

A Studio Setting

Words by Sally Quin

Richard Gunning appears only occasionally in self-portraiture, and even then his figure is persistently unobtrusive—as in *Studio Desk*, 1997, where he has depicted himself on a small canvas, a picture within a picture, amid a crowd of competing objects; or in the very early self-portrait, *Mirror with Flowers*, 1985, in which a vase of flowers is privileged over his background figure, reflected in a mirror and immersed in the painting process. And yet despite such restraint, Gunning's works are utterly autobiographical, stories told largely through a description of the spaces he inhabits.

In Gunning's still life paintings the viewer is led rather gently through the various periods of the artist's life and it is only when the works are read en masse that they tend towards the elegiac. Many of the objects he selects, the markers of time passing, are infused with a Pop aesthetic of a particularly Australian bent, which privileges butcher's paper and cold chips, Milk Arrowroot biscuits and Hungry Jacks burgers. These banal objects are elevated through the artist's attention to detail, his intense interest in the textures of paper wrapping, and the sensory dimensions of the subject matter. The presence of the painter is always implied, from the more obvious interventions like a missing bite of a burger, to an interest in inserting his own works within





paintings, as if the artist is deliberating over, or re-evaluating, the 'original' as he paints.

While Gunning has utilised the traditional subject matter of the still life genre, as in close-ups of fruit and flowers, he has also sought to expand those parameters to include the whole of the studio itself, with elements of furniture, easels and art works placed carefully to elicit certain formal relationships. His approach oscillates between revealing a chaotic profusion of objects, as in *The Blue Table*, 1998, toward works of increasing austerity such as *Studio with Open Door*, 2008. This seems an assertion of the immense aesthetic possibilities of the studio interior, which can be variously disrupted, ordered, and ultimately abandoned as alternative spaces are found.

Gunning's current interest in the studio has a long genesis beginning with his first studio paintings in the early 1980s. During this early phase in Gunning's career, recently out of art school, the studio became the setting for a wide ranging and quite exuberant experimentation

with various aspects of twentieth century modernism. *The Happy Studio*, 1983, presents a view through the window on to the Swan River and Narrows Bridge from the artist's studio in the Oddfellows building in Perth. The intense blues of Matisse's south of France are transposed on to our own familiar city, where *Studio View*, 1983, appears more closely aligned with an Australian modernist sensibility, the striped construction on the left hand side recalling Nolan's 'Wimmera' series.

Gunning's work has always been inflected with a deep interest in art history from the Renaissance to Pop and an openness to resolving aesthetic problems through a variety of approaches. This eclecticism is celebrated in *Studio Desk*, 1997, which depicts a pin-board and table laden with images and objects, constituting a whole universe which could then be interrogated piece by piece. This profusion is subdued in Gunning's more recent work in which the sum of the artist's looking has

been synthesised into a particularly restrained and sensitive aesthetic. Emphasis is on the opportunities for viewing that the studio affords, the multiplication of elements in the world, evoked through devices such as mirrors, the backs of canvases and pictures within pictures.

The setting of Gunning's studio is unmistakably Perth, as the stark light that bathes his compositions hides nothing. Indeed, an abiding characteristic his work has been an investigation of the quality of particular spaces. It is not necessarily a celebration of the city of Perth and its surrounds, but recognition that we are deeply affected by the places we inhabit. Gunning emerged as part of a group of artists who mostly left art school in the early 1980s and were committed to representing their world through figurative art. Interested in historical art and the more recent history of twentieth century modernism, they uniquely contextualised the figure, within Perth's often lonely and oppressive CBD and suburbs.

Opposite top

Richard Gunning
Studio with Open Door, 2008

Opposite left

Richard Gunning
Fish and Chips (detail), 1987

Opposite right


Richard Gunning
Studio Desk, 1997

Above from left to right

Richard Gunning, *Mirror with Flowers*, 1985
Richard Gunning, *The Blue Table*, 1998
Richard Gunning, *The Happy Studio*, 1983



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Strangely for those who came of age during the 1980s, this period is now becoming more sharply defined, parodied as a period of excess and garish bad taste. During the early 1990s Gunning occasionally made reference to this period of excess and greed, as in *Unicorn and Girl*, 1993, a painting which recounts a moral tale of the corruption of innocence set in the Perth suburbs during the fallout of the 'boom.' But to my mind, his work overwhelmingly recalls a period which was also poetic and understated, unique for the group of artists of which Gunning was part, known colloquially as the 'Oddfellows', and for the music of The Triffids which considered our existence on the edge of the Indian Ocean. These ideas are beautifully synthesised in Gunning's *The Rock Climbers*, 1992, which, though recalling the artist's dream, seems faintly recognisable to all. 

Left

Richard Gunning
Still life painting + Mirror,
2008, 150 x 78cm, oil
on canvas

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