

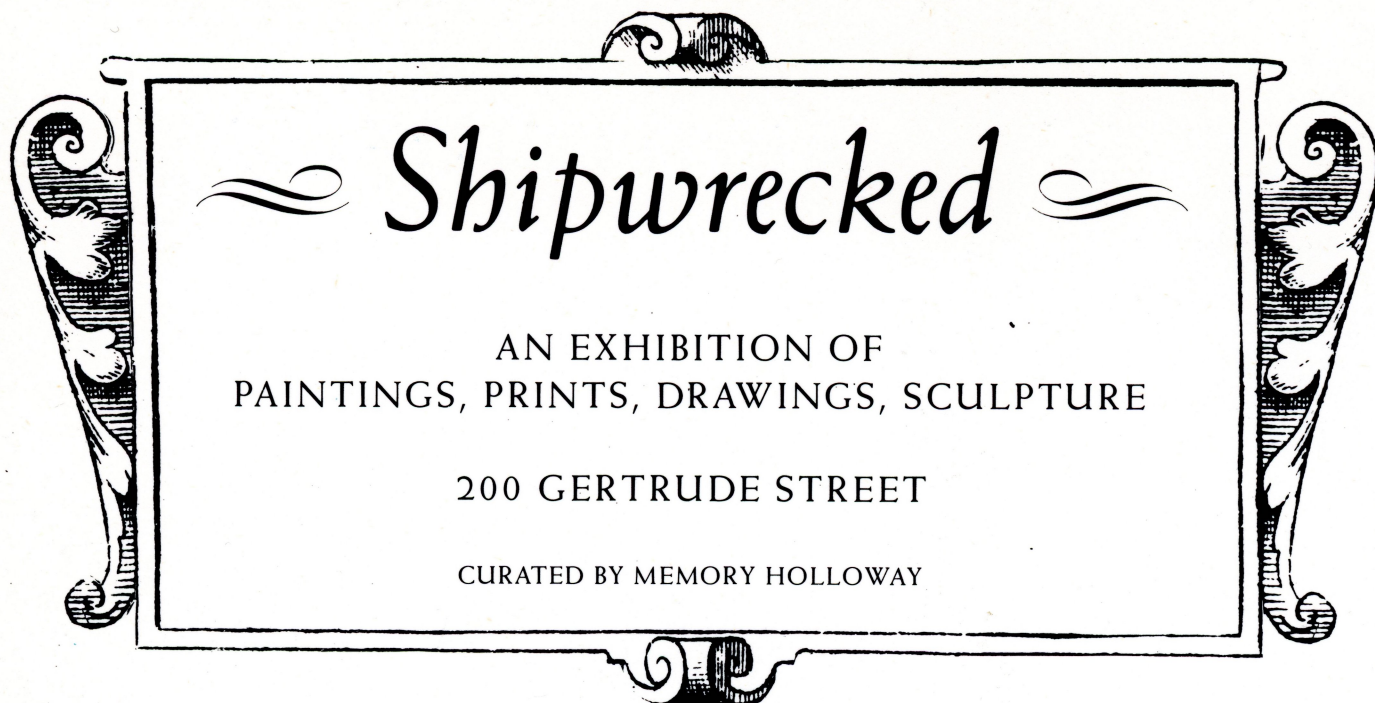


Shipwrecked

200 GERTRUDE STREET

Wednesday November 26 – Saturday December 20, 1986

CURATED BY MEMORY HOLLOWAY



The land he will come to is unknown, as is, once he disembarks, the land from which he comes.

Foucault, *Stultifera Navis*

IN RECENT YEARS a number of local artists have presented in their work the notion of being in passage between Australia and another undesignated place. This theme is often expressed through the literal image of the ship or raft. The idea of being in transit, of being between places even if only in the imagination is more than a description of geographical schizophrenia. The voyage is also symbolic of restlessness and unspecified desire.

In the Eighties these ideas have been taken up as a major theme and among the work of those artists represented here, the voyage, the ship, the storm tossed boat and its final outcome, the shipwreck becomes the collective expression of an epistemological pursuit. To make a tour of the earth or to traverse its waters is to recognize the limits of the human domain and thereby to gain control of one's world. To travel, enclosed within a space which is known (the ship) is to experience security and protection from the dangers of the outer world while at once discovering it. Viewed in this way, navigation and its pictorial representation is a metaphor for exploration and certainty; its darker side is the revelation of what is unforeseen and therefore uncertain. The shipwreck was inevitably the result of the latter: a miscalculation of land's proximity or the inability to chart those shallow reefs which in the 19th century undid so many ships in Victorian waters between the Cape Otway Coast and King Island.

THE NARRENSCHIFF

Although the most immediate visual precedents of the sea voyage and the shipwreck are to be found in the 19th century, *The Narrenschiff*, a text (Sebastian Brant, 1494) and practice of the 15th century, provides an earlier source for the theme of the symbolic voyage. The *Narrenschiff* (literally a Ship of Fools) was a long satirical poem translated into French, English, and Latin, as the *Stultifera Navis*. The narrative tells of a ship composed of all imaginable human types who embark on a great symbolic voyage to find truth, destiny and fortune. In practice these ships of fools were made up of madmen sent to sea

as a way of cleansing European cities of their insane, and they were handed over to sailors as a means of assuring their disappearance. Sending a madman out to sea not only made certain that he would no longer be a burden within the confines of the city; it also signified a symbolic purification. Water transports and it cleanses. The ship can also be likened to a prison; it encloses and it is in a permanent state of passage, making its human cargo a prisoner of his own departure. "Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes, bound fast at the infinite crossroads."¹

The links made between the sea, madness and infinity appear in two works here: in Chris Dyson's ship split in two, called *Skitzo* and in Jan Murray's painting in three parts. Murray takes up the idea of the infinity of travel and the possibility of a continual return to the point of departure. In opposition to a boat filled with people is placed the sign of the alpha and the omega, the figure eight which constantly turns back on itself.

The *Narrenschiff*, as a figure of the navigation of madmen, was also linked in the Western mind near the end of the Middle Ages to folly and to unreason. Yet around this time there also appeared a new view of the madman as guardian of truth. Merrin Eirth interconnects the ship, folly and madness in the ten lithographs shown here. The ship in which a naked figure sits holding a star and an orb (heaven and earth) is also linked to the sanctioned madness of Carnival by the addition of wheels, making travel across land possible in a vessel normally confined to water.

THE STORM TOSSED BOAT

By the 19th century the symbolic voyage as a search for truth is layered with a further struggle: that of the individual against nature and the elements. The image of the storm tossed boat is a recurrent symbol in Romantic painting used to dramatize man's struggle against fate and his need for salvation.² As with all expressive art, the application of the theme exteriorizes internal feelings.

Throughout the 19th century the storm tossed boat was used by artists to express both personal sentiment and in the case of Gericault,

as a screen for political criticism. On one level Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819) (the outcome of a shipwreck) was regarded at the time as an allegory on human will and its survival in the face of elemental forces. But there was a macabre side which many preferred not to see and which enraged others: starvation and the cannibalism which followed, the indictment of French seafaring abilities, and the illusions to the superior strength and fitness of the black race to survive the ordeal, marked by the youthful figure who beacons to a ship from the pyramid of figures who support him. All this was in part an elaborate confection of Gericault's personal interests, but on a more general level it also expresses the narrative context used by Romantic artists to relay an allegorical statement. The storm tossed boat appeared again in Delacroix's *Dante and Virgil* (1822), *Shipwreck of Don Juan* (1840), and *Christ on the Sea of Gallilee* (1854), in which the painter is said to have epitomized his observations on human destiny and the natural order.

Caspar David Friedrich's dramatic *Wreck of the Hope* (1822), also a real incident, was an expression of the possibility of salvation in the face of destruction. Working within the same German Romantic tradition of the Dusseldorf School, Eugene von Guerard executed his shipwreck painting of 1870, *Evening after a Gale, Wilson's Promontory*. In von Guerard's work two surviving figures cling to the remaining exposed tip of the mast of a sunken ship; as a new day dawns they hail a ship on the horizon as it makes its passage around the Promontory. Von Guerard signed his name on the only other evidence of the ship's furnishings – a barrel which floats at the edge of the picture. Ian Parry, in his paintings inspired by Port Phillip Bay and the fishing expeditions he has undertaken there, has drawn on a similar painterly Romantic tradition which makes light a central indicator of mood.

Artists adapted the theme then, as they have again recently, to their own needs, some operating within a specific configuration of symbols, others using it without any particular moral note. Micky Allan's use of a 19th century engraving is a particularly ironic application of the theme in that it featured in an earlier show at Gertrude Street called *Travels without my Aunt*. The engraving appeared there in the context of paintings done of Venetian gondoliers and of the skyline of New York seen from the water – both pictures about 'watering holes' and neither riddled with the romantic doubt and high moral purpose of the 19th century engraving. The overriding attitude in Allan's work to the theme is one which questions the heated emotion of the 19th century. Hers is a much cooler aesthetic which draws on souvenirs and pre-digested popular images.

'VOYAGES IN WORLDS KNOWN AND UNKNOWN'

The ship is a container. Potentially a tomb, it is first and foremost a refuge, a model of security offering protection from the dangers of an unknown world. (Does this resemble the artist's studio?) In his *Voyages Extraordinaires*,³ (to which 'voyages in worlds known and unknown' is the subtitle), Jules Verne makes every voyage a totality, a way of seeing a scientific system. Through these voyages appear and reappear themes, variations, recurring obsessions and cosmological models: in his persistent desire to know the world through what is seen, Verne's voyages may be said to approximate the practice of making art.

Containment is in Jules Verne's writing a preferred state of being; his favored preposition is 'in'.⁴ The Nautilus in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea* is the vessel of the spectator's containment; its inner world is comfortable, even luxurious. Verne's solution to the perils of travel is to suggest a means whereby the traveller can be simultaneously in transit and at rest. Hence he furnishes the interior of the vessel with every imaginable need, with the result that the traveller is wise to remain inside and to venture outside rarely, if at

all. Verne seems to take up Pascal's attitude that "all human misery stems from man's ability to stay at home, at rest, in his bedroom". He should only go out at his peril.

Anton Hassell's *Submarine* seeks the enclosure of the ship and its absolute protection, while still exploring what is external. Paradoxically the ship, which may be a symbol of departure (Hassell's is equipped inside with a bicycle seat suggesting mobility) is at a deeper level the emblem of closure, and of a static sealing off from the world. Like the Nautilus, *Submarine* defines the inside by what is outside: the vessel which contains the spectator is in turn contained by external space. The point of Hassell's land driven submarine is surely the pleasure of containment, similar to the building of cabbies, and hideaways, huts, nests and nooks.⁵ Like the hut, the vessel is the valorization of a centre of concentrated solitude.

In a general sense all the works in this show give further credence to Pascal's idea: the world is a fearful place – ships are overturned and battered by too much of nature, or they are adrift with no direction at all, an equal peril.

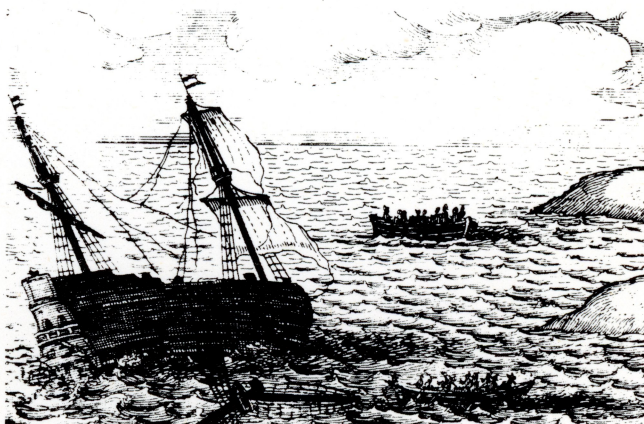
The exterior world of Katherine Hattam's *Adrift* is observed from within a well colonized environment which recalls those interior descriptions of Verne's Nautilus; beyond this interior, safe and known, is the unknown, the uncertain orientation of a single abandoned boat, afloat, outside the close, confined and well ordered space of the domestic container.

SHIPWRECKS, LIFEBOATS AND MIGRATIONS

From surviving records, the first English ship wrecked off Australia's coast was the Tryal in 1622, a merchant ship laden with silver crowns, chests and jewels intended for the King of Siam. Sailing in uncharted waters off the West Australian coast, the ship glided softly onto the coral reef at about 15 kilometres offshore. Ninety seven men, left behind by those who managed to secure the only lifeboats, probably died within a few hours. There were to be many more shipwrecks off Australia's coast over the next 300 or so years. The ships which foundered were sealers, convict transports, immigrant clippers and coastal traders.

Of the early wrecks the story of the Batavia is surely the most dramatic, and the image of its lifeboat is quite likely one of several references which Geoff Lowe had in mind in his painting *Lifeboat*.

The Batavia struck a coral reef in the Abrolhos Islands, again off the coast of West Australia in 1629. Most of the passengers reached the islands by small boats, but food and water were in short supply. While the commander Pelsaert and his skipper Jacobsz went on a 65 day search for water in another boat, the Batavia's crew mutinied on a nearby island, raped the female passengers and murdered the chil-



The wreck of the Dutch East India Company's *Batavia* on the Houtman Abrolhos, off the coast of Western Australia, in 1629, with crew and passengers escaping to the nearby islands. (From *Ongeluckige Voyagie*; J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History.)

dren. 125 of the 268 passengers aboard the Batavia were killed. The total death toll, after 40 drowned and 20 died of illness was 185. The survivors were Australia's first white settlers.⁶

It is noteworthy that for many artists of the Eighties the lifeboat is of greater interest than the shipwreck. In Jan Nelson's painting *Emblem* an empty oarless rowboat on a rough sea, framed by turbulent seas, must be seen in the context of her other paintings which address the theme of the shipwreck. In these the idea of a raft is matched and made emphatic by the support: the paintings are executed on thick wooden planks, themselves forming a liferaft. In one, hieroglyphs appear at the side as a reminder of the role of mapping and its failure to fully chart shallow or treacherous waters.

In Geoff Lowe's work the lifeboat is a cultural component that is ruled by the same conventions as the parent culture but it is also self contained and a cultural end in itself. "The ship is a cultural carrier consisting of techniques, equipment and knowledge which allows travel over bodies of water that would otherwise be barriers to cross cultural contact".⁷ Lowe's lifeboat brings its surviving culture to new shores, only to create an extension and reinterpretation of that culture in response to the new environment on arrival.

That response is also true of those migrants who arrived from Europe after the Second War. In a series of watercolours done in 1984, Victor Majzner makes cross references between the earliest landings, in Australia, probably the Malays, and the Europeans: the brightly colored Malay boat encircled in the upper left of *Arrivers* is a reminder that the Europeans, crammed into a ship on the opposite side of the same painting, were latecomers to the continent. There is also implicit in this juxtaposition the idea that since settlement Europeans have persistently attempted to define and redefine an ever elusive Australian identity for themselves. It may be that the only true survivor is one who can easily seek and adjust to these redefinitions. Alina McDonald's *Survivor* is the only figure in the exhibition

to appear alone without the support of a boat, raft or mast to hang on to. Survival is the ability to adapt as much as it is a feature of chance.

Shipwreck imagery and its offshoots may owe its potency and attraction to its use as a metaphor for a state of mind. We know that Turner used seamanship as a metaphor for the art of painting, and that he believed that there was a similarity between the painter and the mariner: both had command over the vehicle which they guided.⁸ As with Turner, the artists represented here have been gripped by similar motifs, and out of them have formulated a nexus of private meanings made public.

Memory Holloway

NOTES

1. M. Foucault, 'Stultifera Navis', *Madness and Civilization, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Tavistock, London, 1975, p.11. See pp. 3-37 for an analysis of the interrelationship between water, navigation and madness. Also, on the fool and the Narrenschiff, see E. Welsford *The Fool, His Social and Literary History*, Faber, London, 1968, p. 235.
2. L. Eitner, 'The Open Window and the Storm Tossed Boat', *Art Bulletin*, v. XXXVII, 1955, pp. 279-90.
3. J. Verne, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, v.II, *Voyages extraordinaires*, Michel de l'ormeraie, 1975-81.
4. See R. Barthes 'The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat', *Mythologies*, Paladin, London, 1973, pp. 65-68.
5. G. Bachelard, 'The house. From cellar to garret, The significance of the hut', *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1964, pp. 3-38.
6. C. Bateson, *Australian Shipwrecks*, v. I. 1622-1850, A.A. and A.W. Reed, Sydney, 1972, pp. 16 ff.
7. R.A. Gould, ed. *Shipwreck Anthropology*, School of American Research, Santa Fe, 1983, p. 71.
8. B. Venning, 'A Macabre Connoisseurship: Turner, Byron and the Apprehension of Shipwreck Subjects in Early Nineteenth Century England', *Art History*, v. 8. no. 3, September, 1985, p. 305.

CATALOGUE

MICKY ALLAN

1944, Born Melbourne. 1967, Bachelor of Arts, University of Melbourne. 1968, Diploma of Painting, National Gallery School, Melbourne.

1. *Travels Without My Aunt*, 1985
Oil and oil pastel on linen
64.5 x 91
PRIVATE COLLECTION
2. *Shipwreck*, 1985
Oil on linen (copy of an engraving)
88.5 x 130
THE ARTIST, COURTESY UNITED ARTISTS

LYNNE BOYD

1953, Born Melbourne. 1980-83, Bachelor of Art, Victorian College of the Arts. 1983-84, Postgraduate Studies, Victorian College of the Arts.

3. *The Storm*, 1986
Oil on linen
40 x 50
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET
4. *Marine 1*, 1986
Oil on linen
65 x 91
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET

BRIAN DUNLOP

1938, Born Sydney. 1953-58, Studied National Art School, East Sydney.

5. *The Otago*, (not dated)
Etching
24.5 x 27
PRIVATE COLLECTION

CHRIS DYSON

1952, Born Perth, Western Australia. 1972-84, Worked in the music industry. 1981-84, Bachelor of Art, Victorian College of the Arts.

6. *Skitzo*, 1986
Oil on masonite
125 x 91
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET
7. *The Fist of God*, 1986
Oil on canvas board
40.6 x 30.5
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET
8. *Shipwrecked*, 1986
Pencil on paper
20.7 x 14.7
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET

Catalogue continues overleaf...

MERRIN EIRTH

1957, Born Benalla, Victoria. 1974-77, Kevin Grove College of Advanced Education, Queensland. 1978-79, Diploma of Art & Design, Prahran College of Advanced Education, Melbourne. 1979-81, Postgraduate Studies, Victorian College of the Arts.

- 9.— *Odyssey of Souls*, 1986
18. Series of 10 prints
Lithograph and woodcut prints
61.5 x 43
THE ARTIST, COURTESY REALITIES GALLERY

ANDREW GORSUCH

1964, Born Melbourne. 1984-86, Bachelor of Art (Sculpture), Victorian College of the Arts.

19. *Shipwreck*, 1986
Bronze
27.5 x 64 x 10
PRIVATE COLLECTION

ANTON HASSELL

1952, Born Warrnambool, Victoria. 1982, Diploma of Fine Art, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. 1985, Postgraduate studies, Victorian College of the Arts.

20. *Submarine*, 1986
Metal
220 x 182 x 66
COURTESY JOHN AND PATRICIA RIDLEY
21. *Shark Boat*, 1986
Wood
350 x 450 x 123
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET

KATHERINE HATTAM

1950, Born Melbourne. 1971-74, Bachelor of Arts (Hons.), University of Melbourne.

22. *Adrift Off Melbourne*, 1986
Charcoal on paper
150 x 253
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET

GEOFF LOWE

1952, Born Melbourne. 1968-72, Studied Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

23. *Lifeboat*, 1982-83
Synthetic polymer paint on linen and pencil on linen paper
152 x 305 (excluding drawings)
PRIVATE COLLECTION

ALINA McDONALD

1947, Born Melbourne. 1971, Started painting (self-taught)

24. *Survivor*, 1984
Oil on canvas
215 x 400
THE ARTIST

VICTOR MAJZNER

1945, Born Ufa, U.S.S.R. 1962-67, Diploma of Art, Caulfield Institute of Technology.

25. *Arrivers*, 1984
Watercolour on paper
80.5 x 105.5
THE ARTIST, COURTESY CHRISTINE ABRAHAM'S GALLERY

26. *Decoys and Arrivers*, 1984
Watercolour on paper
102 x 152
THE ARTIST, COURTESY CHRISTINE ABRAHAM'S GALLERY

JAN MURRAY

1957, Born Ballarat, Victoria. 1980-81, Victorian College of the Arts.

27. *Untitled*, 1986
Oil on linen
190 x 240
THE ARTIST

JAN NELSON

1955, Born Melbourne. 1981-83, Bachelor of Art, Victorian College of the Arts.

28. *Beached*, 1984
Oil on wood
233 x 278
PRIVATE COLLECTION
29. *Emblem*, 1986
Oil on wood
196 x 300
COURTESY OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS COLLECTION, BUDGET TRANSPORT INDUSTRIES

IAN PARRY

1947, Born Melbourne. 1965-68, Painting and printmaking at Prahran College of Advanced Education, Melbourne.

30. *Moonrise*, 1986
Oil on linen
31 x 51
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET
31. *Wreck of the Mary Norling*, 1986
Oil on paper
28 x 28
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET
32. *Cape Liptrap*, 1986
Oil on paper
28 x 21
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET
33. *Port Phillip Bay – Evening*, 1986
Oil on linen
40.5 x 35.5
THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET

All measurements are in centimetres, height before width before depth.

Thanks to Ruth Bain for her assistance with the organisation of the exhibition; to the contributing artists and lenders to the exhibition; and to Vitrex-Camden for their generous sponsorship of the exhibition catalogue.

Catalogue design by Ian Robertson, typesetting by The Type Centre, bromides by Screen Bromides, printing by Photo Offset Productions, paper courtesy of Deans Art, Melbourne. Deans Art, established in 1985, is one of Australia's largest professional suppliers of fine art materials and graphic products.

DeansArt

Cover Illustration: A rescue made by the Ramsgate lifeboat, powered only by oars, in 1860. Reproduced from *The Commanding Sea*, Clare Francis, BBC and Pelham Books, London, 1981.

Published by Gertrude Street Artists Spaces Inc., November 1986. The assistance and sponsorship of the Victorian Ministry for the Arts, Vitrex-Camden Pty. Ltd. and the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council is gratefully acknowledged.

