

# Show and sell

**Holly Williams looks at how emerging artists cope with economic rationalism plus find time to enjoy what they do**

**Artmaking**, hellish though it can be at times, is something of a luxury pursuit. Sadly though, even for art students, gone are the days when an artist could spend all day in their studios refining their craft or drinking coffee with their colleagues. It is a highly competitive world out there, and with Ricky Swallow acting as somewhat of a poster boy for the emerging artist (rising from making works in cardboard to representing Australia at the *Venice Biennale* in just a few short years), the gauntlet has well and truly been thrown down. Unfortunately, it is not simply a matter of making superb work, although that should be a given, the emerging artist must contend with two things: getting their work out there and keeping a roof over their heads and the latter may prove increasingly difficult in the coming years.

The impact of the new Industrial Relations changes should not be underestimated on the emerging artist. Regular exhibitions are reliant on having time, and time is found by working part-time or casually in a high paying, flexible, (preferably art-related) job. These jobs are usually in short supply and a number of emerging artists find work in fields that tick as many of the boxes as possible, for example in the sex industry or acting as guinea pigs in medical drug trials. Yes decent, warm and intelligent artists are literally selling their body to subsidise their practice. This may seem rather an extreme approach but it is difficult to follow a mainstream career path when your ambition lies elsewhere, especially one which requires constant injections of cash and time, as artmaking tends to.

It is far more common however to have one or two



Helen Johnson and Michelle Ussher, *The only thing you taught me was the only thing you know*, 2006, digital collages. Courtesy the artists.

low paying, casual jobs – gallery minding, hospitality, retail and the like. Pay is sacrificed for flexibility, but with the uncertainty surrounding penalty and remuneration rates resulting from Industrial Relations legislation changes, it remains to be seen if the number of new practicing artists will shrink in the coming years. The financial squeeze has already made itself known in the style of work a number of emerging artists make. Ever wondered why there have been so many shows in artist-run spaces that favor cheap, scrounged materials or the commonplace method of pinning unframed works to the wall?

Currently, Sydney-based artists in particular suffer from a chronic shortage of affordable studio space and a higher cost of living. This has resulted in many artists undertaking post-graduate degrees simply to have a place to work for a year or two, and universities are complicit in this, churning out graduates as the number of courses, though not necessarily the quality of teaching, increases.

On a brighter note, the digital age is the emerging artist's friend. Returning to the second question at hand – self-promotion or 'getting your work out there' may never have been easier although artists have to develop skills which would have been unthinkable ten years ago. With digitalisation has come reduced costs and greater control. Cumbersome and expensive slides have become e-mailable portfolios; images of work can be quickly photoshopped into things of beauty and tailor-made for applications. It is increasingly prevalent for artists to have their own websites and to keep track of International art trends via the internet. National and international opportunities are quantifiably easier to attain than say six years ago and curators and collectors simply need to google a keyword to find the person or show they may have only had a passing word-of-



Benedict Ernst, *Chocolate Courtesan*, 2006, acrylic and collage on linen. Image courtesy the artist.



mouth recommendation about; simply put, unrepresented artists are easier to find with the internet as the middleman.

Emerging artists of today can also invest in the kind of hints only money can buy with such great titles now available on Amazon as: *The Artist's Marketing and Action Plan Workbook*, *How to Survive and Prosper as an Artist: Selling Yourself Without Selling Your Soul*, and the great sounding *Internet 101 for the Fine Artist with a special guide to Selling Art on eBay*. Probably of more use is the raft of websites, for example 'fuel 4 arts' or 'the daily pauper.com' which also supply links to current exhibition and grant opportunities as well as provide artists avenues for self-promotion.



Jay Ryves, *Für Dich*, 2005, digital lambda prints. Image courtesy the artist.

Though the mainstay of early career exposure is still the for-hire artist-run space, there are a number off non-gallery based projects and exhibitions on at any one time. The windows of the Downing Centre Law Courts in Sydney play host to a range of shows, including **Benedict Ernst's** *Fabricated in the Floating World* at the start of the year. The space was free and Ernst achieved a high proportion of sales during the month-long show with a small sign directing passersby to his email address. This winter sees *Off the Wall* at **Art Sydney 06** featuring twenty unrepresented artists and the **Melbourne Art Fair's Project Rooms** which have provided an excellent launching pad in the past for new artists include this year **Helen Johnson** and **Michelle Ussher's** collaborative work and *The Late Sessions* curatorial project by **Soda-Jerk**. Coinciding with the **Biennale of Sydney, Clare Lewis**, is curating a series of exhibitions across central Sydney. One of which, by **Jay Ryves** will take the form of a letter drop to houses in and around the suburb of Redfern, in a timely art-based critique of the impending changes to the local area.

Artists have always been influenced by economic realities, working their ideas around their capacity to finance them. In the past crisis has been a useful stimulus to many artists' imaginative leaps. It would be sad however, if those economic conditions so strangle imaginative thought that cultural breadth and depth is lost and what remains is mere trivialised entertainment.



Michelle Hanlin, *From the Advance Australiana Series* (work in progress, detail), 2005 acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy the artist.

## MICHELLE HANLIN

**Emerging artist Michelle Hanlin provides a fresh and engaging take on Australiana.** She captures iconic and everyday imagery and re-presents it in small sculptural installations and delicate acrylic paintings. A recent graduate of Sydney College of the Arts and finalist in the prestigious emerging art prize the Helen Lempriere travelling art scholarship in 2004, Hanlin had her first solo show last year at Firstdraft in Sydney which was very well received resulting in many sales and invitations to exhibit elsewhere.

At the start of this year, her tantalizing Coat of Arms paintings (stylistically not dissimilar to children's book illustrations) recently featured in the group show *Rectangular Ghost* at Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney. Here Hanlin displaced the traditional heraldic symbols of power and identity with elements of the fantastic, the ephemeral and the stagnant. For example in *Coat of Arms (Swansong)* what at first appear to be small glowing jewels crowning the work are revealed to be smouldering piles of poo upon closer inspection.

In her sculptural installations, Hanlin reinvigorates the over-used method of assemblage with twisted, diorama-like snapshots of Australian mores and popular motifs. *If its Painting, it must be German*, a group show curated by Peter Fay, will see Hanlin delving further into the Australian cultural vernacular with new sculptural works at Silvershot Gallery, Melbourne between 31 August and 16 September 2006.



Michelle Hanlin, *Coat of Arms (Sheba Mini-Yak)*, 2005, acrylic on canvas.



Michelle Hanlin, *Coat of Arms (Split Swamp)*, 2005, acrylic on canvas.

Images courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.