

WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

by David McNeill

"What are we waiting for, all mustered in the forum?
The barbarians are to arrive today.
Why is there so little activity within the Senate?
Why are the senators sitting around yet passing no laws?
Because the barbarians will arrive today.
What laws now can the senators possibly pass?
When the barbarians come, they'll make the laws."

Constantine Cavafy wrote these lines almost exactly a century ago. They express (or rather parody) a kind of social paranoia and ethical paralysis with which we are, unfortunately, all too familiar. The fear of the other, the desperate appeal to the purported historical values of an imaginary and exclusive domestic community, the demonisation of that which is exotic or even merely puzzling and the hysterical insistence on a sense of urgency which is apocalyptic in tone, are the tiresome rhetorical accompaniments of Pauline Hanson, her masters and her tribe.

Conservatives so often argue for the maintenance of what never was - an imagined community subscribing to an unstated but somehow consensual agenda of simple and unchanging values. This is a community without a history as such but with, instead, a mythical originary reference. In the case of Hansonism the touchstone is a WASPish construction fleshed out in rather vague terms of toil and reward, family, deference and common sense. These values congeal around the notion of the small business 'battler' as embodied in the acerbic Queensland fish and chip shop proprietor herself. Of course Chinese laundries, Italian delis, Jewish tailors, Indian restaurants and Lebanese bakers are all part of an historical landscape that makes a nonsense of Hanson's simplistic view of our history. There is a particular irony here which is apparent to all of us who can remember that in the 'fifties and 'sixties fish and chip shops were most often run by first generation Greek migrants!

Phillip George is a second generation Greek Australian. He spends his time between teaching and consulting on computer-aided design, producing artwork and when the onshore winds are right, surfing at Bondi. He is, in many respects, a typical late Twentieth Century Australian; fragmented, decentred, rhizomatic, alert and quizzical. His Greek heritage is a source both of curiosity and pride and it competes for his attention with such diverse interests as tantric Buddhism, neurophysiology and systems theory. Given the need to choose, George will opt for both/and rather than either/or; for inclusion rather than exclusion and in this he is doing nothing more than living in Australia as it is presently constituted, at least for those who are not threatened by the possibility of sharing a world with others who may not think and act exactly as they do at all times.

George's paintings are the products and the reflection of this openness and heterogony. They are works that put one in mind of the illustrations in the Where's Wally? series of children's books. They are marked by a surplus; a visual abundance which offers far more to the spectator than even a prolonged viewing can possibly exhaust. There is in them a richness and generosity that envelopes the viewer in a kind of Gothic excess. They operate at an opposite pole, for example, to the austerity of much neo-geo or post-conceptual art. Instead their density and their diversity offer

an analogue to the polyvocal chatter of the information systems (T.V., the web, etc.) that surround us all. What used to be called 'information overload' is in reality nothing other than the experience of everyday life and there are at least two diametrically opposed ways of reacting to it; we can put our hands to our ears and emit nostalgic or hysterical cries for a more simple world (controlled access to information for minors, restricted immigration, censorship, and so on) or we can frolic in the surfeit like a magpie in rubbish tip. The second option is more fun, more rewarding and potentially less authoritarian.

Like all analogies this one only goes so far. George's palimpsest paintings are not simply serendipitous and nor are they designed just to invoke a kind of eternal present. More ambitiously they attempt to capture in visual form the overlapping shadowy traces of memory itself and it is here that the works start to get complex. The frustrating lack of definition which we all experience when our memories refuse to surface are conjured through the deployment of the properties of the different mediums with which George works. The depth of field limitations of analogue photography, the limits of computer image resolution and the physical facture of paint are all mobilised in his digital paintings to help evoke the sense of melancholy and loss that accompanies our attempts to dredge up lost moments from the slurry of our memories. His images cruise along the threshold of legibility like fish beneath the water's surface. Indeed one of the artist's favourite metaphors for the workings of memory is that of the fisherman's net which always pulls in something other than what was expected.

In any case, it is through the orchestration of all these techniques - the hand crafted, the photochemical and the electronic - that George allows the history of image making to act as a metaphor for the sometimes confusing co-existence in our memories of recent and distant events; a phenomenon which was once described by the great philosopher of memory, Henri Bergson, as 'temporal compression'. Just as seminal memories from our distant past can present themselves with a lucidity and a clarity equal to that of slight memories from more recent times, so too do George's paintings muddy the distinction between foreground and background, figure and ground, linearity and painterliness. They are baroque works for a post-industrial world; crowded and enigmatic at the same time. To borrow Bergson's terminology again, they are intuitive rather than intellectual; they conjure a world which resists stasis and partitioning and in which present and past coexist in a state of perpetual flux and interpenetration.

George confesses to a fascination with the tricks that memory can play. He is not above changing the hang of his works half way through an exhibition in order to test the recall of any viewer on a repeat visit. He frequently employs doubling in his works - changing apparently identical images in subtle ways which may perhaps be intended to parallel the disturbing occasions when, for example, we compare notes with someone with whom we believed we shared a memory only to find that our versions of the past vary in significant detail.

Some of the paintings in this show are constructed within the silhouette of a European carp; a fish which is omnivorous, tenacious and adaptable and which, like so many other successful migrants, was greeted initially with suspicion and hostility. The carp managed to survive and prosper where 'local' species could not. Its tolerance for

pesticide and assorted toxic substances caused considerable indignation amongst those custodians of our ecology who had failed to prevent the environmental degradation in the first place! The carp is a scavenger and a bottom feeder. It carries within itself, in various states of digestion and decomposition, accumulated remnants and souvenirs of its travels.

George's carp contain icons from Mt. Athos, postage stamps from an inherited collection, sculpture from Khajuraho, fragments which reference previous works and exhibitions and assorted cultural memorabilia which has, at various times, fascinated or puzzled the artist. These artifacts and detritus relate to each other with the same degree of coherence as a medieval cabinet of curiosities; that is, they are held together only by the contingent fact that they are constitutive of George himself.

The paintings in this exhibition show us one artist's attempts to produce work after postmodernism. These are not works that are concerned so much with the philosophical problems of representation as with the slippery spaces of recall and imagination. They are dense cyber-mystical dioramas that challenge the distinction between the mundane and the exotic by suggesting that there is nothing that is not, in principle, marvellous.

Cavafy finishes his poem in an ironic register;
"Why suddenly should all this uneasiness begin,
and this confusion? (How grave now have all faces become!)
Why are all streets and squares so quickly emptying now,
and why is everyone returning home so lost in thought?
Because night has fallen, and the barbarians have not come.
And a few men who've returned from the frontiers
tell us that there are no barbarians any more.
And now, what's to become of us without barbarians?
These people were some sort of a solution."

Nothing is barbarous except the need which some feel to construct a sense of barbarity as a curtain against which they might, if only for a moment, appear to themselves as articulate, complete, self sufficient and rational. Phillip George's photo-computer-paintings implicitly challenge both the possibility and the desirability of conceiving either self or community in such constrained and insular terms.

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