

Masking, binding

JOHN HART

Adelaide Central Gallery

REVIEWED BY JOHN NEYLON

IN THE MID 1980s 'appropriation' was the buzzword. Central to the debate, which accompanied its adoption as a strategy by many artists, was the idea of originality. Appropriation appeared to attack the very foundations of originality and with it the respect paid to individual artists as the 'authors' of the ideas. Barthes once said that the death of the author signalled the birth of the reader. It was a persuasive idea which summarized a shift in focus away from a century-old regard for the individual artist as the owner and source of the original idea. This shift in perspective has gone beyond a simple case of painting versus everything else. It's taken on the characteristics of a tectonic shift in cultural consciousness, which has been trying to re-imagine what art is or its functions might be.

But no amount of theorising has altered the fact that artists continue to make artifacts, which curators continue to massage into exhibitions, that reviewers write about them and, most importantly, that people still choose to spend time with them. It's the 'spending time' factor which matters. At some point and despite acknowledging that all ideas have been recycled from somewhere, artists will continue to do things, which they feel are 'special' or unique to them. And, to ensure that these works get looked at they work hard to enhance the visual interest or presence of their work. And sometimes in this process a kind of art emerges, not so much an artifact, more a transaction between artist and viewer.

This was particularly evident in the work of John Hart. The artist has revealed the source of his visual imagery to be erotic internet sites. Most of his images

can be traced to male amateur erotic sites which the artist holds "are less contrived than those devised for commercial purposes". Having selected certain images, Hart proceeded to transport them to Artland where aesthetic devices including grids, block outs and depth of field robbed them of most of their sensory, erotic qualities. Only occasionally (as in *BCHNK08*) did carnality slip in. Unless of course one chose to see in various apertures and pink blobby bits, references to the nooks and crannies of your average body. Some of the paintings were unmistakably figurative, i.e. arms, legs, head, torso, but for the most part the forms were out there somewhere, alluding to some form of human action. But the erotica of the source wasn't to be found here. Hart has stated that he wanted to portray the tension between erotic and aesthetic dimensions. In reducing his imagery to tumescent extrusions, squeezed by blackness, he succeeded in a manner, which may or may not have been intended.

Using a method designed to remind the viewer of the electronic source or DNA of the imagery, Hart made liberal use of pixel-like grids, which symbolically represented the artifice of transmission or exchange. He appeared to be alluding to the nature of the exchange between the viewer and the provider and maybe the subject, given that the provider or 'amateur' artist may be one and the same. If erotic feelings were the desired outcome of any original site visitation, then Hart successfully found a way to unravel this process and suggest that ultimately it's all in the mind. Strangely, the business of covering each form with cool grey gridded forms, then running darker tonal edges along certain of the curved shapes suggested the act of containing flesh in stretch fabric like rubber or Glad Wrap. This hint at masking and binding added interest to these finely crafted sanitised images.