

Above: Catherine Bell  
*Special Delivery*, 2005

Installation: lace food covers, Perspex shelves,  
sling back razor & cake (baked and iced daily)  
Photo credit: 'the photography department'

## *The Raw and the Cooked*

Catherine Bell, Pip Haydon, Victor Meertens & Stephen Garrett  
Blindside  
17 November – 3 December 2005  
Reviewed by Nicola Harvey

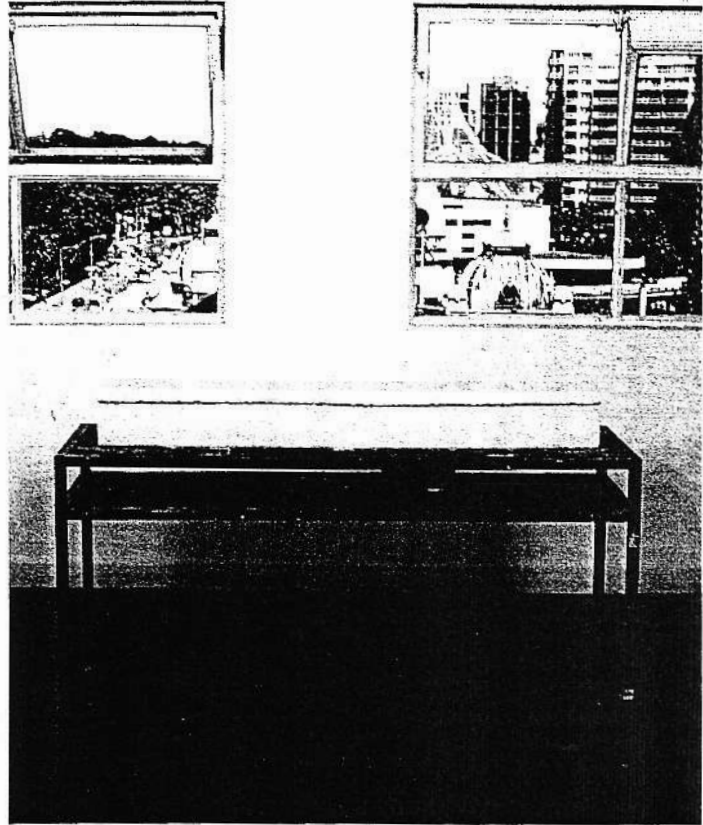
It is likely that on first encountering the recent Blindside exhibition *The Raw and the Cooked* one will have noticed a rather pungent and somewhat noxious odour. A number of sweet, sickly smells emanated from the works, which merged in the small confines of the gallery and became hard to ignore. Yet if one knew anything of the work of artists Pip Haydon, Catherine Bell, Victor Meertens and Stephen Garrett, the lingering presence of such odours would have come as no surprise. All four artists have regularly produced work made almost entirely of perishable food products (hence the smell). In keeping with their practices, and as the show's title suggests, *The Raw and Cooked* consisted of just that: raw and cooked food.

Pip Haydon's large-scale work *Dough Painting* (2005) explored a similar lyricism and physicality to the American Abstract Expressionist painters of the 1950s, whose expansive works allowed for the painterly form, like drips and splatters, to arch across the canvas, emphasising the medium's malleable qualities. Haydon's installation of bread dough accentuated this

malleability yet also the fragility of her chosen material. Large mounds of dough oozed messily from the face of Haydon's piece, some losing the battle against gravity and ending up in a heap on the floor below. A collector's nightmare perhaps, but it was an element of the work that took *Dough Painting* beyond mere reference to past abstractionist practices. Haydon's use of food products, such as raw bread dough, cooked loaves and biscuits, subverted the characteristic masculinity of the abstract expressionists by referencing the realm of domesticity, historically the bastion of the feminine. This was further articulated through the distinct and at times unpalatable odour of decaying dough. Introducing such elements disrupted the 'purity' of the abstract form and we were invited into the familiar world of the home, both visually and sensorially. Greenberg's distinct division between the modernist aesthetic and the everyday was poignantly challenged by Haydon's work.

Stephen Garrett's minimalist sculpture *Strata (fragment)*, from 2005, further referenced modernist traditions. On

*Right:* Stephen Garrett  
*Strata (fragment) 2005*  
 Cast salt, ash & table  
 90 x 137 x 45.5cm



First impression, Garrett appeared to have a penchant for minimalist architectural forms. Yet on the surface of the rectangular form laid a light dusting of a fine grain, a material essentially light and delicate in nature but which was unidentified. Two finely crafted salt cups positioned on the shelf below provided a clue, leading us further away from minimalist references towards ritualistic or sacramental connotations. Unlike the decay of Haydon's work, Garrett's choice use of salt suggested a preserving, life-giving quality. This was an apt metaphor as Garrett's piece stood as a calming influence in the show, a work allowing for a moment of meditative respite, a lifeline perhaps.

Victor Meertens' work occupied one corner of the gallery. Meertens employed beetroot juice as a natural stain, applying it directly to recycled cardboard boxes and paper scraps as a salute to post-painterly abstraction and the colour field artists. Each drawing was marked with an abstract stain accompanied by details for a fictitious building's floor plan. The titles alluded to plans for elaborate civic buildings, built in unlikely hypothetical locations. Examples included *History of Architecture, Plan view of Museum of Contemporary Art located in Seymour, Victoria* and *History of Architecture, Suggenheim Gallery, in Geelong*. The plans for such grand art institutions would never be realised, as they only existed on scraps of paper contained in cardboard boxes, the building material of ephemeral shelters erected by the homeless. Meertens' past work similarly dealt with various modes of architectural design and, in the construction of architectural forms from bread and baking loaves in the shape of houses, Meertens called into question the sanctity of the modernist canon in much the same way as Haydon and Garrett.

The most pungent odour in *The Raw and the Cooked* came from Catherine Bell's work. Nine brightly decorated cakes lined the wall, each iced to depict the cherubic dolls of childhood. Placed on acrylic shelves, the cakes were protected (but not preserved) by white, netted fly guards. Whereas Haydon introduced an element of kitsch by incorporating the domestic into a modernist aesthetic, Bell's hyper-kitsch iconography departed from the modernist tradition. Each cake was presented in a different stage of decay and completeness. The audience was invited daily to carve chunks from the freshly baked cakes prior to display, in an enactment of the ritualistic sharing of food. Yet this interactive strategy was undermined by the text iced onto the top of each cake. The text exposed

the dark side of the suburban dream, the titles declaring: 'Baby cut from murdered mum's womb found alive' and 'Mother found daughter in a pool of blood'. Unsurprisingly, the cakes offered little form of nourishment. In the face of such assertions we cannot revel in the fantastic spectacle of kitsch, for we are reminded of the potential for horror within the dream of domesticity.

By using ephemeral, domestic substances the four artists attempted to explore disparate themes as alternatives to canonical art traditions. The artists were obviously grouped together for their choice of materials but this approach was somewhat reductive and did not allow opportunities to read the work in new ways. Yet, as Robert Nelson articulated in the accompanying essay, none of the artists fell into the trap of presenting food as the 'essential basis of wholesome universality that links people in their spiritual thriving'. Rather each artist attempted to oscillate between Greenbergian high and low art spheres, providing the viewer with a constant conundrum.

*Produced as a part of Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and Express Media's Emerging Writers Program*

Nicola Harvey is an arts worker and occasional writer currently based in Melbourne.