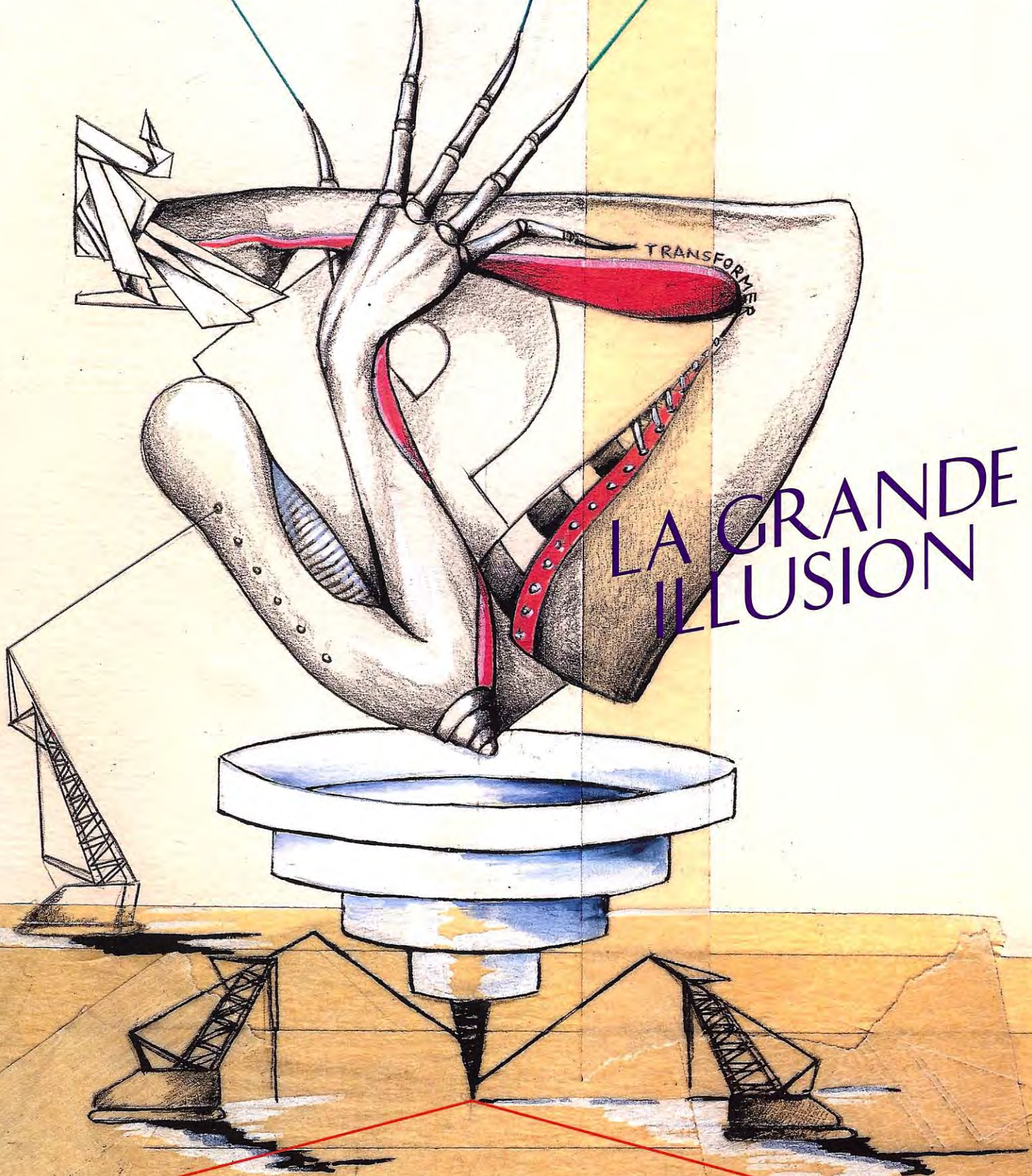


WOUND

/ CREATIVE CULTURE CLOSE-UP /

/ SUMMER 2009 /



LA GRANDE
ILLUSION

MICHAEL SAMUELS

ERECTOR SET



// A TROPICAL PARADISE TURNS OUT MORE LIKE THE STORY
IN ALEX GARLAND'S 'THE BEACH' //

// QUESTIONING THE READING OF VARIOUS MEANINGS ATTRIBUTED TO SCULPTURAL FORMS WITHIN A SPACE //

Michael Samuels' sculptures suggest barely visible traps and little pitfalls. Never played out as full-blown atrocities or spectacular disaster, his works nonetheless – as we approach them more closely – suggest things that might go wrong. Tables and chairs, balancing precariously, may fall. Or, in the earlier works, the seductive travel agent's idyll of a South Sea island, soon leads us in the direction of discovering that Utopia may lack the means by which to feed us, or perhaps even the slight suggestion that we could end up as a food source ourselves...

✓ This is not to suggest that Samuels' works are pessimistic or negative. Quite the contrary, they often have a joyful playfulness and the wide-eyed awe of a child, able to make extensive narrative fantasy out of basic matter. There is way that his work as a sculpture is unabashedly geeky; the way in which he uses honed technical skills to nurture the maximum impact out of fairly mundane materials. It's not unlike someone's dad locked away in the secrecy of the attic, building the ultimate model railway. Michael Samuels' work is most definitely that of an artist whose ode to the unsung hobbyist is implicit. His work is dripping in an admiration and appreciation of the rather beautiful human drive to make complex and elaborate facsimiles of the world in all its detail on a small scale. Or to knock up technically precise household furniture in a garage workshop. And, even if we argue that these activities share certain control freak elements with megalomaniac militarists – the model railway is not that far from a battle map of little soldiers – they are almost always benign. There are few weekend carpenters or

model railway enthusiasts who turn their hands to the production of weapons.

✓ The relevance of all of this to Samuels' work may not be apparent at first. In the main, we rightly understand his work – particularly the more recent bodies of work that have eschewed the use of scale model representative elements in favour of working in a more non-illustrative way; as being concerned with the formal aspects of objects in space. His is a trope that is less concerned with actually constructing a representation or narrative illusion as an end in itself and more with questioning the reading of various meanings attributed to sculptural forms within a space. Of course, narrative and representational elements are essential to this core area of research. Without constructing an experience that overtly refers to recognizable contexts – domestic furnishings and common tools – those questions about the visual language of objects would be insufficiently evocative – too abstract – for the kinds of questions he poses to an audience.

✓ And yet, despite all the validity of this and the consummate skill with which he undertakes these more formal practices as a sculptor, Samuels' personal narrative preoccupations – the stories to which his psychology appears to default – are never really far away. As is evident in the work itself, these are also often funny stories. His humour, perhaps not ever truly cynical or twisted, still draws us into a kind of *schadenfreude* in which we are asked to consider the collapse or unraveling of safe little realities. We are not asked to cackle the evil inappropriate humour of someone defiantly laughing in the face of God as millions of souls perish. It is not the humour of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

Instead, we are alerted to the possibility of domestic-scale disaster as furniture topples somewhere in suburbia or a backpacker's retreat to a tropical paradise turns out more like the story in Alex Garland's 'The Beach' (1996).

✓ Perhaps it is pure speculative projection to look to London-based Samuels' Australian upbringing. And yet, this is work that shares certain commonalities with the narrative structures that we find in much Australian creativity, particularly in film. It might be reasonable to say, for example, that the most powerful Australian creative products have often taken stereotypical aspects of Australian cultural identity – such as a certain geographical isolation, an outdoorsy suburban lifestyle or anti-intellectualism – and subverted them with certain kinds of humour into something that becomes both impregnated with a distinctly Antipodean flavour, whilst finding resonance way beyond that notorious geographical location, so far from many more densely populated regions of the globe.

✓ Samuels' works do have inherent qualities within the materials and motifs that we can readily see holding a resonance for such cultural narratives. The formica and wood of the recent sculptures readily fit with the laid-back suburban Australian lifestyle that we understand from soap operas beamed around the world, complete with aesthetic qualities that denote practicality and perhaps even a preference for comfortable nostalgia rather than chic sophistication. The miniature car park in which a drugs deal might go wrong has more of the whiff of a deserted nighttime lot besides a suburban mall than downtown ghetto. And the picturesque islands on which ironic horror might occur are all too frequently the ideal destinations for



X PREVIOUS PAGE / MICHAEL SAMUELS / SAVE WHAT YOU CAN, 2005 (DETAIL)
 / *Mixed media* X LEFT / MICHAEL SAMUELS / GOODBYE TO DIGNITY, 2007
 / *Installation view* / *Mixed media* X RIGHT / MICHAEL SAMUELS /
 CHARITY CASE (DETAIL), 2008 / *Mixed media* X





// THROUGH THE IMAGERY OF SUCH WORK THAT HIS
SMALL-SCALE DRAMAS OR TRAGEDIES ARE INTRODUCED //

Aussie travellers who are ambivalent in their denial of being stereotypes.

✓ It is into this world that Samuels takes us and it is within the lives of the people he encourages us to invent through the imagery of such work that his small-scale dramas or tragedies are introduced. In this, it shares a lot in common with the best of Australian cinema or fiction.

✓ Furthermore, again showing certain similarities with tendencies in other Australian art forms, it is exactly this tension between the modest, domestic scale of the tales told and the actual depth and complexity of experiences related that the power of the work lies. Understatement as a means of addressing serious content, especially through humour, is present in Michael Samuels' work in much the same way that it is in the works of Australia's most talented filmmakers. The little dramas played out on Samuels' islands have a quirky almost cute side to their humour: these are not *really* dramas that we should take too seriously. And yet, of course, they are. They are every bit as much about failure, damage and death as any dark Teutonic misery-fest. Underlying the laconic

and non-confrontational imagery, his are works that address exactly the same traumatic questions about human existence that other tropes address in far more angry or aggressive manners.

✓ This questioning or underlying morbid preoccupation, however, is far less evident or, at least, far more sublimated and dissipated in the more recent works. Toppling over, after all, is not necessarily as serious as languishing in starvation on an island surrounded by shark-infested waters. And, it certainly seems that Michael Samuels is, for the present at least, turning his attention to questions sculptural rather than existential. Or, in any case, not in the very human sense. Existence – of the object in actual space and all of its tangential ramifications – remains at the heart of these new works.

✓ One might even go as far as to say, the more recent body of work has become less about the potential for toppling over and far more about evoking a sense of joy and pleasure in remaining erect. These are works that elaborate the clever mechanisms and techniques by which the often-monumental piles of furniture remain upright,

epic, proud and gravity-defying. They are much more about architecture and engineering, perhaps even making the linkages between these esteemed and important disciplines and fairly basic human drives for ordering and creating things from the grubby shambles of the natural world. The kid flipped into a hyperactivity episode by the appearance of Lego or Meccano is, after all, an essential prerequisite if we are to continue to grow adult architects and engineers.

✓ The little gasps of cleverness at Samuels' precise cutting of legs or insertions of joints into the cannibalized domestic-looking furniture – facilitating that the whole stands almost illogically straight and stable – makes the links between the solutions that children learn to find with toys and the marveling respect that we feel when we see an architect do something clever and seemingly impossible with concrete and steel. If the possibility of collapse and failure are never entirely absent in the more recent work, they are certainly not one of the main narratives playing out in the centre of the frame as they often were in earlier works.

✓ It is also perhaps testament to Samuels skill and evolution as a sculptor that these new works can operate on various levels without overly elaborate explication.

✓ A friend, recently critiquing the work of a talented young painter said, "He has a lot less to do." Implicit in this sharp-eyed comment is the recognition that, as an artist develops, his or her restraint and editorial skills become an increasingly powerful strength. There is a way in which Michael Samuels' more recent bodies of works demonstrates that the almost obsessive narrative details that he used in earlier works, now having undergone a process of full exploration, are not required to address the topics raised by the newer bodies of work.

✓ Of course, the same level of craft is still there. But, like a much more experienced musician, here it is not necessary to dazzle with conspicuous trills and overt decoration. Bold blocks of colour used repetitively, replicated incisions of similar proportion or forms repeated in different scales all work as a sculptor's version of a restrained palette or minimal variation of form. As a result, the very precise and insightful discourses about aesthetics and composition actually made by these works arrive silently, without fanfare. Samuels quite intentionally draws us into a state of delight with the aspects of the work that are immediately and overtly clever. But it is only when we linger longer, that we realize that these sculptures are not nearly as incidental as they seem. If the initial experience appears to be about serendipity, it soon turns out that these works are entirely about a planned, constructed reality. By displacing our thinking through the initial reading of the work

– the red herring that we are dealing with something that is almost certainly about domestic forms only- Samuels cleverly makes his more architectural points quietly.

✓ Only when our curiosity makes us spend time with the work to understand exactly how it was made do we undergo certain realizations. Like Todorov's theories on the detective novel, the works run two narratives in opposing directions. We live out the forward narrative. Ours is the story of the audience investigating how the work has been constructed. And, in so doing, we uncover the backwards narrative, the story, unfolding in reverse order, of how the sculptor has made the work. With lessons learned as children, we take something apart in order to learn how it was put together.

✓ It is only really at the point at which we realize this that we uncover Samuels' more subtle points about art and architecture. These are points, for example, that elaborate that although creativity may be driven by fairly prosaic and practical activities, they are, in themselves, never enough. Aesthetic choices remain essential. What makes one of Michael Samuels' sculptures more than just a cleverly balanced pile of furniture – or a beautifully designed building stand out from mundane practical banality- is insufficiently explained in purely pragmatic terms. An artist's or designer's choices must ultimately find that aesthetically pleasing space in which the whole adds up to more than just the sum of its parts. Rather than lecture or theorize on how one can achieve that, it ultimately needs to be delivered, the rules by which it stands or falls never entirely tangible or able to be definitively explained. X KP

✓ *Michael Samuels lives and works in London. His solo institutional exhibition credits include Architectural Association, London and Ville du Parc Centre d'art Contemporain, Geneva. He has participated in a broad range of group exhibitions including those at LABoral, Gijon; Zuiderzeemuseum, Enkhuizen; Jerwood Space, London; National Gallery, Prague P3, London; Kunstlerhaus, Vienna; Bloomberg Space, London and The Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland.*

All images courtesy of the artist and Rokeby, London, unless otherwise indicated.

www.michaelsamuels.co.uk



X LEFT / MICHAEL SAMUELS / CONSPIRATORIAL WINK (DETAIL), 2008 / *Mixed media* X TOP / MICHAEL SAMUELS / BAD MOON (DETAIL), 2003 / *Mixed media* X