

W A G G A W A G G A C I T Y A R T G A L L E R Y

Robert Owen



INSTALLATION #1

'The Time Falling Bodies Take To Light'*

INSTALLATION #2

Four Seasons (From The Centre)

8 June - 9 July 1988

EXHIBITION ORGANISED BY JUDY LeLIEVRE AND JOHN ELSEGOOD



The Wagga Wagga City Council is very pleased to be associated with this exhibition. As the Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery's major Bicentennial Exhibition it is appropriate that the work of Robert Owen, who was raised in Wagga Wagga, be shown. I would like to thank the New South Wales Bicentennial Council and the Regional Galleries Association of New South Wales for their generous assistance and support in this project.

Alderman R. Harris,
Mayor, City of Wagga Wagga

Introduction

Until very recently artists in Australia, whether they intended to or not, defined themselves in terms of overseas art practice. Ironically, the most 'Australian' of Australian artists from Streeton to Nolan, Tucker and Boyd sought recognition in London, Paris and New York. Confirmation of identity came from outside Australia rather than from within.

Robert Owen is one of a growing number of outstanding Australian artists who are consciously choosing a very different national context for their lives and work as artists. For them the centre of art is no longer a particular city or country overseas but is increasingly any and every place in the world that provides a context for their work.

It's not just that Robert Owen comes from Wagga Wagga, has many friends there and has been very supportive of its Gallery and art school; Wagga Wagga is as valid and relevant a place for an artist to work and exhibit as Edinburgh, Venice or Mildura.

That Robert has worked and exhibited in all of these and many other places is indicative of a regionalism that has nothing to do with provincialism. Quite the opposite, it represents a maturity and professionalism in his approach to being an artist, where the work and its context is more important than the notice or status it might receive in a particular art centre, city or gallery.

As major cultural institutions continue to grow they inevitably become more formal in their response to the work of living artists. The role of the small public art museums and galleries in commissioning and exhibiting contemporary art becomes, in my opinion, much more vital. At this time and place both Robert Owen and the Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery should be congratulated and encouraged for this exhibition and their willingness to work together.

Michael Goss, OAM

Executive Officer, Regional Galleries Association
of New South Wales Limited.

'The Time Falling Bodies Take To Light'*

For some Heaven is Bermuda, for others Byzantium; for some a Mercedes, for others music. We think of it as the Pearly Gates, as Pie in the Sky. People with apple-breath, and breasts like clusters of palm trees, reading the Song of Solomon. Heaven is Transcendental Bliss, the body glorious, the garden enclosed. Heaven conjures 15th century tapestries of pleasure gardens with heraldic tickets on each shrub; *Le Dame a la Licorne*: marble naiads; elliptical mandorlas like flying saucers, or the miniature paradises of hashish-eaters.

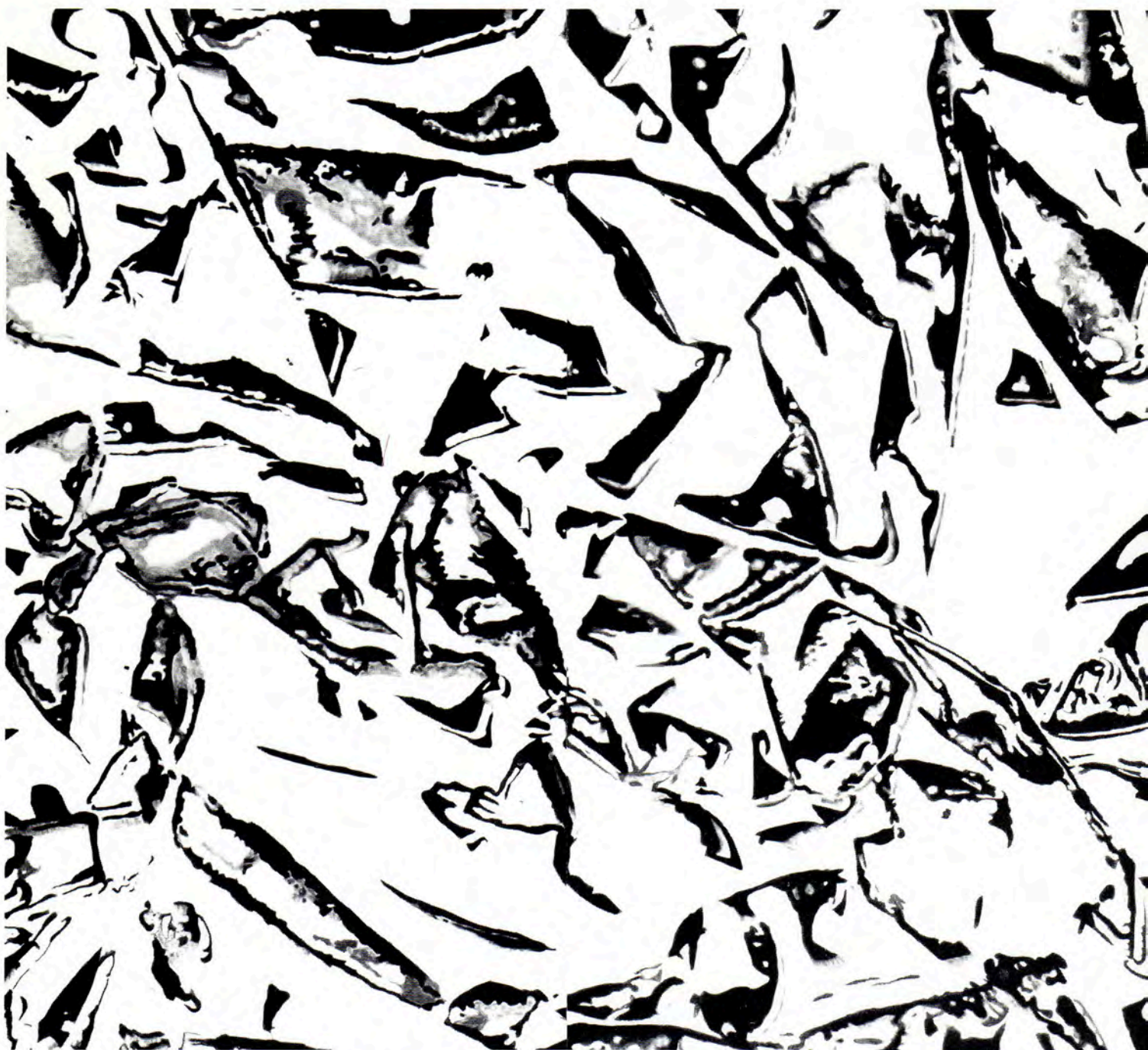
But of course Heaven is not a place, but a state. Paradise is "spezzato", wrote Ezra Pound, in fragments it arrives, a flickering here-and-gone environment in which the universe lives like music. Light, dancing on the stones, from which grew trees whose gnarled roots were dark against the dazzle of the whitewashed walls. The transient aspects of permanence, the permanent aspects of transience. Paradise lives its life in flashes and glimmers in the wind.

Robert Owen developed a vocabulary of paradise from books, from images, from sea voyages to the coastal regions of the Eastern Mediterranean, in Asia Minor – Byzantium in the 6th and 12th centuries – with its mosaics, mosques and minarets. Also through Asia: stupas and palaces and reliquaries, and gold-embroidered sanctuaries. More than merely Romantic, Owen's sensibility absorbs the luminous details and constellates them. This gives art a valid civic function: to provide intimations of a permanent clarity in the mind, i.e., a kind of mini-ecosystem, the conditions suggesting the best possible for a culture.

In this age of IBM and Sleeping Cells, Baudrillard declares a glaciation of the senses. The senses are fossils he says in *Cool Memories* (1987). Owen's work admonishes the present, but enriches it because alertly seen and felt, and passed on, to us. If anything Owen glaciates in order to *celestialise the senses* into orbit.

In this work, are we standing on the edge of a lake on a jump or think basis? We throw a stone instead, and the ripples lead us into a meditation on the tensional-compressional ultimates of the solar system. Hence stones take on transparency and become stars, and stars are made from scrap from a junkyard. Light, in these works becomes fixed, material, fallen under a heavy weight; light transmits pigment, and pigment becomes liquid. Colours have speeds, and all colours take to the water in blue. Why do painters paint their best blue when the mind is serene? Gazing at intense blue abstracts the glare of light and floats the mind.

**The Time Falling Bodies Take To Light; Mythology, Sexuality, and the Origins of Culture*, William Irwin Thompson, St. Martins Press, New York, 1981.



Detail: Folds in The Lake Of Light 1984 acrylic and charcoal on canvas 259 x 670 cm

Blue is an energy event vibrating 600,000,000,000 times per second. Halfway between black and white, blue is the fulcrum of light, but the hinge of darkness. Is there evidence here also of a resolving of the carbon/diamond paradox? Light becomes leaf becomes coal becomes light. Might the earthy carboniferous body in mortality be crystallised into hard and faceted diamond? Light through matter makes it spin. Do we spin forever?

Owen's work requires that it maintain some wholeness, but this is a more 'holistic' than an idealistic perspective. A picture of the world without inequality; harmony. The

work is also a kind of re-wiring of the world compelling out of the material selected some electric pattern. Just as, cut off by a layer of glass, iron filings leap around the poles of a magnet, making, some believe, a kind of dark rose.

He has understood the major historical events of this century – like the de facto transfer of the basis of art from matter to understanding, craft to concept, signified to signifier. At the same time he is deeply entangled in the pleasures of materials: its colours, its textures, its light effects and so on. Indeed he is a rhapsodist of the senses at a time when we are in the business of divorcing the mind



from the senses.

Most people, goes the cliché, feel they'd be bored in paradise. With Robert Owen you have the feeling his heaven would consist of a 26 hour day in which he could share the universe with everyone.

George Alexander

From a forthcoming monograph: *Robert Owen, Transits*.
To be published by Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery.

Catalogue

INSTALLATION #1

'The Time Falling Bodies Take To Light' 1988

Floor: acrylic and charcoal on canvas, coal, pasavated steel, copper and bronze, 50 x 4.5 x 27.5 metres. Ceiling: oil and pigment on existing structure 30 x 104 metres. Wall: mirror and text, 8.5 cm x 47 metres.

INSTALLATION #2

Four Seasons (From The Centre) 1988

4 cibachrome photographs, 36 blue electric lights and sound tape, 6 x 12 metres overall.



Self Portrait (From The Centre) 1983 cibachrome photograph 102 x 70 cm

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.
- Roxlyn 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.
- 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, *Ormond College Welcomes New Art*, 1987.
- Institut Superier Pour L'Etude Du Language 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'ars 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 McEvilly, *6th Biennale of Sydney*, Artforum, November, 1986.
- George Alexander, *Boomerang Art Australia, Plus-Moins-Zero*, Revue d'art Contemporain, Bruxelles, No. 46, 1987.
- Tony Clarke (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. Artist's Book.
- 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.

FRONT COVER: *Fire Drawing* 1964
fire and wax on aluminium, 58 x 37 cm.

