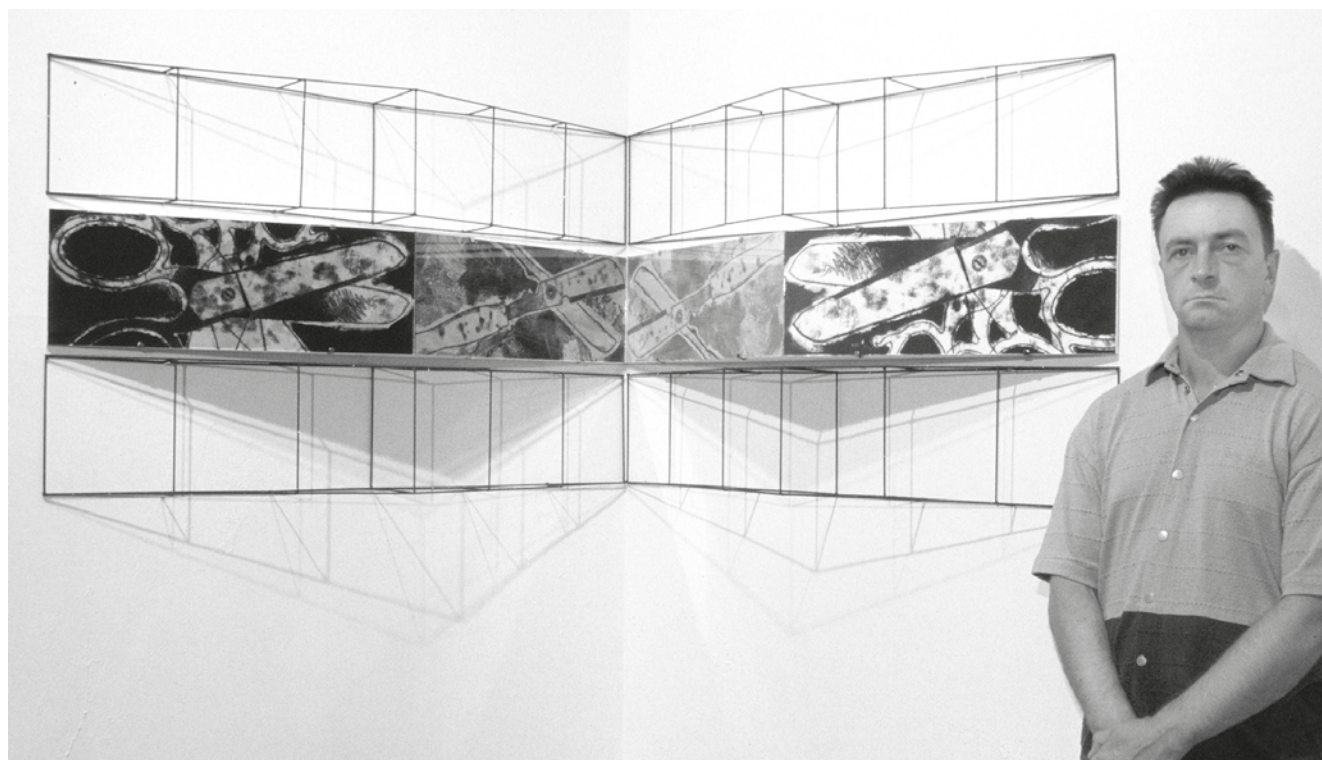


BUILDING A BRIDGE WHILE CROSSING IT



Clive Barstow in front of MIRO MIRROR ON THE WALL, at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art 1998
wood, metal and monoprint 2.6 x 0.6 x 0.4 m

Dr Christopher Crouch talks to Clive Barstow about cultural construction and Clive's recent exhibition at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

Dr Christopher Crouch: *Your show at PICA was called 'A Linear Heritage'. This seems at odds with your previous show which examined ideas about chance and fate. Why the change in approach?*

Clive Barstow: The show you are referring to was called 'Synchrofate'. It presented a linked series of chance events which took place over a number of years, which in my view had some synchronistic connection. In trying to understand the creative unconscious it became apparent to me that our view of it was in many ways influenced by a heritage of cultural constructions. I felt the need to backtrack a little, and investigate my own heritage as a way of positioning myself both creatively and philosophically. The PICA show was

more of an observation, a vehicle for me to exorcise my cultural past and assess its shape so that I could move forward from a more neutral position.

Was the interest in cultural construction rather than the creative unconscious a new or continuing one?

New in respect that it is the first time I have surveyed my own history and position within a cultural context, but it was important to me that I made some connection between the unconscious and the constructed mind, I have always been interested in the relationship between the opposites. I therefore re-worked certain images from the previous show and developed them within a number of three

dimensional structures to see how the physicality of materials and space would affect the reading of the work. In this respect the imagery was the unconscious and the object that contained it represented its cultural framework.

So the move into three-dimensional structures is intimately related to the change of conceptualisation in your work?

Yes. My training as a sculptor taught me that the response to physical structures is quite different to the language of image and illusion, and I particularly want to emphasise the notion of the construct in all its forms. I came to the conclusion that my European heritage was based on a collection of historical artefacts and texts,

which on reflection I feel were taken out of context and repackaged to fit a chronological order, hence the notion of the linear. The PICA show was a series of wall reliefs which attempted to set up a point of tension between the physical and the illusionistic so that the audience could sense how our reading of history has been manipulated.

How far do you see the issue of cultural construction extending? Because in a recent paper you contextualised your work within an East /West dialogue.

It is difficult not to generalise in a short answer, but the differences between eastern and western thinking on this matter go a long way in explaining a European respect for the artefact and its indifference toward the immaterial. My

definitive than the paper. I am always cautious not to fall into the trap of illustrating theory within my practice as this can lock in the practical work before it has even begun. I prefer to approach the work more from an intuitive use of materials in the hope that magic will happen. The unpredictable is still exciting to me. It is more a case perhaps of practice driving theory, but ultimately I am striving to find a working relationship where both are equally in a state of flux for as long as possible.

Is a material tradition as important as a conceptual one for you?

Anyone trained practically as a sculptor or printmaker has to acknowledge a deep respect for the material tradition as it is the first language with which we can

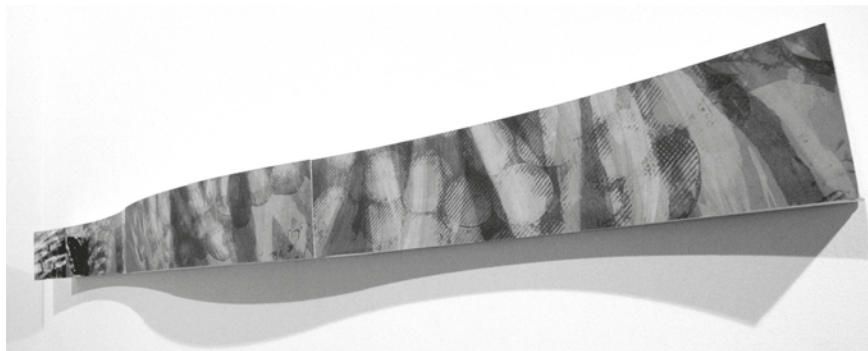
hopefully. I don't believe in making models or even preliminary drawings and then reproducing the object to plan, I don't see the second stage of this as an artistic process.

How do you think your education in Britain influenced your practice?

I was taught printmaking while studying for my MA at the Chelsea School of Art under Tim Mara, Eduardo Paolozzi and Mike Birchnell (who now works in Sydney). As well as owing them a great debt of gratitude, I must also acknowledge the significance of working there at the height of the post modernist punk era. In retrospect this contributed to my rather anarchic and critical view of anything and everything traditional. The urge to re-invent has always been with me and I think this is a particularly British attribute. This form of creative anarchy is manifested in so many cultural forms, music, fashion and humour to name a few. Likewise the urge to constantly re-invent the wheel is seen as eccentric and indulgent from the outside, but it is an integral part of my make up.

How is working in Australia affecting your current practice?

There are many local issues that are of tremendous importance of course, but it would be dishonest of me to say that I can adopt these at this time with any integrity because there are other things that I need to clear from my system. What I am enjoying is the ability to stand back at a distance and view my past more objectively rather than from within, and to balance these views with a better understanding of the opposite. Using landscape for instance for me would be a crutch on which to rest, there would be no honesty in this either as an observer or from a position of critique. Australia offers me a place to view, so while building the bridge I have the ability to look both backward and forward. •



Clive Barstow TANGENT TO THE LEARNING CURVE 1998
digital image and monoprint on laminated wood, 2.4 x 0.2 x 0.18 m

paper looked at the way that Aristotle's correspondence theory of truth formed western thinking with its emphasis on evidence as proof of fact. This for me highlighted a number of philosophical differences that explain to some extent our misunderstanding of many other cultures which value ritual and ceremony above object and permanence.

You say that you like to make work that is intuitive, and you compare your working process to building a bridge while crossing it. How does this approach actually work? Although we have mainly talked about a theoretical position, I feel it is important to point out that the development of this position nearly always happens after the work is made, it is more of a reflective activity after the event as a means to help me understand the direction I may take next. The exhibition in this respect was less

communicate ideas. Having said that, I have spoken against techno fetishism, where an obsession with process overrides thought. This has something to do with my approach to printmaking coming from a need rather than a love. I have always found sculptors' prints for instance, more exciting than prints made from within the craft itself. My way of resolving this is to work from a hunch rather than a plan. I worked this way even as a sculptor. I would get a real kick from taking risks on a vast scale, both materially and financially. Working in this uneconomical way means that only a small percentage of the work I produce makes it to the gallery wall, but this is an important method of filtering and refinement for me. One of the objects in this show was made during the installation time and only finished on the day of the opening, that way the work stays fresh and open for myself and the audience

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