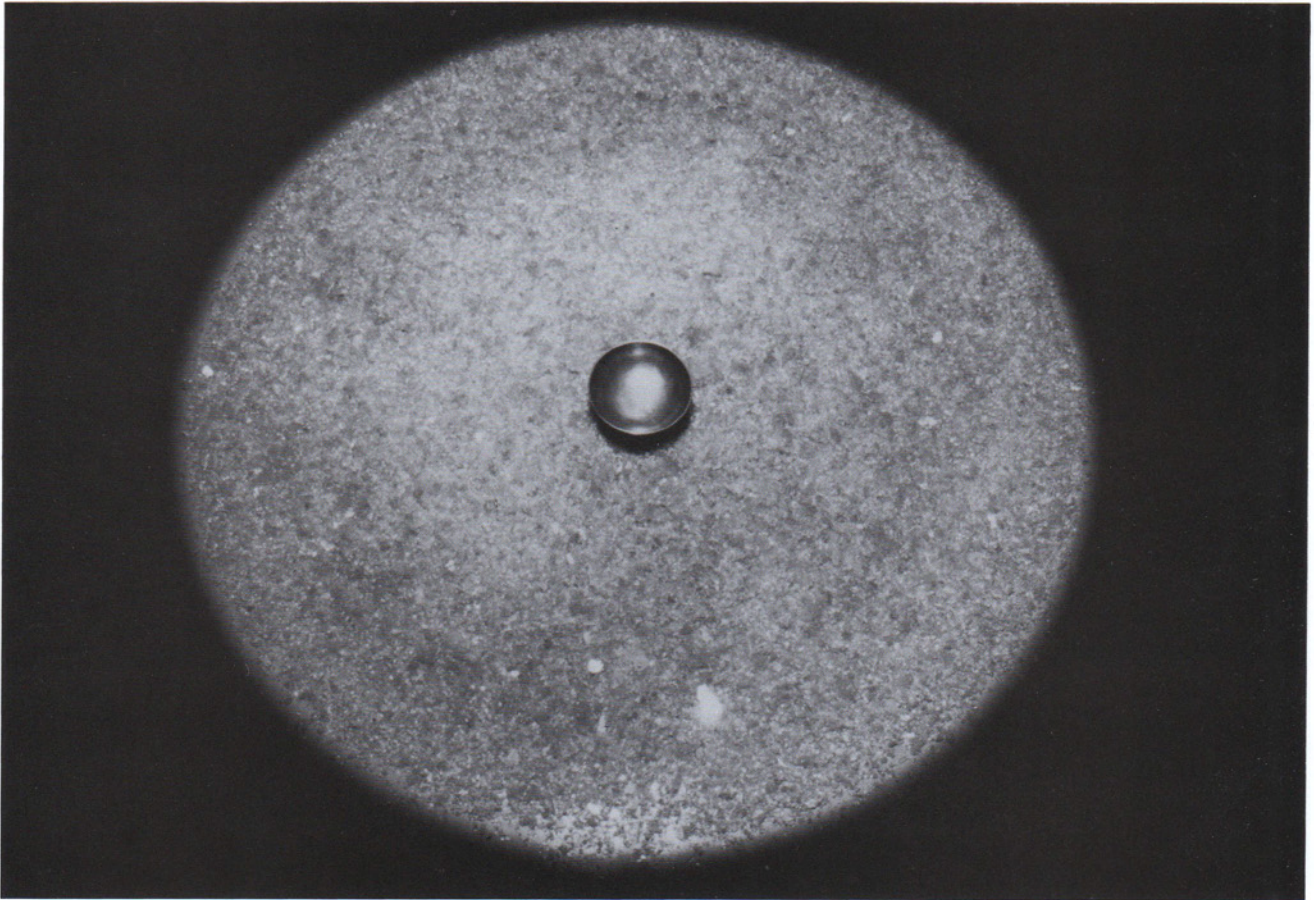


# ROBERT OWEN

A WARRING PEACE; A SWEET WOUND; A MILD EVIL.

15th June - 15th July, 1988

A Warring Peace; A Sweet Wound; A Mild Evil. Installation detail. 2 metre diameter.



## BORDER CROSSINGS

In an age of systematised critical scrutiny, Robert Owen is a kind of Invisible Artist. There has been no ready type role for him among today's historians of reputation. This has partly to do with the fact that he has spent a great slab of time overseas, partly to do with his own unaggressive manner, but chiefly as a consequence of the nature of the work itself - crossing the borders of painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, installation - and resisting elaboration as stubbornly as a line of poetry like, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust".

A work more to do with vision, then, than easy academic interpretation. Given time, however, the work assumes intelligible contours and his entire *oeuvre* (at least since 1976) begins to reveal a poetic instrument as clear and concentrated as a printed circuit. Owen's assemblages compel out of otherwise mute objects: jars, pigment, scrap metal - new ways of re-wiring the world and the bodies in it.

The real pleasure I get out of work like Owens' (and he does belong to a family that includes Eric Orr, Wolfgang Laib, Simone Mangos, Joan Grounds) is a double one. First, it has absorbed the major historical events of the last half century, such as the *de facto* transfer of the basis of art from matter to understanding, craft to concept, signified to signifier; and second, the artist is still deeply entangled in the sensuality of materials (colours, textures) and the materiality of experience (overlays of time and life's labyrinths and enigmas).

Robert Owen is one of those sensibilities grown abundant and fertile with curiosities and satisfactions, and it shows in the work. A work, that if it teaches you anything, is to be and know and grow - and, a rare thing nowadays - intensifies your sensuality.

George Alexander  
March 1988



A strange and beautiful constellation of objects. At one end of the gallery two tiny urns, 'brides of quietness' are placed on a rock which casts its own shadow in blue. A miniaturised world within a sea of potential vastness. One urn is upright the other inverted, joined at the lip by a circle edged in luminous red, their duality melting into one shapely form "Sutures bracket the lips of closed wounds through which things have been excised or interned".<sup>2</sup>

Opposite, at the other end of the gallery, a pile of fragmented glass, is sharply encircled by light, glimmering in one thousand directions, perfectly contained. Buried within it, is the round form of a Tibetan singing bowl. The bowl tells a story; traditionally it is used by the monks who make ritualistic sounds by rubbing round the edge with a wooden stick and by resonating the bowl at their lips.

Around the walls of the gallery, an extended strip of mirror (a sliver of silver light) splices the room in four directions, fissuring the architecture. Upon the face of the mirror appears the hand written repetition in blue, "I change, I am the same". The words ring with a constancy of perpetual change as do the concentric ripples on the smooth reflective surface of calm water. Diagonally opposite corners meet at 90° angles and exchange their image in an illusion-

ary intersection creating an infinite mantric echo. Distant spacial and temporal dimensions can be heard and felt in the noises of night which pervasively play on the accompanying sound tape, transforming the gallery space into a place of heightened experience.

We view this work with a certain sense of reverence and surprise. The images have both a clarity and an ambiguity which arises from the sense in which this art serves to generate mystery rather than to resolve mystery. Each of the elements present - mirror, metal, light, text, glass, pigment, has both a physical and poetic dimension reacting one against the other in an oscillation of tiny energies. The objects used are like vehicles of consciousness suggestive of a rich resonance. Is the ultramarine powder at the foot of the urns a shadow or an auratic quality of light? Is the shattered glass a metaphor for crystals of ice or the materialization of sounds potentially emitted from the singing Tibetan bowl? We might by some leap of the imagination be witness to the site of the origins of earth or perhaps, a site for the origins of art?

Owen's installation belongs with those branches of philosophical thought that acknowledge the equal validity and co-existence of opposing truths, each of which is a means of coming to terms with a



*A Warring Peace; A Sweet Wound; A Mild Evil.* Installation view. Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.

view of the world and it is in part from this that he draws strength to pursue the course of his activities. *A Warring Peace, A Sweet Wound, A Mild Evil*: each paradoxical phrase contains its opposite and evades definitive meaning. It is not possible to determine which part of the work corresponds with the distinct parts of the title. There is an engagement with paradox and contradiction as these elements which make up the installation interact with each other and become transmitters of energies.

Pleasure is present alongside pain, the wound as well as its cure, the poison and its antidote. The indication here is of a view which through its ability to rigorously embrace opposites resists the temptation to lapse into comfort. The installation is thus structured according to the notion of a dynamic equilibrium, a unity formed from the active interaction of parts, and a necessary meeting of opposites poised at the moment of symmetry: material/immaterial, upright/horizontal, physical/metaphysical, corporeal/spiritual. The recurrence of the circle (the lip of the urns, the rim edged with red, the Tibetan bowl) reinforce this notion of perfect unity. Whilst each of the images and objects chosen has been personally felt (the idea of the urns for example, surfaced from a period spent living in Greece),

the artist also appeals to a more universal collective memory that is deeply associative and that synthesizes intellect with intuition.

Like the cosmologist, the monk, and the scientist, Owen dares to speculate about the origins and structure of the universe, its laws, elements and parts and their bearing upon human life. In so doing, he inquires with equal passion into the mystery and internal structures of art. In neither of these inquiries are there any comfortable truths or easy answers that might set the quest for meaning at rest. Rather there is the desire of the artist always to be there at life's edge where: "familiar things end, and something else begins, something which makes us recall another state of being."<sup>2</sup>

**Sue Cramer**, April/May 1988

Director

#### NOTES

1. Bernice Murphy, *The Forbidden Object*, May 1986, catalogue for a group exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.
2. William Irwin Thompson, *The Time Falling Bodies Take To Light, Mythology, Sexuality and the Origins of Culture*, New York 1981, cited by Robert Owen in exhibition catalogue for 'Phase, Zone Three (Into the Light)', Victorian College of The Arts Gallery, Melbourne, 1988.

## CATALOGUE

**Installation**

*Floor:* Glass, Tibetan bowl, light (2 metres diameter)  
Stone, Perspex, Clay, Pigment (2 metres diameter)  
*Wall:* Mirror and text, (8.5 cm x 39.40 metres)  
12 min. ambient sound tape.

---

Spotlight sponsored by GRAFTONS

**Robert Owen**

Born Sydney, Australia 1937. Studied National Art School, Sydney 1958-62. Lived in Greece 1963-66 and London 1966-75.

**Selected Individual Exhibitions**

Coventry Gallery, Sydney *Cross Reference* (installation), 1978.  
Australian Centre of Photography, Sydney: Solander Gallery, Canberra; Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery, N.S.W.; *Burano, Colour Works*, 1979.  
Coventry Gallery, Sydney, *Apposition* (installation), 1980.  
Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, *Plain Images* (installation with Mike Parr), 1981.  
The Developed Image, Adelaide and New Zealand Tour, *Burano, Colour Works*, 1981-82.  
Coventry Gallery, Sydney, *Hammer on Rock* (sound installation), 1982.  
Art Projects, Melbourne, *From the Centre* (installation), 1983.  
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, *Turn of the Moon and Folds in the Lake of Light* and *From the Centre* (installation), 1984.  
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, *Resurrections* (installation), 1985.  
United Artists Gallery, Melbourne, *Easy Science*, 1987.  
Victorian College of the Arts Gallery, Melbourne, *Phase Zone Three (Into the Light)* (installation), 1988.  
Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, *A Warring Peace; A Sweet Wound; A Mild Evil* (installation), 1988.

**Selected Group Exhibitions**

38th Venice Biennale, Italy, *From Nature to Art/From Art to Nature*, 1978.  
Maki & Tamuta Gallery, Tokyo, *Documentation*, 1978.  
3rd Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, *European Dialogue*, 1979.  
1st Australian Sculpture Triennial, Latrobe University, Melbourne, 1981.  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, *Australian Perspecta*, 1981.  
Christchurch, New Zealand, *Anzart-Australian New Zealand Art Encounter*, 1981.  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, *Re-Constructed Vision*, 1981.  
Melville Hall, Australian National University, Canberra, *Australian Art of the Last Ten Years*, 1982.  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, *The Seventies into the Eighties*, 1982.  
Rimini, Italy, *Ambiente*, sound environments, 1982.  
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, *Presence and Absence*, 1983.  
Australian Contemporary Art in Tokyo, Japan, *Continuum '83*, 1983.  
ARC/Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France, *D'un autre continent: L'Australie le reve et le reel*, 1983.  
Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney, *Artists Books*, 1983.  
Art Projects, Melbourne, *Drawings (Schematic, Expressionist and Psychological)*, 1983.  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, *Instruments of Art*, *Australian Perspecta*, 1985.  
Kunsthau Hamburg, West Germany, *Biennale Des Friedens*, 1985.  
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, *Forbidden Objects*, 1986.  
6th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, *Origin, Originality & Beyond*, 1986.  
Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, *Primal Painting*, 1986.  
Australian Centre of Contemporary Arts, Melbourne, *Geometric Abstraction*, 1986.  
Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, Sydney, *In Print Vol. 1: Artists Books*, 1987.  
Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 3rd Australian Sculpture Triennial, 1987.

University Gallery, University of Melbourne, *What is This Thing Called Science*, 1987.

Ormond College, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, *Ormond College Welcomes New Art*, 1987.

Institut Supérieur Pour L'Etude Du Langage Plastique, Bruxelles, *Plus-Moins-Zero Exhibition*, 1988.

**Selected Bibliography**

Roland Millen, *The Venice Biennale*, Art & Australia, Vol. 16/1, 1979.  
Elwyn Lynn, *The Sydney Biennale*, Art International, Summer, 1979.  
Nick Waterlow, *European Dialogue*, Flash Art, No. 90-91, 1979.  
Pierre Restany, *Advance Australia Fair*, D'arts Periodico d'arte Contemporanea, Vol. XXI No. 92, 1980.  
Ken Scarlett, *Australian Sculpture*, Nelson, 1980.  
Mike Parr, *Robert Owen's Apposition*, Aspect, Vol. 5/2, 1980.  
Judy Annear, *Frame of Reference* (catalogue), Australian Tour, 1980-1981.  
Suzi Gablik, *Report from Australia*, Art in America, Vol. 169/1, 1981.  
Mike Parr, *Flash Art in Australia*, Flash Art, No. 99-100, 1981.  
Bernice Murphy, *Painting*, Australian Arts Review, 1982.  
Jennifer Phipps, *Anzart*, Australian Arts Review, Sydney, 1982.  
Nick Waterlow, *The Sydney Biennale*, Art Monthly, No. 57, 1982.  
Bruce Adams, *Presence and Absence: The Gallery as Other Place*, Art & Text, No. 10, Winter, 1983.  
Paul Taylor (ed.), *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*, published by Art & Text, Melbourne, 1984.  
George Alexander, *Meditations on Robert Owen* (catalogue), Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 1984.  
George Alexander, *Australian Perspecta* (catalogue), Sydney, 1985.  
Pam Hansford, *Robert Owen*, Art in Australia, Vol. 24, No. 2, Summer, 1986.  
Pam Hansford, 6th Biennale of Sydney (catalogue), Sydney, 1986.  
Thomas McEvelly, *6th Biennale of Sydney*, Artforum, November, 1986.  
George Alexander, *Boomerang Art Australia*, Plus-Moins-Zero, Revue d'art Contemporain, Bruxelles, No. 46, 1987.  
Tony Clark (curator), *Ormond College Welcomes New Art* (catalogue), Ormond College, 1987.  
Naomi Cass (curator), *What is this Thing Called Science* (catalogue), University Gallery, University of Melbourne, 1987.  
Robert Owen, *Easy Science* (catalogue), United Artists Gallery, December, 1987.  
Robert Owen (ed.), *Phase Zone Three (Into the Light)*, 1988.  
Robert Owen, *Hiatus #2*, Plus-Moins-Zero, Revue d'art Contemporain, Bruxelles, No. 50, 1988.  
Sue Cramer and George Alexander, *A Warring Peace; A Sweet Wound; A Mild Evil* (catalogue), IMA Brisbane, May, 1988.

**Collections**

Australian National Gallery, Canberra;  
Art Gallery of New South Wales;  
Art Gallery of Queensland;  
Art Gallery of Western Australia;  
National Gallery of Victoria;  
Museum and Art Gallery of Tasmania;  
New Parliament House, Canberra;  
Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery, N.S.W.;  
Wollongong City Art Gallery, N.S.W.;  
Armidale City Art Gallery, N.S.W.;  
Newcastle City Art Gallery, N.S.W.;  
Mildura City Art Gallery, Victoria;  
Archivio Arti Contemporanee, Venice;  
Polaroid Collection, Amsterdam;

---

Catalogue: Terence Hogan. Typesetting: Editcetera. Printing: Econoprint.

**ARTSPACE:** 11 Randle Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010. **Telephone:** (02) 212 5031. **Gallery hours:** Tues.-Fri. 10-6, Sat. 1-5. ARTSPACE acknowledges the support of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body, and the NSW office of the Minister for the Arts.