediate reflections on and comparisons with Celtic art. Through the brogue it is possible to perceive visual echoes.

In his backgrounds, factory chimneys and slag heaps have the looming presence of menhirs and barrows, while little gable-roofed kennels recall the windowless cells of Hiberno-Saxon missionary monks. His common use of the motif of knotted rope relates to the interlace decoration of Pictish stone engraving of the calligraphy of mediaeval illuminations such as the *Lindisfarne Gospels* or the *Book of Kells*.

Heng is also an inheritor of the Celtic tradition in a more abstract stylistic sense, in his paintings' combination of expressive distortions of scale and line with patterns of flat, rich colour. This makes his canvasses seem crowded to the point of claustrophobia, a sensation reinforced by repeated images of containment: buildings, boats, pipes, the high sides of a truck or a bridge. Such crowded enclosure is a significant component of a general Northern European aesthetic sensibility, as seen in the work of several of the artist's apparent and admitted influences: German *Neue Sachlichkeit* ('New Objectivity') painters of the 1920s such as Max Beckmann, and the English visionaries William Blake and Stanley Spencer.

That these artists also consistently address religious and moral subjects is significant, for despite the wit and elegance of Heng's work, his is by and large a dour, Presbyterian vision, concerned with sin and redemption: recent series explore archetypal moral themes such as Temptation, Theft, the Fall and Resurrection.

Just another love story presents a bleak summary of the necessity and the limitations of close human relationships. Naked castaways, ambiguously joined below the waist and in their shared grasp of a paddle, the couple fail to connect. They row in different directions, each looking away and back to a separate past, which is the other's future. Despite the heavy stylisation of the figures and rigorous simplicity and symmetry of the composition, the drawing represents only a momentary balance of forces before the inevitable psychological slapstick of turning turtle.

There is a similar tension in *Vacation*. In Roget's *Thesaurus*, the word "vacation" appears in the "leisure" listings, which also include the phrase "time to kill". The painting seems to illustrate the literal meaning of this colloquialism, suggesting the imprisonment of Calvinist predestination, the impossibility of escape from work and death.

Perhaps there is even an element of ironic self-portraiture here; an image of the artist heading off to the city on a Friday night. The pig's eye is rolled to the corner of its socket; while he faces his point of departure, his thoughts are focussed on the darkness of an unknown future. Watch it; there is always something happening behind your back.