

STEEL LIFE

by Ed Hanfling

Gregor Kregar's *Steel Life* is essentially a tripartite equation: a large globe or sphere of steel and glass; eight small glass figures; a set of eleven television sets of steel and glass. The relationship between these three facets is meaningful, but it cannot be fully explained; there is no definitive meaning. That last is a commonplace assertion, but here it is in earnest, made deliberately, pointedly. It could be taken to mean that that meaning comes from a process of piecing together the parts of the installation – conceptually connecting them – reconciling them – ‘reading’ them – to produce a surface play of signifiers (read: ‘a series of thoughts in the mind of the spectator’). Or, less fashionably, it could imply that the meanings generated by the work elude linguistic definition – that they reside more in the realm of something like ‘feeling’ (or, for the more squeamish, a series of resonances) – that the materials and processes employed by the artist evoke or elicit reactions that are almost physical, or sensual.

I don't want to start, or finish, by saying, ‘This work is about [such and such]’. American artist David Salle commented: ‘I don't think art “deals” with anything per se, and if it does, it doesn't interest me on that level at all. When I hear the phrase “this work deals with”, my heart sinks.’ In a similar vein, Gregor Kregar has stated: ‘I try to make a shape or form which engages the viewer and gets a reaction from them, even if the viewer cannot explain what they are seeing.’

Kregar's work could be described as sculptural, but there is little indication that he is consciously working within a given discipline. He does not allow the *idea* of sculpture, or, for that matter, of installation, to dictate or determine the form of his work. This means that he is not working with, or within, specific conventions customarily associated with his medium. For many artists, those formal and aesthetic problems are the starting point – the mental frame within which the work is executed. A painter, for example, may confront the practice of easel painting, predicated on the flat surface, the liquidity of pigment and the four edges of the canvas or support.

Kregar works in the opposite direction. He begins with a set of ideas and, perhaps, objectives. He has a general idea of what he wants to do, and the nucleus of what he wants to convey to the spectator. It then becomes a question of which materials will best suit those ideas. This leads him to a use of materials that transcends – and, in fact, in many instances entirely bypasses – conventional and customary processes. It's a free-thinking approach to materials, and it allows the strongest possible connection between conception, form and process.

Consider Kregar's use of glass. Within the sphere of art, there are specific traditions – in terms of process, style, function and form – associated with glass. Kregar's globe or planet – the spherical form that is a feature both of the present installation and a number of previous works (such as *Oko 2*, 2001, created for the sculpture terrace at Te Papa) – comes across as a blatant subversion of such traditions. At first glance, it's as if the glass has been mashed together by a cack-handed foreman at the tip. But it quickly becomes both compelling, in terms of the aesthetic effect, and meaningful. The aesthetic effect is not aligned with that which is expected from art glass, yet it is in sympathy, so to speak, with the ‘real’, fundamental or prosaic, qualities of . . . just glass (without worrying about ‘art’). On a simple level: hard, sharp, spiky, brittle, fragile. Then (beyond that, on top of that, extrapolated from it): jarring, edgy, discordant, slightly sinister, eerie (in terms of the manipulation of light and colour), capable of both illuminating (revealing) and sheltering (concealing).

‘Without worrying about “art”’, I said. Glass is a common feature of the everyday environment, from windows to wine bottles. It has a separate lineage within the traditions of art – stained glass

windows, vessels. Kregar's work elides this distinction, but, at the same time, draws attention to it. He uses glass bottles – either 'straight' (that is, in their original form, as in his Te Papa sculpture) or as the raw material for a very different formal quality (melted and melded). Of course, it has become commonplace to talk about 'found' or 'readymade' objects – objects from the workaday world transformed into art – elevated and admitted to the realm of art, their meaning and significance transformed in the process. But Kregar's use of 'valueless' materials is not quite so straightforward, insofar as the final outcome (the *artwork*) betrays the 'work' component (the *artwork*) and is, quite often, poised *between* what might be called 'artness' and banality – between the aesthetic and the rawness and corporeality of everyday objects.

The sphere or globe has a fragility or vulnerability imparted by the use of glass – by implication, the fragility or vulnerability of the planet. The glass figures, on the other hand – portraits of Wanganui residents – artists, students, councillors – the locals as opposed to the global – despite their small scale, or perhaps because of it, have a sense of solidity and sturdiness – compactness.

Television might be expected to give them contact with the wider world – to mediate their relationship to it. The 6 o'clock news brings the world into the living room. There's a religiosity about this relationship with television. Hours are set aside for worship – the 6 o'clock sermon. It purports to bring us closer to the world (materiality) in the same way that attending church or saying prayers is seen by many to bring them closer to God (spirituality). The screen in the corner is like an icon on the mantelpiece. But – fundamentally – it's an illusion: the material, the physical, is precisely what the television fails to deliver. The television distances us rather than bringing things closer; 'reality' is always 'out there' not 'in here', and, for that reason, the imperative for response is lacking. It's the modern equivalent of the 'aesthetic experience'.

The experience provided by television is comfortable; whatever it portrays – tragedy and disaster – it is always contained. Comfortable and entertaining – like kitsch – rarely challenging. We see in it our own lives; it confirms us in our values, reflects them back. The television itself is just another of the accoutrements of our lives – like cars – and the things we surround ourselves with to soften our lives – roses in the garden.

Kregar's installation, on the other hand, is hard and edgy. Edgy in terms of the materials – an uncomfortable abutment of metal and glass. Kregar emphasises edges – distinctions, differences – perhaps to defy the homogenising tendencies of the process of 'globalisation' to which he refers. On the edge – in the sense of being poised – between 'kitsch' and 'art', or 'banality' and 'art'. And on the edge (the cutting edge?) in terms of materials and forms that are pushed to a point where they are by no means comfortable or easily grasped (where they set one on edge). It creates a tension which stymies the stolidity of steel and glass.

Steel Life was completed during Gregor's residency at Tylee Cottage, Wanganui, November 2002 – February 2003. This residency is funded and administered by the Sarjeant Gallery/Te Whare o Rehua/Whanganui.