



ROBERT OWEN

Long before morning

10 February – 5 March 2005

S H E R M A N G A L L E R I E S



Dark Night

Robert Owen's *Long Before Morning* consists of two groups of works that provoke contemplation and reverie. While each group of works can be taken separately, each also provides a context for the other. In the process, they bring light to an abiding and difficult Australian crisis.

On the walls are paintings that suck in light and glow. These paintings are the latest variants of the artist's *Origami* series. All the *Origami* paintings are flat works, and pack three squares, three double squares, one triple square and one quadruple square into a four-by-four grid, without ever repeating a configuration. In all the works using this system, Owen has in-filled the areas with seven colours and one black or near black pigment. This particular series, *Transitions of Night (Lake Mungo)*, is filled with colours observed by the artist at Lake Mungo in New South Wales at the specific times of sunset, night and pre-sunrise. Each of these times is represented by a series of paintings using the same spectrum, but because the colours appear in different proportions in each painting,

each painting is different in effect, while each series works as a narrative of subtle changes and modulations.

On the floor, there are glistening stones on blankets. These, too, add to a series begun some years ago. Originally conceived as a proposal for the Stolen Generations Memorial competition for the Melbourne Museum in 2001, similar stones were also present as a group at Owen's recent exhibition, *Different Lights Cast Different Shadows*, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where they became *Tears of History*, a set of twenty-two differently sized, but formally equal objects. This new installation shows them as a scattered field of objects of the same size. Evocative of seeds, eggs, pills or river stones, they suggest a potential power that is locked in, waiting to be released. While the black marble shines, sparkles and reflects, the main appeal of the objects is their tactility, through form and weight; through heaviness when held.

The conjunction of painting and sculpture is a persistent tactic in Robert Owen's work. Both practices are unified in a complex way, nearly always with regard to a non-formal or extra-art subject matter. A typical piece from past work is *Hiatus*, 1981, which also provides an interesting



contrast to this installation. In *Hiatus*, what appears to be a painting is a photograph – full-size – of a double-hung window with a sunlit view beyond. This non-existent outside looks as if it has let in light onto the floor; the light is actually white talcum powder. In the middle of the patch of light a granite rock ‘casts’ a lead-sheet shadow. The geometry of light in haptic space is revealed through material representations of light. In *Hiatus*, the relationship of painting to sculpture is an illusion enacted in real space, and our attention is kept hovering somewhere between the two.

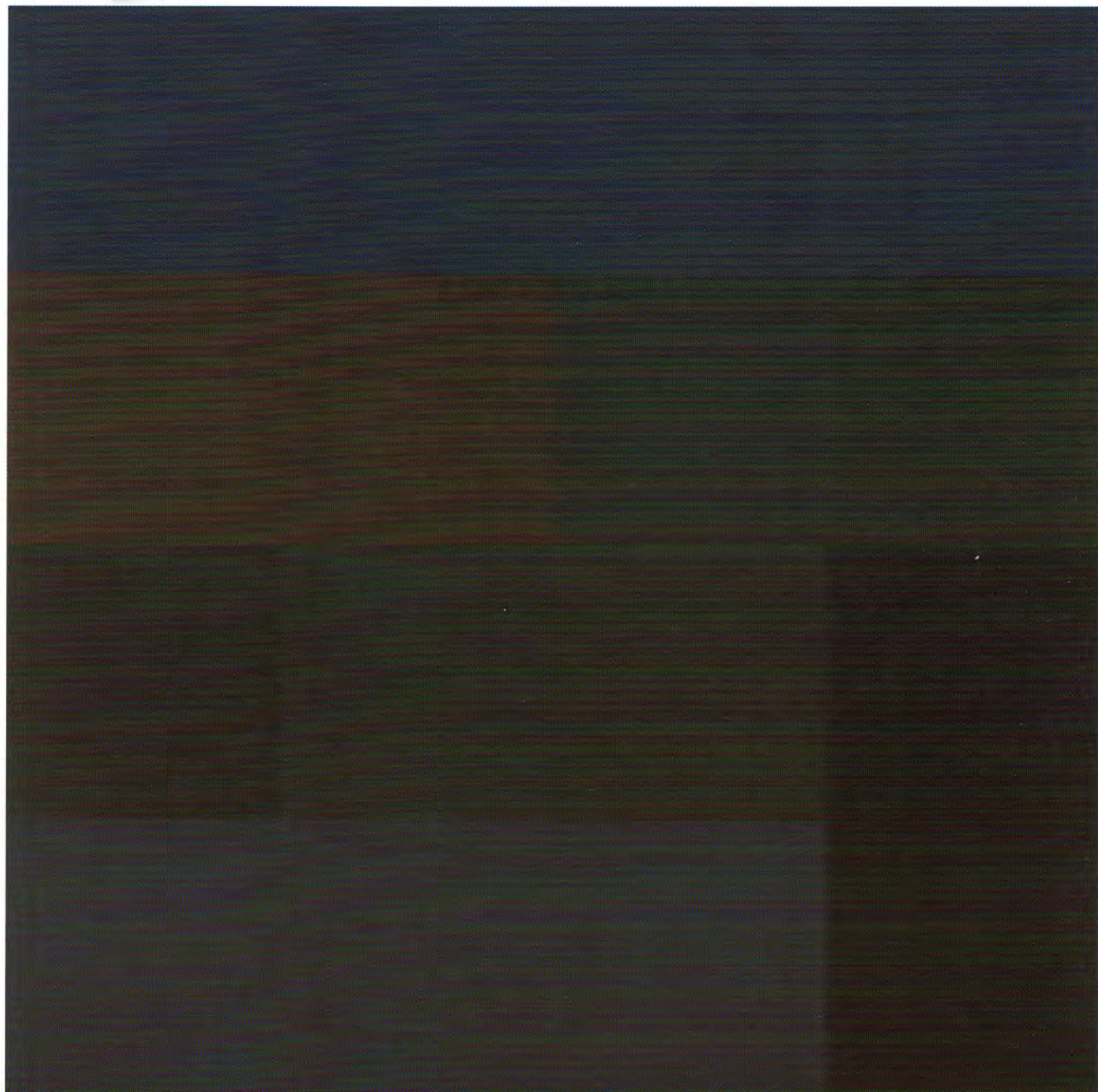
But in *Long Before Morning*, our attention is taken elsewhere. The *Lake Mungo* paintings are mysteriously deep. Some of the relatively lighter colours act as screens against the pull of the space, but they are temporary pauses for a journey into darkness. We stand in front of these paintings as individuals against the night, and then we go in. And while the stones reflect their surroundings, including us as we approach them, they quickly direct us to the compound of feelings buried inside us. Title, colour, form, weight and maybe their location on the floor – on a symbolic ground – send us into a reverie, that is, into an imaginary space inside us.

The paintings are square, the sculptures circular. When brought

together, the circle and square are ancient symbols of the divine and the mundane, sometimes as a complimentary pair but mostly as two qualities that require reconciliation through a special creative effort. The huge spaces implied by Robert Owen’s installation offer no easy image of reconciliation – not even a clear summary of what ‘the problem’ might be – but show some of its threshold conditions. The stones’ currency resonates in the paintings; the paintings give the stones a mythic place. Taken together, the paintings and the sculptures point to where we have to make an effort. Owen’s installation provides an image of the dark night of the soul (of our soul) from which we can begin to bring together our long history and our callous actions along its living edge.

Alex Selenitsch

Alex Selenitsch is a Melbourne-based poet and architect, and a senior lecturer in architecture at The University of Melbourne.



EDGE OF THE DUNES (LAKE MUNGO) 2004
acrylic on cotton, 122 x 122 cm
courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

opposite

floor:

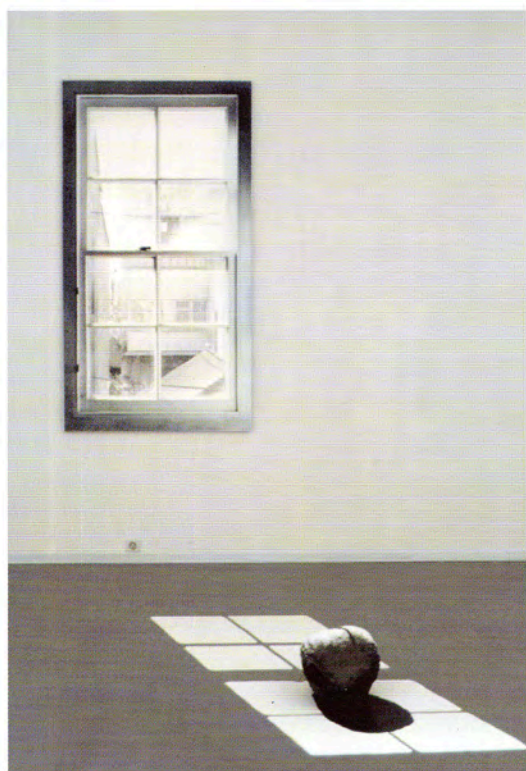
TEARS OF HISTORY (SORRY STONES) 2000–2004
Astral black granite, dimensions variable

wall:

TRANSITIONS OF NIGHT (LAKE MUNGO) series
acrylic on cotton, each 122 x 122 cm
installation view, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney



COLUMN OF GRIEF 2000
 from the *Sorry Stones* series
 Astral black granite, 15 x 15 x 185 cm
 courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney



HIATUS 1981
wall:
 photograph on linen on wood
 176 x 94 x 3 cm
floor:
 talcum powder, 'light', lead 'shadow' and granite rock
 30 x 70 x 185 cm
 courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

Born in 1937, Robert Owen graduated from the National Art School, Sydney, in 1962. He lived in Greece (1963–66), and in London (until 1975), thereafter returning to Sydney. He was Associate Professor and Head of Sculpture at RMIT (1988–2001). He currently lives and works in Melbourne.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2005** *Long Before Morning*, Sherman Galleries, Sydney
2004 *Different Lights Cast Different Shadows*, The 2nd Balnaves Foundation Sculpture Project, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; *Flickering Light*, ARC One Gallery, Melbourne; the text of light, TarraWarra Museum of Art, Yarra Glen, VIC
2003 *Sculpture 2003: Installations*, Conny Dietzschold Gallery, Sydney
2000 *Quietness*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne
1997 *Leaving the Memory Behind (Cubes & Hypercubes)*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne
1995 *Ghost Tantras and Coloured Spaces*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne
1994 *Sunrise*, Annandale Galleries, Sydney
1993 *Sunrise*, City Gallery, Melbourne
1992 *Sunrise*, Pyo Gallery, Seoul, Korea
1991 *Re-Vision*, Annandale Galleries, Sydney
1990 *Re-Vision (Three Works)*, Chameleon Contemporary Art Space, Hobart
1989 *Trace of a Silent Bell*, City Gallery, Melbourne
1988 *Trace of a Silent Bell*, Palais du Rhin, Strasbourg France; *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light: Retrospective Installation*, Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery, NSW; *A Warring Peace; A Sweet Wound; A Mild Evil*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; *Phase Zone Three: Into the Light*, Victorian College of the Arts Gallery, Melbourne
1987 *Easy Science*, United Artist Gallery, Melbourne
1985 *Resurrections*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; *Persephone's Towers*, Air and Space Studio, London
1984 *Turn of the Moon, Folds in the Lake of Light and From the Centre (Installation)*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
1983 *From the Centre*, Art Projects, Melbourne
1982 *Hammer on Rock (sound installation)*, Coventry Gallery, Sydney; *Burano, Colour Works*, Axiom Gallery, Melbourne
1981–82 *Burano, Colour Works*, The Developed Image, Adelaide and New Zealand tour
1980 *Plain Images (Installation with Mike Parr)*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney; *Apposition*, Coventry Gallery, Sydney
1979 *Burano Colour Works*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney; Solander Gallery, Canberra; Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery, NSW
1978 *Cross-Reference*, Coventry Gallery, Sydney
1977 *Memory & Logic Units*, Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne
1976 *Some Past/Some Future Work* Coventry Gallery, Sydney
1975 *Constructions & Drawings*, Coventry Gallery, Sydney
1974 *Seven Days (Drawings 1966–1974)*, Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne
1971–72 *Relief Constructions*, Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2004** site: [unseen], Sherman Galleries at Danks Street, Depot Gallery, Sydney; *McClelland Sculpture Survey and Award 2003*, McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park, Langwarrin, VIC
2003 *Sculpture 2003: Installations*, Conny Dietzschold Gallery, Sydney; see here now, Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s, The Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne
2002 *A History of Happiness*, Melbourne Festival, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne; *Towards a Free Tibet*, Span Galleries, Melbourne
2001 *Buddha: Radiant Awakening*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; *The Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award*, Werribee Park, VIC; low-down: recent acquisitions, Monash University Collection, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne; *Sculpture at Seawinds*, *Arthur's Seat: Old Landscape*, New

- Gardens*, Parks Victoria, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery
2000 *Art & Kabbalah: Contemporary Responses to an Ancient Tradition*, Jewish Museum of Australia, Melbourne
1999 *Silver*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney
1998 *Construction in Process VI: The Bridge*, Melbourne
1997 *Wall as Medium*, David Pestorius Gallery, Brisbane; *Geometric Abstraction in Australia 1941–1997*, Queensland University Art Museum, Brisbane
1996–97 *Spirit + Place: Art in Australia 1861–1996*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
1995 *Australian Contemporary Painting*, Annandale Galleries, Sydney
1994 *assemblage!* Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, NZ; *Reinventing the Grid*, Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne
1993 *International Festival of the Arts: Circle, Line, Square: Aspects of Geometry*, Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery and Newcastle Region Art Gallery, NSW; *Colour*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne; *Contemporary Australian Art*, Government House, Perth; *Going Public*, Annandale Galleries, Sydney
1993 *Inner Space*, 5th Australian Sculpture Triennial, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; *Lightworks*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
1992 *The Angelic Space, A Celebration of Piero Della Francesca*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
1991 *Three Installations*, *Echo (A Warring Peace; A Sweet Wound; A Mild Evil)*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; *Artists Make Books*, Linden Gallery, Melbourne and touring; *Off the Wall – In the Air; A Seventies Selection*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne; *Sculpture Show*, Annandale Galleries, Sydney; *Models, Ara Multiplicata*, Sydney
1990 *Inland, Corresponding Places*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne; *Out of Asia*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne; *Artists for Green Peace*, Linden Gallery, St Kilda, Melbourne; *Deux Ex Machina*, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney; *Australian Photography*, The Waverley Centre, Melbourne; *Artists against Animal Experimentation*, Deutscher Brunswick Street, Melbourne; *New Acquisitions*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
1989 *Deux Ex Machina*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne; *Europe and Back, Artists' Installations*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne; *France–Australie Exchange D'artistes*, Chapelle de la Salpetriere, Paris
1988 *Olympiad of Art*, Seoul Olympic Park, Korea; *Plus-Moins-Zero*, Institut Supérieur Pour l'Etude Du Langage Plastique, Bruxelles; *Prints by Twenty-Five Australian Artists*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra
1987 *Ormond College Welcomes New Art*, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne; *What is this Thing Called Science*, University Gallery, 3rd Australian Sculpture Triennial, Melbourne; *In Print Vol. 1: Artists Books*, Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, Sydney
1986 *Geometric Abstraction*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne; *6th Biennale of Sydney: Origin, Originality & Beyond*, Art Gallery of New South Wales and other venues, Sydney
1985 *Biennale Des Friedens*, Kunsthaus Hamburg, West Germany; *Australian Perspecta: Instruments of Art*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; *Ten Years*, Air Gallery, London
1983 *Drawings (Schematic, Expressionist & Psychological)*, Art Projects, Melbourne; *D'un autre Continent: L'Australiale reveet le reel*, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France; *Continuum 83*, Australian Contemporary Art in Tokyo, Japan; *Presence and Absence*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
1982 *Ambiente*, installations, Rimini, Italy; *The Seventies into Eighties*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; *Australian Art of the Last Ten Years*, Australian National University, Canberra
1981 *Re-Constructed Vision*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; *Anzart: Art Encounter*, Art Gallery of Christchurch, NZ; *Eight x Two x Three*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney; *First Australian Sculpture Triennial*, La Trobe University, Melbourne

- 1980** *Frame of Reference*, Ewing & George Paton Gallery, Melbourne and Australian tour
1979 *3rd Biennale of Sydney: European Dialogue*, Art Gallery of New South Wales and other venues, Sydney
1978 *Documentation*, Maki & Tamuta Gallery, Tokyo, Japan; *7th Mildura Sculpture Triennial*, Mildura, NSW; *38th Venice Biennale: From Nature to Art, From Art to Nature*, Venice, Italy
1970 *Four Australian Artists* (with Boyd, Hessian and Nolan), Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, UK; *Constructions*, Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, New York, US; *Three to Infinity*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, England
1969 *John Moore's Liverpool Exhibition 7*, Liverpool City Gallery, England; *Constructions*, Marlborough Fine Art, London; Icon Gallery, Birmingham; Museum of Modern Art, Oxford

AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES

- 2002** Australia Council Visual Arts/Craft Board Emeritus Award for service to the arts
1988 Artist in residence, CEAAC Centre European D'Actions Artistiques Contemporaines, Strasbourg, France
1987 Artist in residence, Gertrude Street Artists Studio, Melbourne
1987 Artist in residence, Victorian College of the Arts
1985 Artist in residence, Air & Space Studio, London
1983 Visual Arts Board Project Grant to participate in D'un autre continent, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, France
1978 Visual Arts Board Project Grant to participate in 38th Venice Biennale, Italy
1969 John Moore's Liverpool Exhibition 7, UK

PUBLIC COMMISSIONS

- 2004** *Rotary Landing*, Queensbridge Square, Melbourne for Melbourne City Council
2003 *Craigieburn Bypass: Melbourne's northern gateway*, collaboration with Architects Taylor Cullity Lethlean and Tonkin Zulaikha Greer for VIC Roads Hume Freeway Development
2002 *Webb Bridge*, in collaboration with Architects Denton Corker Marshall for The Docklands Authority, Melbourne
2001 *Memory Pond*, Grattan Gardens Plaza, Prahran, Melbourne
1999 *Discobolus*, Hellenic Tribute, Sydney 2000 Olympics, Olympic Park, Homebush Bay
1998 *Axiom*, Atrium Sculpture, New Commonwealth Law Courts, Melbourne
1989 *Vessel*, public sculpture, Nippon Exhibition Centre, Chiba, Japan
1987 *Night Companion*, sculpture tower, World Expo 88, Brisbane
1980 *Interiors*, design production (costume, stage and lighting), Sydney Dance Company

COLLECTIONS

Robert Owen is represented in public and private collections throughout Australia and worldwide, including the British Museum, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Olympic Sculpture Park, Seoul, Korea and the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Japan.

Comprehensive CV and bibliography available on request
 Photography: Diane Panuccio

cover

TEARS OF HISTORY (SORRY STONES) 2000–2004 (detail)
 Astral black granite, dimensions variable
 installation view, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
 courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

SHERMAN GALLERIES

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