

## **DOUG (Douglas Elliott) ERSKINE** sculptor. b.1949 d. 1988

### **ARTIST AFTER THE CRIME**

Hogarth Gallery - 1985

*(Doug passed away since this interview took place. May he R.I.P.)*

Doug: "I had so many phone calls from people last night and yesterday saying '*thanks for the party...*' so many people had a good time. I hope my exhibitions will all be like that..."

My initial reaction to Doug's exhibition had been a dropped jaw. Like taking a fantasia fun flight through a mescaline-induced metatext of all the art reproductions you've ever grown up with. Images en masse by Botticelli, David, Arbus, Litchenstein et al. had been pillaged, polaroid(ed), plundered, packaged and preshrunk; a pithy one-liner and price tag attached to each...then wound round the room in a continual stream of 4" x 6" parcels.

I make this observation to Doug over a kitchen table in Woollhara, where he lives above a butcher shop with his cat. Doug and Cat appear to have been having a relaxing morning.

Doug responds to my impressions: "All an exhibition is, if you want to be true to yourself, is a self-indulgent wank. So you can walk around and think, "Have I progressed?...Have I achieved what I wanted to do?"...I tried to put on a very 1985 exhibition. To outline the gallery in one line of blatancy and enclose it."

Doug's technically-facilitated technique has an inherent paradox. With the use of polaroid and collage Doug takes famous images and produces the oneoff...unreproducible reproductions.

Doug: "If you look really closely at my work from there away (Doug embraces two metres of air) they look really slick. But up close they're the roughest pieces."

"Oh..." I say, but feel I may be missing out on some crucial subtlety. I look from Doug to Cat, wondering if I should redirect my line of fire...

*I ask Doug if he feels that media imagery has effected the artist's role in society?*

Doug: "I'm always very aware of what's going on. I don't live in a closed apartment world...I was reading in an article the other day about this artist walking through a New York department store. Well, we all know that everyone is good at something, whether its wiping your bum or picking your nose, but this guy got off on a black woman who was in charge of telling people what to do on elevators. She'd got it down to such a fine art she was a walking, breathing piece of art herself...Here was this so-called great painter being humbled by a woman who'd made her crumby job into an art-form..."

Doug tries to find the article, leaving Cat and I to get acquainted. He comes back empty-handed.

*What does Doug feel about the art in life/life in art thing?*

Doug: "I think some people go through life and never find the ability. I'm lucky I've found my niche. Some people out there are caught in the most terrible ruts. I want to do what I want to do even if I have to worry about not having money or having to go without for a few days..."

*"Is life an open-ended soap opera?" Cat sighs, attempting to lacerate his paws on an empty tin of Snappy Tom. I shoot him a dirty look. He was moving in on my territory.*

Doug continues (to one of us): "I find envy really boring. There's a lot of envy out there. The media punctuates it, which I find fascinating..."

*I regain control of the interview and kick Cat under the table.*

*"Yowl!" says Cat.*

"U-turkey", says Doug, and affectionately strokes him.

"So that's what he's called" I think. "What about the current artistic climate?", I ask.

Doug: "I don't like the current New Wave school of painting...It looks like you've gone to school for three years and done it...We seem to be experiencing a horrible, decorative time warp...I walked out of the last two Perspectives and cried.

*I ask Doug for his opinion on the existing gallery system.*

Doug: "When I first came to Sydney I was introduced by John Olsen to a gallery owner. The owner said, "I'll exhibit you when I can afford you" and here was me ...." (Doug raises his arms), "a wimp from Newcastle saying back, "Then you'll never exhibit me!" ...I've been very lucky with my galleries though. Like the Hogarth's always given radical young artists a chance...even when their work's not decorative..."

I hone in on some specific examples of Doug's work. In *'Simply Stunning'* Doug has polaroided the ubiquitous image of Botticelli's Venus, then layered and collaged; attaching a dried flower arrangement and what appears to be a lock of pubic hair to her mythologised tresses...and then literally laid her out inside a neat little aluminium frame.

Doug: "Well, you know how people say "simply stunning!" when they're looking at 'Vogue' or something...a lot of people asked me for a copy as it sold pretty early in the evening. But I couldn't because they're all one-offs...pity!"

**And *'The Death of Marat'* dimensionally the highlight of Doug's show...a contemporarised/life-sized/3-D version of David's vision of the famous revolutionary's death - (I had had an argument with a guy on the evening of Doug's opening, as to whether it was the ultimate wet dream or a frolic into a frame of *'The Fourth Man'*) - a 'real live' beautiful young man sat coldly in a bathtub of artificially aqued water, set on a sterile white tile base. In front of his body was an 'Imperial' typewriter teasing with the (in french) swan song: "the artist after the crime" - a radio and off-the-hook phone of similar vintage lay beside the bath. Next to a casually hanging towel and rosary beads was a 'Golden Dreams' calendar produced by 'Marilyn Munroe Publications Inc.', where Marilyn is posing, pre-platinum, with nothing on but her radio...a stand nearby**

**holds a transparent crucifix, dried wax from the now unlit candle it once held, obscuring parts of the dead Christ's anatomy...**

"Well?" I say to Doug.

Doug: "I wanted to take a favourite image and put it into a forties-onward environment...all I was concerned with really was the image."

*"Arghh!" I scream, locating my carotid and reaching for the bread knife.*

*"Crumbs aren't becoming on a corpse..." snipes Cat, caught up in his own drama beside the pre-heating oven...and muttering something about "understanding Sid" and "going out with a bang" and trying to fasten the top of the Glad oven bag he's all wrapped up in.*

*"Little creep", I think. "He'd do anything to be centre of attention." I reach for the knife...*

Doug (to no one in particular): "But I did read somewhere that a Capricorn will always stand at the back of a party....and I thought "How true"..."

(Interview for Stiletto Magazine)