



Novel twists and turns

John Hart's rendering of folded and crumpled material brings to mind the classical masters as well as the venerated tradition of still-life painting. PRUE GIBSON explores its appeal.

The soft curves and elegant folds of conventional drapery suggest the female form. In Classical Greek and Roman art, the sculptor's skill was in part measured by his technical facility in carving falling folds of clothing. Renaissance fresco painting, less formalist and rigid, still included the draped apparel of the subject as a compositional device and by the Baroque period, robust and risqué boys in falling-off, unironed white shirts (by the likes of Caravaggio) or crumpled cloths on tables loaded with rotting fruit were testing the artists' skills.

John Hart, a Broken Hill-based artist and the manager of the Pro Hart Gallery, extends this interest in the aesthetic values and challenges of drapery in his recent body of work, *Through a glass darkly*. The first element to set Hart apart from his drapery predecessors is his choice of fabric — plain white cotton rather than extravagant silks or linens. The second element is the way he arranges his drapery scenes, lights them, photographs, Photoshops and finally paints them. The third element is the way the sheets are slung over an invisible wire. They hang in folds, repeatedly wound over or twisted into loose

knots. Do they form a washing line, a kid's 'pretend' theatre stage, a crumpled bed?

While Hart's drapery does not adorn a beautiful female form, his compositions are still feminine, sensual shapes. There is no evocation of a human form but inherent in the concept of sheets (and therefore laundry and house duties) is the history of the domestic world, ruled by women. Gathered fabric is also associated with fashion and with the creation of dresses in particular. Gathered, tucked, hemmed and folded, Hart's arrangements cannot but draw on these mnemonic associations.

By the Baroque period of European art history, drapery was also an interloper in the period's cornucopia of still-life paintings. I am thinking of the scenes of recently slaughtered small animals, half-burned candles, brass plates with rich cheeses and overripe fruit, with perhaps a skull, perhaps some grapes, scattered coins and the odd rodent or butterfly hovering around. Inevitably in Baroque art, there would be a half-concealing curtain, an El Greco-style wall or a mannered tablecloth. The tablecloth was either creased from ironing or fetchingly crumpled, with disdain for order and a desire for realism.



This desire for realism is what links the paintings of John Hart to Baroque art. He says, "I guess I am a bit of a Formalist. I have always looked at ways to collide seventeenth-century painting techniques with digital photography and printmaking ... the process of painting a realist image requires the implementation of conceptual skills to render a sense of perspective and solidity of the forms depicted." But there is more at work than Hart's desire to play with notions of reality and truth. While he cites Gerhard Richter and Chuck Close as admired artists, Hart creates experiences of sublime beauty, unencumbered by overworked conceptual motivations. Hart's paintings are not flawed or compromised by hyper-aesthetics. They seem to function separately from (although also as a result of) Hart's photographic preoccupations and intellectual interests. This is a sign of artistic success.

In a previous series in 2007 called *Analogue*, Hart focused on pieces of crumpled paper, tied together in knots or wrapped around bottles and vessels. The knotted paper paintings seem like a loyal lifetime's marriage or the wheeling sails of a windmill. But the opened paper versions are free. The mere offering of an opened piece of paper, theatrically lit, opens the viewer's heart. They seem to call out. *We are free, we are free.*

John Hart achieves this inherent emotion and subtle allusion to otherworldliness — a peek-through-a-keyhole — in a number of ways. While he maintains in interview and in his writings his desire to avoid meaning and reduce the narrative, his paintings are nevertheless loaded. Perhaps the meanings are not the same for all of us. Perhaps there is not a consensus of memories. But loaded the paintings are. As he notes, "People have said that my paintings have a sense of loss, a sense of narrative threat. I suppose that while I do my best to make an objective painting it is impossible to produce a work of art without some subjectivity." Likewise, it is impossible to view a work of art without some subjectivity.

Hart aims to manipulate our perceptions and our interpretation of what we are seeing. He does this by creating a scene or constructing a model. He then photographs this new original form using "classical lighting techniques to dramatise the forms within the object. The digital image is transferred into my computer and further manipulated. I use a digital tablet and Photoshop to transform and isolate the object



in a sea of black." Hart's sea of black is mysterious, threatening and curious. It is a *mise en scène*, a memory theatre, a play within a painting.

In 1996, I met John Hart's father — the artist Pro Hart. I had flown to Broken Hill to complete research for a William Dobell retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It was dry, dusty, pinky red, located in a flat expanse: an old mining town, full of eccentric outback characters who appeared in Pro Hart's paintings. This is the isolated and sometimes bleak environment John Hart grew up in. However, what many people do not know is that Pro Hart had an impressive collection of historical Australian and European art, which he had accumulated over many years. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that John Hart was affected by this wealth of artistic stimuli. He moved to Adelaide to study at the Central School of Art to find his own artistic voice.

Hart has been affected by the traditions of art and how they can be reinterpreted and developed into something new and dynamic, whilst still maintaining potent emotion. He says, "Every object I construct is something new that hasn't existed in the world before. An old white T-shirt can be twisted and folded into shapes that are totally unfamiliar." His paintings of drapery are mysterious and majestic, despite or perhaps because of their mundane nature.

Opposite page:

Left top: John Hart, *Paper Composition No 53*, oil on board, 122 x 92cm.

Left centre: John Hart, *Paper Composition No 46*, oil on board, 96 x 96cm.

Left bottom: John Hart, *Paper Composition No 50*, oil on board, 122 x 92cm.

Right: John Hart, *Composition 68*, oil on canvas, 92 x 92cm.

This page:

Top left: John Hart, *Composition 86*, oil on canvas, 92 x 92cm.

Top right: John Hart, *Composition 72*, oil on canvas, 122 x 92cm.