

## Retrospective

### *Lyndell Brown and Charles Green*

In 1989, at the old Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in the Domain Gardens, we saw the collaborative duo Russian artists Komar and Melamid talk about their work. We were both fascinated. We loved the sheer skill of the socialist realism of their work, its cleverness, and the weird mysteriousness of not knowing who did what, there being really one artist out of two. Back in the studio, as we talked about it, we gradually realized how relevant this was to us, for we'd been talking about how much we wished elements in photographs, such as the still life bric a brac, the pages of text, the shiny surfaces, could move into paintings, to get the deep somber spaces of Green's paintings and his background in conceptual art into Brown's photographs of carefully arranged objects and texts. A recent series of re-created pre-collaboration works (figures 1 and 2) was a way of recapitulating, understanding and absorbing that pre-collaboration history into our work via a retrospectively mapped timeline.



Lyndell Brown and Charles Green.  
Retrospective, 1989, 1989-2010, original 1989 polaroids by Lyndell Brown  
incorporated into 2010 re-documentation.

Instructions: I prepare a retrospective - a museum in miniature - with polaroids for a four-  
person exhibition (the other artists are Sandra Brinde, Suzy Baris and Gail Hastings) at the  
Melbourne artforum initiative 'Stage 5'. This is my last project as an  
individual artist for shortly afterwards I decide to embark on a lifetime artist collaboration.  
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**Figure 1. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, Retrospective, 1989. Retrospective Version 1989-2010, inkjet print on rag paper, original 1989 polaroids by Lyndell Brown incorporated into 2010 re-documentation, 65.5 x 90 cm. Courtesy ARC One Gallery, Melbourne, and Bruce Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.**



Lyndell Brown and Charles Green.  
Waiting, Site 2, 1979. Retrospective Version, 1979 - 2009, documentation of ephemeral  
event. Original 1979 photograph by Charles Green incorporated into 2009 re-  
documentation.

Instructions: I have had a hilltop site south of Mount Warrung, New South Wales, the  
second drive after a twelve-month interval. I went from dawn to dusk on the hilltop. I  
document the work being done, leaving the camera roll. I believe the roll that I have with me  
this week and for the other weeks in this series that I will not discuss the meaning of this  
work to anyone.  
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**Figure 2. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, Waiting, Site 2, 1979. Retrospective Version, 1979-2009, inkjet print on rag paper, documentation of ephemeral event, original 1979 photographs by Charles Green incorporated into 2009 re-documentation, 65.5 x 90 cm. Courtesy ARC One Gallery, Melbourne, and Bruce Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.**

We both knew instinctively that collaboration would mean giving up all our own separate work and would require committing to this for our lifetimes. We both work on each part of every painting and photograph. We both sit down next to each other with our brushes, mixing colours on the same palette, and work for hours together. But then, like all artists, we also have a lot of administration to do, and we work on photographs as well, though neither of us can ever remember who pressed the button to release the camera shutter. We can't usually remember who did what. We have arrived at the same ideas at the same time, and we have always built in a lot of brainstorming sessions from the very start, way back in 1989. It's a third

artist we create, not his or her art: we want to do the best job for this third artist. It's like working on a film: aiming for the best result, you don't have to see the whole picture until the end. We have worked as one artist since 1989, and will continue to do so. There is no division or fixed allocation of labour in our works. We are jointly responsible for all stages of planning, preparation, production and presentation.

Since 1989 we have for the most part worked according to the following method: we gather a huge archive of images and proof photographs of these in preparation for our paintings; we project photographs onto canvas, combining them into a whole, like pages in a giant atlas; we copy photographs and photographs of carefully lit studio installations; and then we work from hard copy.

Between 1989 and 1998, we developed paintings that both European and Australian critics understood as combining image and text, embedding images from art history and documents from history into scenes of contemporary globalisation, based on a mode of literate contemporary history painting, with *trompe l'oeil* as a key strategy. We contemplated the globalisation of western culture and the invention of Occidentalism through the history of oil painting, Cartesian mapping systems and that symbol of Europe's journeying to the Pacific, the tattoo. In the later 1990s, we extended the practice of artist collaboration by working with other artists in an expanded team, with New Zealand artist Patrick Pound, on installations that were art history research through images instead of text, and then with the other long-term Australian artist collaboration couple, Farrell and Parkin. The installations of photographs, text and transparent silk were, contrary to what we thought at the time, even more of an archaeological investigation than the paintings, for it took us a long time to understand why we wanted to do different things in different media, in either painting or photography or – as we chose for several years between 1999 and 2005 – in between, with transparent photographs on film of paintings made to become photographs, and sometimes never then exhibited after this transformation. The duraclear photographs were digital, light-jet prints on a tough, transparent film that is more archivally stable than cibachrome photographs. These pictures were pinned to a wall, using long stainless steel etymological pins like those used in natural history museums to pin butterfly specimens; they then floated out from the wall. Light reflecting back from white walls behind the image illuminated the picture. The slight distance from the wall created ghostly drop shadows, since the light tones were almost transparent. The effect was somewhat like a ghostly daguerreotype portrait, one of the earliest and most painterly of photographic technologies, although the scale, content and presentation of the duraclear photographs

was explicitly contemporary.

In 2007 the Australian War Memorial asked us to be Australian Official War Artists. We were the first “contemporary” artists to be awarded such a position. We were deployed for six weeks in combat zones and remote military bases (both Australian and U.S. bases) across Iraq, the Gulf and Afghanistan, later finishing a large painting commission and mural-size photographs documenting those wars for the Australian War Memorial. The resulting large exhibition, *Framing Conflict: Lyndell Brown and Charles Green*, started touring at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne (November 2008), and went to many major public art galleries around Australia, culminating at the Australian War Memorial in 2010. It then went on to Washington, D.C. We completed, in November 2010, a second commission for the Australian War Memorial, *Night and Day* (2010).

We travelled for six weeks in combat zones in which Australia was involved, gathering a large photographic archive. We generated an unexpectedly rich photographic archive of images that we wished to use in paintings. As we processed the images and experiences associated with the “War on Terror” that gathered on location in Iraq and Afghanistan, we realised we had developed two quite separate bodies of work: painterly photographs and documentary, photographic paintings. In our mind, as we moved from ghoulish Baghdad palaces turned into vast American compounds – eerily reminiscent of the end of Vietnam – into the vast mountainous desert wastes of Afghanistan’s Taliban-dominated provinces, to small outposts inside which coalition forces find themselves confined, we aimed to move beyond the commission, to develop a large-scale body of paintings, and to integrate and combine this with the historic processes of climate change, migration and asylum – processes in which we find ourselves participants, and in which Australia finds itself profoundly implicated for decades to come. The paintings and photographs were deeply formal, and their formalism imitated their subject matter: a calibrated but amorphous military machine imposed across vast and severe, implacably hostile landscapes and cultures; a natural, not-so-familiar Central Asia that is also the intersection of globalised change, climate shifts, geographic severity and Orientalist fantasy. The question we asked was: how can we revise the rhetoric (both pro- and anti-war) surrounding images of war, which remains indisputably important in the formation of Australian identity and also deeply resonant in our age? We wished to add a literal and also a metaphorical scope to images of contemporary war that had not been gained in Australia. The method was to work with documentary objectivity, but aiming to locate and show patterns of behaviour across images rather than the

specificity of a document, indicating that we want the images to communicate a larger understanding of history and culture. The result was an apparent neutrality and objectivity, which became the means for creating a powerful vision of clarity (if not necessarily of truth) in the midst of chaotic ruination.

*Ark* (2008-2009) (figure 3) and *Manang (Tibet will be Free)* (2010) (figure 4), were painted as we emerged from two years of processing our experiences as Australian war artists, which led us to strip down the Byzantine mazes of images and associations – these usually mark our work – in the face of the astonishing bleakness of contemporary conflict. Here we turn towards the palimpsests and layered *trompe l'oeil* that we have sought for many years. When we were in New Delhi at the start of 2008 for an exhibition of our war photographs, our Delhi Dealer was playing a CD in his car as we drove around: the Kronos Quartet's new CD, comprised of cover versions of music from 1970s Bollywood films. We thought of paintings to incorporate that other history of Western interaction with the East: the hippy trail of the 1960s and 1970s. We have returned to India perhaps fifteen times and have a strong connection with Tibetan culture. We had already decided to tell the wide story of our own time, and now we wished to add another, more personal narrative to that overarching history which we were dealing with in our war images. So we brought images from our travels in Asia into our paintings, alongside the many other images we use. Now, at the level of art, this is painting in the tradition of Orientalist travel painting, current from the eighteenth century on; yet we engage this in full awareness of the ideological baggage we now locate in those pictures. We are immensely aware of all our painter predecessors, and the paintings we cite are variations upon them.

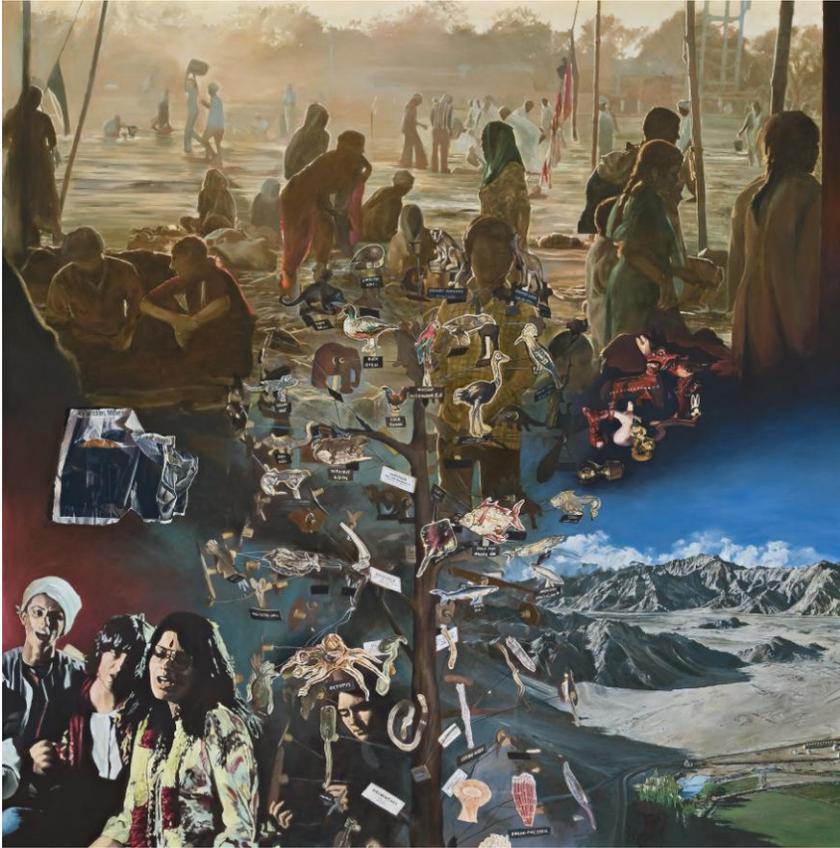


Figure 3. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *Ark*, 2009, oil on linen, 170 x 170 cm. Courtesy ARC One Gallery, Melbourne, and Bruce Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.

*Ark* (2008-2009) is a Darwinian mandala. We painted a crudely painted and sculpted Tree of Life from the Chennai Natural History Museum, splaying it over an encampment of pilgrims in North India, a monastery in Tibet and a tableaux of dancing hippies drawn from the amazing 1971 Bollywood film, *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*, where for the first time middle class Indian audiences realised that the young Western visitors flocking to sacred Indian sites were not solely in search of spiritual enlightenment. Over all this floated a crumpled photograph of Mohammed Haneef, the young Indian doctor imprisoned as a terrorist in 2007 under draconian Australian laws, in an update of the conflicted Australian relationship with the East.



Figure 4. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *Manang (Tibet will be free)*, 2010, oil on linen, 121 x 121 cm. Courtesy ARC One Gallery, Melbourne, and Bruce Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.

In 1984, Green was walking on the very spine of the Himalayas, crossing to the Tibetan side of the Annapurna massif. A few months later he was to meet Brown, and she was to feel the same powerful connection with Asia and India, and Central Asia in particular. The main image of *Manang (Tibet will be free)* is of the valley floor just below that crossing. At the lower left corner, a crumpled clipping displays a slogan that protestors attached to buildings in Beijing during the Olympics; the image of the protestors atop this communications tower in Beijing adds poignancy in the light of the terrible horrors the Chinese Government has inflicted upon Tibet. At the lower right, we placed a detail of Bellini's *St Francis*, from the Frick Museum in New York, and at the top right, we painted a larger image of Indian police patrolling for terrorists in Mumbai railway station.



Figure 5. Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, *An End to Suffering*, 2009, oil on linen, 170 x 170 cm. Courtesy ARC One Gallery, Melbourne, and Bruce Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.

In *An End to Suffering* (2009) (figure 5), we painted the second of an ongoing series of double self-portraits. We posed ourselves according to the figures in an early nineteenth-century painting; the postcard beside us shows this painting, and beside it there is a degraded view of a famous Russian Constructivist monument to the Revolution being wheeled through Moscow. Above us, drapery peels back to show Robert Smithson's great *Spiral Jetty* (1970) at dusk. To our right appears an old Tibetan painter whom Green visited in the early 1980s in a remote corner of Zanskar. Beside and below us is a cascade of postcards, newspaper clippings, crumpled paper and book pages, including several images from the contemporary conflicts that we have been depicting.

We have always worked in a zone between painting and photography, touching both. Painting is an intensely appropriate method of post-production, and of course post-production has been central to much contemporary art. First, we have gradually gathered considerable painting

skills, and a deep sense of painting's profound history, with ourselves working in almost literal presence of, Velázquez, El Greco, Goya and Ingres. Second, working together in the studio is deeply satisfying, since together we are not subject to new media's technological problems, nor to those of digital technology, but we remain able to use these peripherally. Third, we have understood, these last few years, the degree to which painting, or the desire for painting, is connected with photography. As Michael Fried explains in all his books, and most explicitly in his superb book on contemporary photography, contemporary artists seek to convince.<sup>1</sup> Certain modes of address or methods of image-making can lose their ability to convince quite suddenly. The banal surface of a photographic print runs headfirst into that problem when images are enlarged and become pixilated or grainy. Fourth, paintings take advantage of a "memory effect" by the disposition of the tropes of memory. For over two decades, our paintings, installations and photographs have been carefully interrupting and diverting flows between events, images, memories and histories. These works also ask how the past figures in the present, and how it might be accessed and remembered. They are about the realisation and reconstitution of events.<sup>2</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Amelia Douglas, "The viewfinder and the view," *Broadsheet*, 38/1 (Sept. 2009), 200-205, 204.