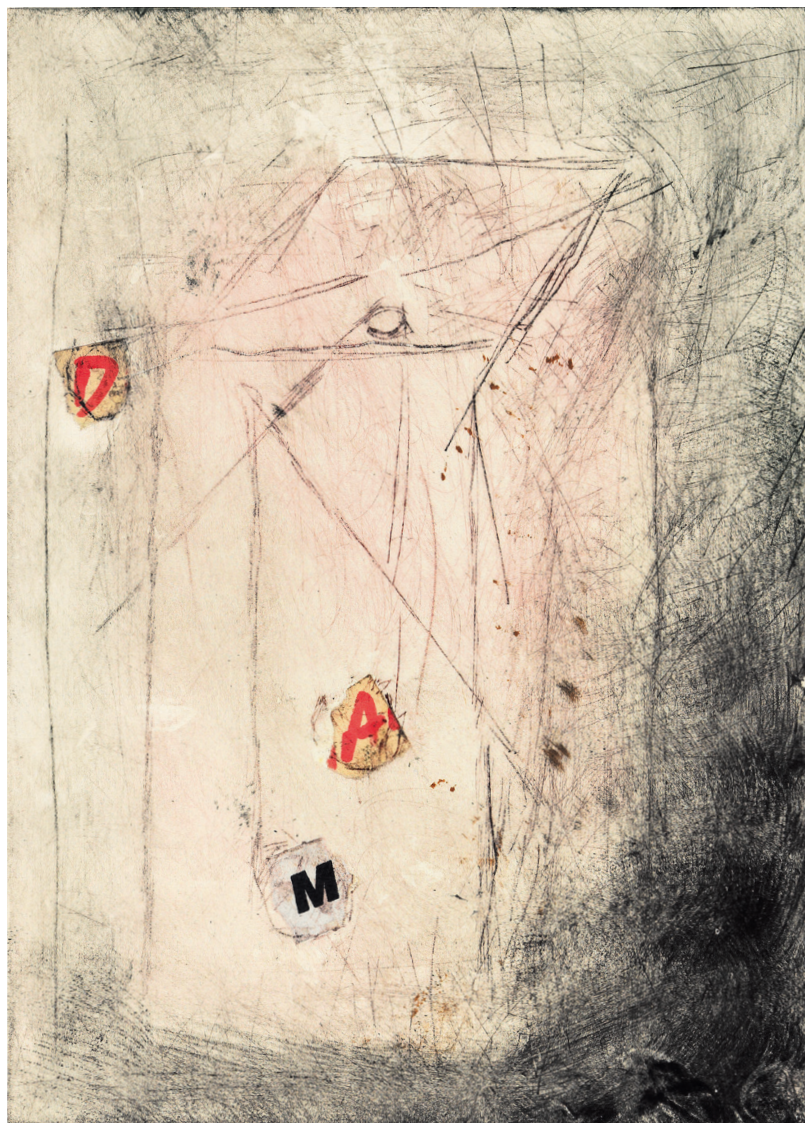




HIDING IN FORMALISM¹

Peter McKay

'Perhaps all I've lost
Might be looking for me'

(Madonna Staunton)

Renowned for being an artist of restrained elegance and abstract harmonies, Madonna Staunton would presently be better recognised for her unswerving staging of authentic emotions and vivid philosophical insights. In her recent practice she has taken to piercing through the everyday with an erudite brush. Personalised, yet commonly relatable, Staunton portrays her learning from an inventory of life events and broad observations in graphic accuracy.

Staunton is an adventurous artist who has worked across many media, but her abundant talents in collage and assemblage have undoubtedly overshadowed her more recent venture into painting and print. Within the many stories of Australian art, Madonna Staunton can be considered the most proficient practitioner to have worked in collage, and one of the most significant figures in assemblage too. Her talent for harmonising colour, tone, shape and texture is rarely equalled and the allusive potential she brings forth from the most modest materials is testament to the 'common' miracle of the world and all its elements. Yet this achievement has greeted her with some limitations, as she should also be noted as an important contemporary painter — one who delves deep into the psyche to disclose her insights into mortality, morality and the experience of our interior worlds.

Having edged towards prominence since the late 1960s, Staunton has often been positioned as a regional modernist given her attachment to the creative current of the time. She has sometimes been respected for, though to some degree relegated to, being a quiet campaigner for the advancement of European and American aesthetic values in Australia. While this discussion adequately places Staunton in the wider schema of art history, on occasions this focus on concept or technique and associated narratives has arguably unfairly diverted the discussion from the inimitable particulars of her own practice.

Around 1999, Staunton started on a long return to figurative painting. She began to leave this conflation with art history behind, and focused intently on articulating her personal vision of life and human nature. Subject content that she might have previously buried in Formalism was now out in the open, and soon the artist was making paintings that would measure among some of the most powerful and provoking works of her career. In plain sight, Staunton reinvented and, given the thoughtful philosophical content, possibly even rediscovered herself.

These disjunctions have necessitated a solid reappraisal of the art of Madonna Staunton. Here we reconsider her lifetime of achievements from this vantage of her most recent figurative paintings, not simply to balance the history, but to also consider the idea that Staunton has always been a painter. Painting is certainly where her practice began and, on careful viewing,

Untitled suite (Closet) (detail) c.2001
Etching, collage
3 sheets: 17 x 13cm (each)
Collection: The artist

it is possible to see that in many ways she never stopped being a painter. Staunton simply stopped painting with paint and instead painted with found materials, ready prepared in colour, tone, patternation, texture, and even form, by their experience in the world at large.

Furthermore, Staunton has also created a substantial body of print work in etching, solvent transfer, collotype and, most significantly, in monotype. This is important because the monotype method is in essence a variation on painting, except that the image is first composed in ink on a smooth plate before being pressed onto paper. The swiftness and self-assurance required to compose a monotype means that the process lends itself best to those artists that can improvise, be spontaneous and embrace the fortuitous accident. These are characteristics that Staunton has spent a lifetime cultivating — or has at least been preserving from her youth.

Beginnings

Whereas every artist's life experience has some impact on the shape and content of their creativity, in Staunton's case this influence offers valuable insight into the structure and content of her work, which often harbours a biographical aspect. Her father was a bookshop owner and collector of period furniture, and her mother was a librarian and book conservator, poet and painter, who studied under the educator, advocate and utopian intellectual William Lane. She was born 6 October 1938 in Murwillumbah on the New South Wales Tweed River, 130 kilometres south of Brisbane, the only child of Albert Errol Staunton (1905–62) and (Violet) Madge Staunton née Jones (1917–86). The family moved to Sydney the next year, and the young Staunton attended a number of Catholic schools until 1951 when, at the age of 13, they relocated to Brisbane. Owing to ill-health, Staunton did not return to formal schooling, however, she continued to study, and later teach, music privately. Living in a household full of books and bibliophiles, she became an avid reader. Soon she started writing poetry with some seriousness.²

Although Staunton was raised in a family with high participation in the arts, it seems her father was not always entirely sympathetic to his daughter's aspirations to be an artist of one sort or another. From early childhood Staunton was a talented pianist, yet she still remembers the impact of her father's remarks after stress caused her to falter on stage during a recital. He declared on the journey home that she did not seem to have what it took to be a performer. In her fragile state, the young Staunton's hopes were dashed. This scene may be the subject of the small semi-abstract painting *Allegory* 2012, and in broad thematic terms this relationship dynamic would seem to be implicated in many works. In the cultural context, this parenting style may not have been unusual at the time in Australia, yet its impact persisted.³

At 16, Staunton entered the workforce. Although she landed promising entry-level positions in the literary section at the *Courier-Mail* and in Grice's Music Store, in little over a year she was given an invalid pension and left the workforce. Staunton has explained:

At the age of seventeen I was losing the natural physical energy and exuberance that goes with adolescence. That made me a much more introverted person, someone who was thrown back on to one's own resources . . . I think the book that really set me off on an inner journey . . . was *The Perennial Philosophy*. It opened up a world of mystical literature to me. Any form of fulfilment was to be very much a journey into the wilderness.⁴

Allegory 2012
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
25.2 x 20.1cm; 31.4 x 26 x 3.8cm (framed)
Collection: The artist





Circumstance brought isolation, but this was not to be a time of loneliness and disenfranchisement as one might expect. Instead, Staunton profited from solitude and reflection. In the manner of Henry David Thoreau and his classic description of the simplest life possible in *Walden; or, a Life in the Woods* (1854), Staunton found that her spirit was strengthened and focused by the absence of distraction and interference. She learnt that a life that gives full attention to its content is more rewarding than a busy life, which often fails to engage beyond the task at hand. Solitude became Staunton's key to transcending her immediate surrounds and striking a dialogue with the universe. This is how the passage to the artist's inner world opened.

Thinking of Aldous Huxley's achievement in *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), we should appreciate that mainstream views on spirituality, mysticism and the contemplative experience of the mind have changed markedly between then and now. Published shortly after World War Two, Huxley's text demonstrated the shared concepts among many different religions, and in doing so participates in a long tradition of comparative texts looking to articulate the character of the human spirit in its highest form. It should be noted that Staunton is not particularly concerned with religious command or ideologues. *Authority* 2013 — a portrait mocking those (patriarchal figures) with no consideration for the individual and their experiences and who dress in the robes of moral expert — demonstrates her nuanced relationship to concepts of a spiritual nature. Staunton emphasises the expanded dimension of our own inner worlds and the need to recognise the inner worlds of others.

The Perennial Philosophy was also the artist's introduction to Buddhist thought, which would become fundamental to her relationship with material and form. In the catalogue accompanying Staunton's first survey exhibition, Michele Helmrich astutely commented that the artist's work 'pays tribute to the Zen ideal that Enlightenment is to be found in the commonplace, in emptiness or non-attachment, rather than in European preoccupations with emotion or intellect.'⁹ It should be emphasised, however, that Staunton is not an aspirant Buddhist — simply that her outlook is aligned with a Buddhist account of the world and associated ideas on how to be in it.

Self portrait c.1980
Ink
31 x 23cm

Self portrait c.1980
Ink
31 x 23cm

Self portrait c.1980
Ink
31 x 23cm

Collection: The artist

Without labouring the point, it is important to understand something of the nature of the Buddhist insight. The following passage from the *Tao Te Ching*, the classical Chinese text that contributed to the foundation of Taoism, Buddhism — and the artist's personal library — deserves a slow reading and contemplation. Quite remarkably, this cryptic play about understanding the fragile and elusive nature of passing time accounts for Staunton's art practice in its several guises, or its processes rather, as well as any passage ever could. Staunton's art is indeed that of keeping track of things; of exerting only a gentle influence, taking care not to force a direction; of cultivating the inherent experiential wealth in each element, irrespective of and above its material value.

What is not moving is easily held. What has not happened is easily planned. What is brittle is easily broken. What is tiny is easily dispersed. Deal with a problem before it arises; exercise control before confusion exists.

A tree with an arm-girth of trunk grows from a tiny sprout; a nine-storied terrace arises from a heap of dirt; a thousand-mile journey begins with the first step. Action spoils; reaching loses. The truly wise are not active. Thus they do not spoil things. Do not reach so do not lose. Things are often spoiled very close to completion. Be as careful at completion as you were at the beginning.

Thus the truly wise want the unwanted and do not prize what is rare. Study what is unstudied and preserve what is lost. Assist in the course of nature but never interfere with it.⁸

Although thoughts and emotions can take a surprising amount of time to form, their presence may be felt long before. One may feel a certain way, or hold a particular belief well before being able to adequately articulate, let alone thoroughly examine, a position. These elusive and influential intellectual objects could be hiding, or they might well be hidden: either way, it takes a sophisticated strategy to catch them and make them something more tangible than intuition. As Staunton's subjects shifted, this approach to discovery and creation has remained constant. It is the art of being present.

Education

The artist's mother Madge had studied painting at East Sydney Technical College from 1948 to 1951; she took great care to relay much of this learning to her daughter and support her independence through education. Notably, Madge studied with prominent artist and designer Phyllis Shillito, who provided her pupils with a sophisticated foundation in colour theory. Madge's exercise books became the foundational knowledge for her daughter — providing Staunton with an advanced understanding of tint, shade, contrast, scales, complements and discords from a very young age. Interested in furthering this education, Staunton exchanged some solitude for professional development, joining the Royal Queensland Art Society at 21. She took painting and life-drawing classes, participated in exhibitions, and worked on the group's newsletter.⁷ Staunton proved to be most proficient at working from life. Her line-work in charcoal was elegant and lyrical, and she was also noted for her ability to capture a perceptive likeness in one sitting using oil paint; there is a joyful, bright and sometimes sensuous quality to them. Italian painter and sculptor Amedeo Modigliani was cited as an early interest in this regard. The subtle tonal shifts and evocative distortions that form the hallmarks of Modigliani's approach became strengths that Staunton would deploy equally across her mature output — albeit in a wholly different tenor.



In the excellent introduction to the *Contemporary Art Society in Queensland* by Helen Fridemanis, Staunton explained how this interest became moderated over time.

At about the age of twenty I looked at the German expressionists. With the re-emergence of Expressionism, I realised that there was chaos within and there was chaos without and the only way I could create order was through art. Being an artist is a tremendous medium for exploring. If you are an artist you are granted that wonderful means of actually giving expression to any discoveries that you have made.⁸

Subsequently, between 1964 and 1965 Staunton attended Brisbane's Central Technical College. Without overstating the significance of a student exercise, it is interesting to note Staunton's capacity to process Roy Churcher's belief in Cézanne and the idea of describing 'form through colour' in only one lesson as is evident in *Pedestrians* 1964.⁹ Her mother's support and teaching clearly set Staunton well ahead in this regard. A more ambitious stimulus might be seen in the loose calligraphic twists found in *Easter* 1967 after studying under Bronwyn Yates in 1966. By this time Staunton, at 29, was now starting to prove herself as an artist of independent vision.¹⁰ *Peripheral green, blue* 1968, for instance, in its remarkably delicate tonal harmony and refined composition, is partly the work of a young artist responding to the then relatively recent American breakthroughs — Abstract Expressionism and more specifically Colour Field painting — but, equally, Staunton was also giving form to her own sensations. Tellingly, the slightly earlier, and largest work of the group, *August 1966*, greatly rewards the viewer who devotes time to recognising the subtle complexity of interactions between its elements. It is tempting to suggest that Staunton's keen commitment to modernist art practice was a

Man Crossed c.1967
Charcoal
44 x 33cm

Pedestrians 1964
Synthetic polymer paint on card
50 x 41cm

Collection: The artist



brave and exceptional thing during this conservative era in Queensland's history; and in a broad evaluation, it was. It might also add credence to the regional modernist account too. Throughout its history, however, Brisbane has been host to a more nuanced and multidimensional socio-political setting than it is often ascribed. As Urszula Szulakowska details in the introduction to her history of *Experimental Art in Queensland* 1998, much of the innovation at this time in Queensland was imported, and yet:

Above all, experimental art in Queensland has often been hybrid in its disregard of formalist divisions between the various arts. Such art challenged Eurocentric ideologies through the artists' working method, which was often collaborative and critical of the market conditions of art production. Directly, or indirectly, experimental artists attacked Queensland's conservative political hegemonies.

In this, they were often articulate, often totally incomprehensible; sometimes caught in a party-time, fashionable poseurship; at other times deeply committed to an impermeable ethical system.¹¹

In this context, Staunton's early years exemplify the attitude among experimental artists at the time. This period, rather than laying the foundations for her brand of regional Modernism, is better seen as a period spent recognising her aesthetic interests in the works of other artists, then digesting these ideas and synthesising them into her own style in the process — which is indeed the way of most developing artists.

August 1966
Oil and synthetic polymer paint on
composition board
122.5 x 184cm; 124.5 x 186cm (framed)
Collection: The artist



Collage

Staunton joined the executive of the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) in Queensland, serving from 1968 to 1970. This involvement may have proved integral to her fortuitous path toward collage. Her very first collage, made c.1968, was largely composed from CAS newsletters: art about newsletters about art. More truthfully, however, by 1968 her health was sadly failing again, and she no longer felt able to work in paint at a large format. Staunton explained that 'Being an only child, my world became one of textures — a world of tactile, intimate experiences on an intimate scale', and collage seemed to accommodate this awareness.¹² After searching for a method to relay the profound inner world she had been developing with her studies of Eastern and Western philosophy and modern poetry, these limitations imposed by poor health proved oddly fortunate. David Andre explained in the text accompanying the prominent University of Queensland exhibition 'MacPherson, Shepherdson, Staunton' in 1979 that:

The way in which a flat area of colour is applied to a large surface cannot be duplicated on a small scale — one alternative was collage. While the size of the works was reduced, the monumental scale was preserved. This impression of monumentality is achieved through the restrained use of colour and the avoidance of clutter, an obvious temptation with collage.

To find the muted colours of her paintings, Madonna Staunton looked to those things other people had discarded — faded pieces of cloth, scraps of paper, tags, old photographs, letters, weathered leather and other long-since-forgotten fragments.¹³

By 1976, Staunton was exhibiting collages in a commercial gallery setting with Ray Hughes and at the Institute of Modern Art, which only opened twelve months prior, in the 'painting' exhibition 'Brisbane Painting Today' (1976). The association with Hughes, who was then based in Brisbane, was significant.

Hughes' promotion of conceptual, minimalist and neo-popist forms in the late sixties and early seventies was crucial in developing an audience for difficult and demanding art forms. The early exhibitions at the Ray Hughes Gallery were of considerable critical worth within Australian late-modernist art, including some of the major Australian women artists. Hughes, to his enormous credit, has always shown the work of many women artists.¹⁴

Exhibition views of 'Madonna Staunton',
Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane, 1976
Madonna Staunton archive

Untitled 1976
Paper collage
27.2 x 23.6cm

Untitled 1976
Paper collage
27.4 x 24.1cm

Untitled 1976
Paper collage
27.8 x 24.2cm

The James C Souris, ac, Collection,
Brisbane

Staunton was by this time a significant figure in the rapidly establishing contemporary art scene. This, of course, was also the time that she became known as a collage artist, and much has been written about the influences and connections between her and European modernists such as cubists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque; surrealists and dadaists Max Ernst, John Heartfield, Hannah Hoch, Jean Arp and Kurt Schwitters; followed by a diverse group of Americans such as Joseph Cornell, abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell, and proto-pop artist Robert Rauschenberg, among many others. While this discussion of chronology and dissemination offers an interesting historical account, it does little to illuminate the understanding of Staunton's practice, as her work is not about or significantly in the style of these artists.

In a short review of 'MacPherson, Shepherdson, Staunton', Dr Gertrude Langer got to the heart of the matter in a few lines: 'Collage, the technique more than any other that has stimulated creative twentieth-century ideas in art, can be used in *various* ways for *various* reasons.'¹⁵ Staunton has always found her *own* reasons: meaningful resemblances to other artists' work are, in reality, reasonably few. What should be said about her practice and the way it was interpreted at the time, however, is well expressed in the text that accompanied the same exhibition.

Madonna Staunton does not consciously strive to represent any particular themes or ideas in her work. She builds up each work relying on her feel for colour and design. Ideas on meaning evolve on reflection. As with poetry, the ideas expressed are open to interpretation . . . Staunton tries to avoid preconceived ideas, about what a collage should be and more specifically about what particular objects mean or used to mean. By so doing, she has managed to create a personal vision of great beauty and quiet charm.¹⁶

Painting without painting

Though this exhibition focuses on Staunton's painting practice, it is not intended to underplay the significance of her collage and assemblage works — the intent is to read those works as, or at least in close relation to, painting. This relationship is most easily recognised in her assemblages, for example *Assemblage with plank* 1988, acquired for the Queensland Art Gallery Collection in 1992. Iterating the 'painting without painting' theme, Staunton took a sizable and denuded canvas stretcher and created a composition by fixing to it a pair of folding chairs and a reclaimed house painter's scaffold board, complete with a cosmos of starlike splatters and cloudlike streaks of paint. The chance patterns evoke a sense of the timelessness of the cosmos, and similarly the chairs speak of time spent contemplating, as a painter might in front of their work. The presence of two chairs is an ambiguous invitation: it could imply an exchange, perhaps at remove, with an audience or another artist. Tucked behind one chair is a record cover for the album *Still Crazy After All These Years* (1976) by Paul Simon — and so it may be that the two chairs are to accommodate multiple aspects of the one: the artist. This dry, yet playful coda is lighter than Staunton's other artworks of the time that, paradoxically, reeked of emptiness.

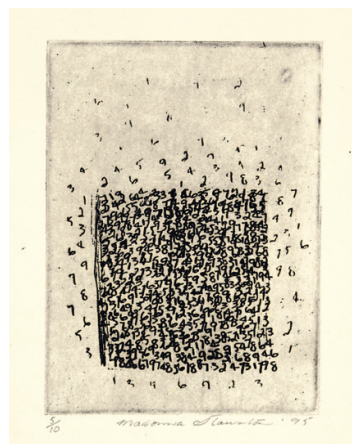
In *Chair with packing case* 1993, now in the University of Queensland's collection, a single well-worn wooden chair has been camouflaged by the addition of recycled painted timber. Among the aged, flaked paint, the chair is at once hidden by, and also appears to be hiding in, the gesture. The work — alongside other key works also in this exhibition, *Hide 1* and *Hide 2* 2002, and *Romantic doubt* 2004 — featured in the important survey of established



Untitled 1973
Paper collage on canvas
151 x 173cm
Purchased 1995. Queensland Art Gallery
Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

contemporary artists, 'Interesting Times' 2005, curated by Russell Storer for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. In the catalogue, Brisbane poet Nathan Shepherdson wrote about the artist's talent for engaging life, death and the echoes of presence in a single sign:

Madonna Staunton has found a method of injecting philosophy into chairs. She hangs the coat of her thinking over the backs of them. The chairs she uses in her works are the timber ones. While timber is an inanimate substance, it should be remembered that we are sitting — or not sitting — on the flesh of trees. In profile a human being on a chair leaning over a table resembles a question mark. Perhaps the most pressing question Madonna asks of her chairs is if they can withstand the weight of absence.¹⁷



Untitled (triangle) 1995
Etching, ed. 5/10
14 x 10.5cm

Untitled (square) 1995
Etching, ed. 5/10
14 x 10.5cm

Collection: The artist

While Shepherdson's idea of wood being the flesh of trees may seem fanciful, it articulates both the depth of imagination and empathetic projection of the artist. Staunton's short story *The Small Garden* (1982) — republished in this volume — takes this fancy one step further to identify the fears of a shrub under the eye of a gardener. Shepherdson also implicates the balance between preservation, states of decay and regeneration, as well as different states of presence, both physical and remembered into the reading. *Hide 1* and *Hide 2* recall the tipi structure used by nomadic First Nations peoples of the United States, though Staunton's are somewhat more defence-armoured. Here, two ladders (perhaps once joined by the plank from *Assemblage with plank*) are covered with painted timber lengths to create a physical protection for the psyche.

Similarly, *Romantic doubt*, another painted timber assemblage, presents other ideas about escape through literature. Select timbers have been arranged rather like the artist's own overflowing bookshelves, along which Staunton has sporadically scribed the nouns 'UTOPIA' and 'EREWON' — references to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon; or, Over the Range* (1872). In More's text, Utopia (derived from the Greek for 'no place') was a fictional, idyllic community created for the purpose of indicating and imagining a different existence apart from the status quo. Inspired by the author's time in New Zealand, Butler's *Erewhon*, an anagram of nowhere, satirises the scattering British Empire and is a kind of early treatise on the potential for 'machine consciousness', otherwise known as artificial intelligence. Perhaps in this work, we can see the artist doubting her 'romantic' belief in positive evolution and the direction of her society in general. Ideas become cluttered and counterproductive — invoked, though shuttered out.

Numbers game 2002 speaks of a different kind of alienation: that of being misunderstood and typecast. Comprised of redundant railway markers, complete with coding and small ink bottles, *Numbers game* resembles a Rosalie Gascoigne gridded reflective road-sign work, jumbled, or even exploded. Tired of being discussed in reference to Gascoigne, Staunton composed an



Nodding bird c.1999
Relief print
14 x 25.5cm
Collection: The artist

arrangement as if it had been shook in frustration. For her, numbers and letters are important symbols associated with the systematic denial of rights among certain citizens by authoritarian regimes. Even as a benign administrative process, the impersonal experience of being reduced to a number can sit at odds with a strong sense of self and self-worth. This process of divorcing or stripping identity is a practice that art critic Ihor Holubisky noted 'has the effect of desensitising and dehumanising' those citizens who are already the most disenfranchised. The Nazis were known for tattooing concentration camp detainees so that bodies of prisoners could be accounted for, either dead or alive.¹⁸ Similar practices were inflicted on Indigenous Australians with King plates, used by colonists to identify leaders while also establishing a hierarchy and bureaucracy amid colonised populations. Later, *Immigrant* 2008, a tender graphic portrayal of Staunton's Irish forebears, would mark her concern for those who travel from a desperate situation (to another). The numbers in *Key*, also from 2002, would seem to reference the domestic and a longing for safety in the empty space behind a table leg. *Key* also references Staunton's interest in music and the qualities that are shared across visual and musical composition including tone, sequence and pace.

Painting with paint

Concurrently, Staunton had begun working with wire coathangers. Though coathangers seemed to represent a peculiar interest in the incidental to many of her admirers at the time, their significance becomes clear when tracing back through her later works. In her 'Armatures' series of 1999, she attached wire coathangers to pre-painted boards in an even dispersion, and then painted around them with a gestural action. In one respect they were a kind of painting system with set parameters, offering a safe process by which to return to painting *with* paint — but they also coded a personal insight. Rex Butler wrote an observant review of the work when it first showed at Bellas Gallery, contextualising the strategy with the shaped canvases of Frank Stella and Minimalism generally, but the real insight lay in his title, 'Ghosts in the closet'.¹⁹



Staunton was thinking about the armour that we cloak ourselves in before we leave the home each day to face the world. Equally, she was also considering the restless aspects of ourselves — our sensitivities, vulnerabilities, secrets and compassion — that we might leave behind in the closet like coathangers, or skeletons, left to rattle. Perhaps we take the coat in order to leave the warmth of our souls behind.

Around this time, Staunton began making monotypes with the printing assistance of Wim de Vos. As stated earlier, the fast-paced process with its potential for delicate tonalities suited Staunton perfectly. Her first subjects were simple line drawings, again of coathangers, and then of safety pins. Safety pins are useful devices — though with a tendency to prick when least expected — and exert a kind of karmic justice that balances their brilliant utility. Soon, these simple illustrations began to morph into whimsical scenes. Coathangers became birds, and safety pins found themselves in idyllic garden settings: life was everywhere in everything. A parallel practice worth bearing in mind might be that of the American poet Gary Snyder, whom Staunton has met and admires. Snyder has a strong belief in the place of environmental and cultural ecology in the face of globalist expansion; he is known for his profound interest in the role and experience of community, and his respect for diverse cultures including Buddhism, the ancient Chinese poets, and First Nations across America. In his writing he often addresses interconnectedness, the life of things, and the careless pressures exerted on the world by the powerful or inattentive — in much the same way Staunton does.

Monotype (*Mother bird*) c.1999
Monotype
15.5 x 22cm
Collection: The artist



After the World Trade Center attack in New York on 11 September 2001, the artist's empathy for those involved drew her monotypes into yet darker territory. In the 'Sept. 11' series, two dark book-like blocks of ink appeared page after page, interrupted by the ghostly trails of her hand falling down the plate. These haunting gestures recall the victims who fell hundreds of metres in front of the dark plate glass, and in front of the rest of the world as it watched the shocking broadcast together at once.

It seems that faced with this terrible reminder of mortality, along with the more subtle variations in self that aging delivers, Staunton gained a new clarity, daring and vitality. Her work took on a narrative dimension of sorts, though she carefully strived to avoid being didactic. The artist continued making monotypes through c.2005, expanding her subjects, particularly still life, and experimenting with strategies of representation until she made a wholehearted return to figurative painting.

Among the most accomplished paintings of this new period is *Reprise* c.2007. Here, an elongated figure, painted in murky tones worthy of Walter Sickert, stares out at the viewer with a brittle and nervous exhaustion. The subject's face seems to hover in front of her head, detached as it rests in her hand in a way that suggests they have been charting the formless, infinite void of depression. The eyes, marked with disbelief and acceptance, strike out. Later works *They say* 2010 and *No one said* 2010, while continuing the investigation into (self-)portraiture, refer clearly to brooding feelings surrounding family inheritance. *The reader* 2012, depicts a head in a book — the preferred means of escape — and the colour of the mood that is felt in this limbo of residing in the physical world but being present in another.

Monotype (*Landscape with safety pin*)
c.1999
Monotype
16 x 22cm
Collection: The artist

In *Anxiety* 2012 a sole figure is nearly ejected from the picture plane, tumbling out of this synthetic space, preoccupied and faltering. Many of Staunton's compositions are articulated in a condensed geometric arrangement — a post-cubist strategy linked to her tonal collage, but coded with emotional sensitivity provoked by the wrestling of humanist ideals and hostile circumstance. Brilliant, piercing blue eyes strike here too, out of an astonishingly sophisticated composition of layered complementary tones — pink, yellow, mauve and more blue — all worked over each other with a delicate brush action. The figure's hands seem to repel each other like magnets of matching polarity, signifying a body and mind in all-consuming turmoil.

In an effort to exert some order over chaos, Staunton attempted to frame her future after death as she optimistically aims to experience it. Her 'Postcard' series addresses authors and musicians already passed. In writing to Samuel Beckett, Emily Dickinson, Franz Kafka, Tiny Tim and English poet Stevie Smith,²⁰ she announces her resolve to locate them, finding consolation in a kind of transcendental goal setting. These novel projections are couched in a brutally honest personal reflection about the limits of life and the ideas that have made it worthwhile, charging the work with startling sensitivity and intelligence. Cats have steadily featured in other recent works, and Staunton's insight into and admiration for their fine-tuned engagement with their surrounds is clear. Their emotions are absolute and their habitats are lively. For them, time is measured differently, and each moment is valued and lived with equal verve, whether ranging or resting. Cats might make the finest Buddhists.

On first view, this heavy atmosphere seems to have lifted a little further in *Out of a clear blue sky* 2013. Its glorious sense of sunlight and blue sky could easily be mistaken for an optimistic statement. Of course, the idiom is not about the parting of the clouds to receive the gifts of chance — but instead describes an unexpected injury sustained somehow out of nowhere. Even in the finest moments lurks hazard. Similarly bittersweet, *Sunflowers* 2013 is remarkable for its economy of form. Again post-cubist, but with a nod to Vincent van Gogh, Staunton has constructed a deceptively simple composition full of the pulse of nature, tempered by a mindfulness of the inevitable decay of all life. While Staunton would declare a still life like this a mere 'busy work' while she waits for greater inspiration, its ambience reveals her immense capacity for colour and form in painting, and indicates an abundance of melancholy insights present in its making and in the artist.

Madonna Staunton's story is a lesson in an individual's capacity to change and adapt, to reintroduce and renew, and to persevere in the shadows when necessary. It might be that a small revolution in the artist's thinking took place at some stage along the way, yet on careful viewing it seems that her path has remained relatively true. Needless to say, travel far enough in any one direction and there is bound to be a change in aspect. Together, this group of works represents many of Madonna Staunton's key achievements in an eventful lifetime — with still more to come. They demonstrate the importance of investing, for the longest term, in ideas and ideals, feelings and thoughts. Expressed with talents amassed over a career spanning nearly 50 years, each work, however humble, attests to the insight that can come with age and profound reflection. Having mastered the ability to create compositions analogous to states of meditation or inner harmony by a pattern of particularly sympathetic aesthetic ordering, Staunton then had the wit and wherewithal to reveal more and more of her personal experiences than would have previously been concealed. Her deep expressive content and thoroughgoing philosophical understanding of human existence is now exposed, unprotected. Attracted to this wisdom, it appears that what Staunton had been looking for from the start, found her in the end.



Kitchen blues 2009
Gouache
9.8 x 14.8cm
Collection: Michael and Kylie Rayner,
Brisbane

- 1 Madonna Staunton suggested in a discussion with Josh Milani that until her reengagement with representational painting she had been 'hiding in formalism'. This can be taken to mean that the artist was concealing certain observations into works that might have appeared exclusively occupied with aesthetic concerns, and also that she herself had been hiding behind the idea that she was a 'formalist' artist who dealt in the relationship between colour, tone, shape, scale, texture. 18 June 2013.
- 2 Stephen Rainbird, in *Madonna Staunton: A Survey 1966-1993*, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 1994, p.21.
- 3 Discussion with the artist 8 March 2014.
- 4 Helen Fridemanis in *Artists and Aspects of the Contemporary Art Society*, Queensland Branch, Boolarong Publications, Bowen Hills, Brisbane, 1991, p.118.
- 5 Michele Helmrich, 'A Poetics of Discipline: Madonna Staunton' in *Madonna Staunton: A Survey 1966-1993*, p.7.
- 6 Frank J Machovec (trans.), *The Book of Tao*, The Peter Pauper Press, New York, 1962, pp.39-40.
- 7 Rainbird, p.21.
- 8 Fridemanis, p.145.
- 9 Roy Churcher, artist and teacher, briefly instructed Staunton during her time at Central Technical College in 1964. Fridemanis, p.23.
- 10 Fridemanis, p.121.
- 11 Urszula Szulakowska, *Experimental Art in Queensland, 1975-1995: An Introductory Study*, Griffith Uni Print, Griffith University, Brisbane, 1998, p.vi.
- 12 Fridemanis, p.121.
- 13 David Andre, *MacPherson, Shepherdson, Staunton*, University Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 1979, unpaginated.
- 14 Szulakowska, p.16.
- 15 Dr Gertrude Langer, 'Making their mark', *Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, 28 July 1979.
- 16 Andre, unpaginated.
- 17 Nathan Shepherdson in *Interesting Times: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art*, Russell Storer, Museum of Contemporary Australian Art, Sydney, 2005, p.125.
- 18 Ihor Holubizky, 'Madonna Staunton: sorting through ... organising things, in time ... through time' in Michael Snelling (ed.), *Madonna Staunton*, IMA Publishing, Brisbane, 2003, p.22.
- 19 Rex Butler, 'Ghosts in the closet', *Courier-Mail*, 15 August 1988.
- 20 A great coincidence, Smith was raised by an aunt named Madge, and resented her absent father though this atypical family space offered her an independence that would be the foundation of her attitude and work. Her most famous poem is 'Not waving but drowning', and much of her work dealt with death and depression.