

## AT MAF

## COLLECTOR'S DOSSIER

# LYNDELL BROWN & CHARLES GREEN: ISLANDS OF MEANING

WHILE ARTISTIC COLLABORATIONS SPARK IDEAS OF SPONTANEITY AND TUSSLES OF INDIVIDUAL WILL, LONG-TERM COLLABORATORS LYNDELL BROWN AND CHARLES GREEN TAKE A DIFFERENT VIEW. AS THEY TELL **TIMOTHY MORRELL**, THEY SEE THEIR PAINTINGS AS BEING PRODUCED BY A THIRD HAND, SOMETHING THAT BOTH COMPRISES AND TRANSCENDS THE TWO OF THEM. PORTRAIT BY **KIRSTIN GOLLINGS**.

The images compiled by **Lyndell Brown** and **Charles Green** often resemble a pin-board. The oddly assorted collections of bits and pieces that households stick up on their wall or fridge have no apparent connection to each other, except that they represent the details of a shared life as specifically as the combination code of a safe represents the key to its contents. There is nothing arbitrary about the way these artists combine seemingly unrelated pictorial components.

They have worked in collaboration since 1989 and from the beginning their method has been one of carefully shared decision-making rather than mixing and matching to see what they could come up with. Brown was primarily a photographer and Green a painter (both of them are graduates of Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts, although it was called the National Gallery Art School when Green began there in the early 1970s). "We each saw something in what the other was doing," says Brown. "The process was a mutual admiration and critique. We could each learn from the other and also help with what the other was doing."

Up to that point, there had been no obvious connection between their respective bodies of work. Brown was focusing on the way early photography imitated painting, and her still life photographs borrowed from baroque trompe l'oeil artists, creating deliberate ambiguity about the medium she was using. Green was painting apocalyptic landscapes. The only immediately apparent common ground was a strong commitment to engage with history and an interest in conveying the sense of gravity that gives much of the art of the past its power. These are aspects of their collaborative work that have remained constant ever since.

Collaboration has been an expanding aspect of their practice and they have made works with **Patrick Pound** and, most recently, **Jon Cattapan**. Green suggests that they are able to collaborate successfully because of their experience as writers working with editors, a co-operative, collaborative process, offering little opportunity for undisciplined self-indulgence. "There's an austerity that comes from collaborations," he says. They grew up among a generation of more senior Melbourne artists, most notably **Robert Rooney**, who were dismissive of self-expression. Brown and Green, in turn, refer to the dispassionate third hand that emerges through collaboration, a creative force that's independent of the participants.

Another aspect of their work that has continued and expanded is the ambiguity about medium. They make both photographs and paintings. They exhibit paintings of photographs and photographs of paintings. This is not a matter of wilful perversity, but a way of achieving particular visual and physical qualities in the objects they make, as well as heightening a sense that they're depicting real people and events.

This migration of an image through various states and contexts is primarily motivated by the pleasure that artists take in engaging with their materials, but it also seems to reflect the nature of any image today, which may be reproduced in paint, in pixels or in screenprint on a t-shirt. Despite multiple physical manifestations, the image remains constant, as if its existence were independent from its material form.

This phenomenon has been widely cited as a fact of contemporary mass media culture, but according to Green, times have changed. "It's not a forest of signs any more. Artists don't think like that at all now."











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## “There’s an austerity that comes from collaborations.”

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Lyndell Brown & Charles Green, *View from Chinook*, 2008. Edited digital colour photograph, 111.5 x 151.5cm. Collection of the Monash Gallery of Art. COURTESY THE ARTISTS, ARC ONE GALLERY, MELBOURNE, AND HEISER GALLERY BRISBANE

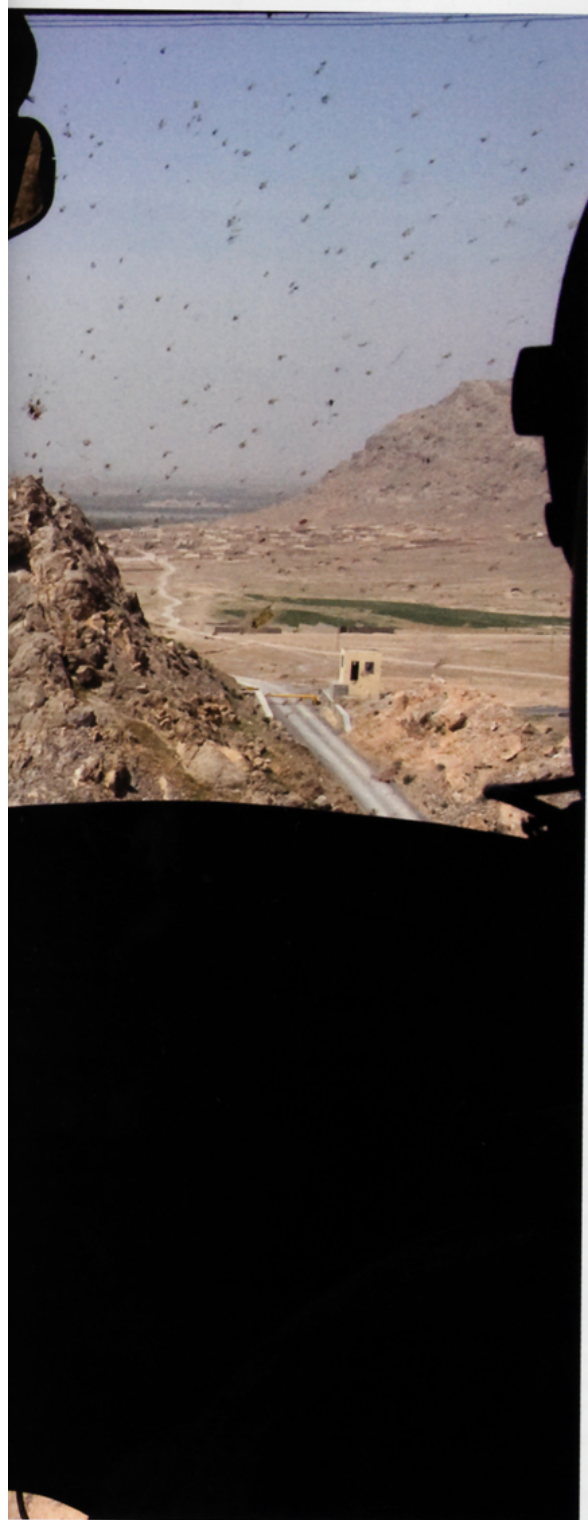
Art students in the 1980s were bombarded with the ideas of **Barthes**, **Baudrillard** et al about signs and simulacra, but Brown and Green are not particularly concerned with the idea of an image being virtual rather than actual. The contemporary notion of an avatar is of vastly less significance to them than the word’s original meaning in Eastern religion. When discussing their multi-image pictures they are far more likely use Tibetan Buddhist *tankas* as a point of reference rather than talking about channel surfing on TV. “It’s not a collage aesthetic, it’s a navigational aesthetic,” says Green. Brown echoes this. “Once the images are combined there is a compellingly necessity,” she says. “There’s definitely a logic. It’s not arbitrary.” Green comments that they aim to produce “elegant clockwork machines that start ticking when you push them”.

In a world awash with images they build up private islands of meaning, which for them are rock solid. They take no special interest in social media but Brown and Green possibly represent the attitudes of contemporary users of information technology, who have taken control of it, actively participating in it rather than being at its mercy.

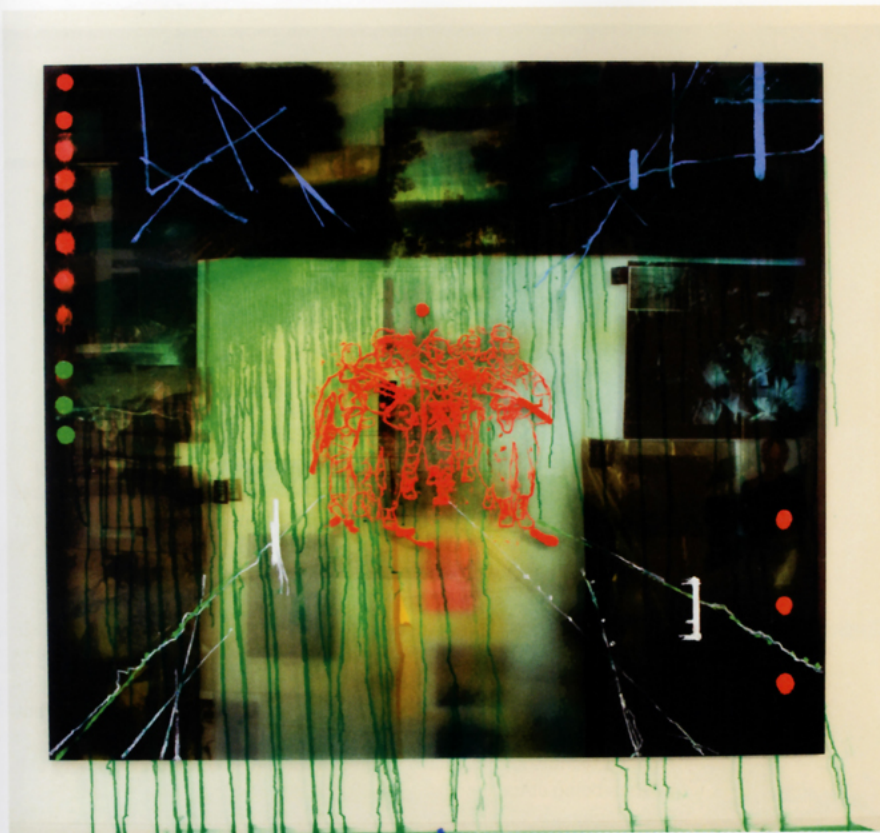
Photography is a fundamental component of their work because of their affinity with the technique as artists but they are acutely aware of its overwhelmingly powerful role in society and culture. Brown explains their seemingly paradoxical practice of reproducing photographs in paint: “We never found the American photorealists all that interesting, but when we paint a photo we find more and more. The image enters our consciousness in a really rich expansive way.” When they first began working together the first versions of photoshop were just appearing, but they have always resisted the illusory convenience of composing work on a computer screen. Brown believes that “the more you photoshop an image the more the life is leached out of it. In painting we re-intensify the image.” She also refers to the “love of the actual process of painting”.

Their work may lead the viewer to various preconceptions that generally turn out to be wrong. The physicality of the objects they make is of great importance to them. Brown compares the arrangements of crumpled pictures and papers made in the studio preparatory to beginning a painting to baroque sculptures. The final painting often depicts creases and folds that are reminiscent of dynamic drapery and that are as important to them as the images that the folds engulf.

They are, therefore, deeply engaged in the investigation of pictorial space, a pursuit that theorists claim fuelled the entire modernist movement, but which seldom concerns artists who emerged subsequently. Two distinct ways of depicting space can be observed in their work. Sometimes the component elements are clearly discrete, square objects such as books, pages and clippings superimposed over a background. This is similar to the way American artist **Robert Rauschenberg** (whom they greatly admire) laid images onto the picture plane like a compositor working on a flatbed press. Sometimes the







**“It’s not a collage aesthetic, it’s a navigational aesthetic.”**

From left:

Lyndell Brown & Charles Green with Jon Cattapan, *War and Peace #16*, 2012. Oil on digital print on duraclear film, 105 x 150cm. Collection of the artists. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS

Lyndell Brown & Charles Green, *Deep Rock*, 2011. Oil on linen, 170 x 170cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS, ARC ONE GALLERY, MELBOURNE, AND HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE

montaged images, instead of being separately contained by a square framework are fully integrated into illusory space. “We oscillate,” says Green, “between flatbed space and illusion.”

They are unusually well informed about art history and theory. Like an extraordinarily large number of contemporary Australian artists, they both have doctoral degrees. They did not, however, take the usual option of a studio-based degree, which art schools now offer primarily in recognition of the candidate’s abilities as an artist. They gained their PhDs in the traditional way which involves undertaking much more ambitious documentary research and writing, a rigorous test of the candidate’s abilities as a scholar.

Certain classes of imagery recur in their work, notably photographs from 19th century Japan and from 20th century moon landings. The jarring disparity of places and periods dissolves when these heterogenous subjects are viewed as travel images. The artists’ own travel photos, sometimes decades old, are also incorporated. They share a love of 19th century orientalism – the West’s obsessive attachment to an often mistranslated vision of the exotic East. Their work may appear to be a bewildering blend of unrelated elements, but it is a systematic layering of time and of space rather than a blend. They do not endorse the general assumption that we now live in a chronological cocktail of all times and all places which coexist, undifferentiated, in the electronic

media. They are strongly aware of the connections and consequences that give history its structure.

In 2007 the Australian War Memorial sent them to Iraq and Afghanistan as official war artists. Brown explains: “We agreed to take the War Memorial commission because we believed it was an opportunity to collect and paint images of contemporary history.” The sense of gravitas has always been an essential element in their work, and it would be difficult to imagine a graver subject than this.

Following the project Green commented on the experience of being in Afghanistan. “There is no front line,” he said in an interview recorded for the Australian War Memorial. “The Australians are embedded inside enormous, vast complexes of almost unimaginable size that constitute the American military bases. The scale of this enterprise is almost beyond description.” Virtually everything that concerns them in their work can be found writ large in this war zone. The superimposed cultures and histories at the heart of the conflict provided a disturbing illustration of the ramifications of global connectivity. Green says of their War Memorial work, and of their paintings ever since: “We tried to trigger a sense of the matrix for which we bear some responsibility.” •

*Brisbane’s Heiser Gallery exhibits new work by Lyndell Brown and Charles Green at the Melbourne Art Fair from 1 to 5 August 2012.*





1998 1997

1996 1995

2007 2006

2005 2004



## BRUCE HEISER

DIRECTOR, HEISER GALLERY

Gallerist **Bruce Heiser**, who represents **Lyndell Brown** and **Charles Green** in Brisbane, says that his clients are very conscious of the fact that aside from being fine works of art, pictures by Brown and Green are important documents of our time. "They're beautifully painted, but there's more going on." Collectors have the pleasure of admiring the visual qualities conventionally prized in the works they want to live with, but they also "get the idea that there's a contemporary narrative," says Heiser. He speaks of his own enjoyment of the piercing blue they often capture in the sky of their pictures. "They're wonderful draughtsmen."

He says that viewers are really intrigued by their layering of imagery, "using photographs from a trip to India 15 or 20 years ago and bringing

them into a new context by combining them with recent photographs they took in Afghanistan ... People want to collect and hold onto things the way they do. It's in our nature to hark back and having a piece of history helps to make sense of the present. It makes an anchor." People are interested in the fact that they were official war artists. This puts them a context with **William Dobell** and **Ivor Hele**.

Heiser also speaks about their integrity to each other and to their work. "They totally respect what the other does. They're true to the significance of their subject matter. They don't pull any punches. They're agitators because it's political work, but it's informed. People can see that they're interested in history."

*Timothy Morrell*



### 1953

Charles Green is born in Melbourne

### 1985

Brown and Green meet for the first time and discover a shared interest in Asia

### 1989

Green and Brown begin collaborating; the same year they marry

### 1994



### 1984



### 1987



### 1961

Lyndell Brown is born in Melbourne

### 1991

First exhibition of their collaborative work is held at 13 Verity Street Gallery in Melbourne



**CAMPBELL GRAY**

DIRECTOR, UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND ART MUSEUM

**Campbell Gray**, director of the University of Queensland Art Museum, describes **Lyndell Brown** and **Charles Green's** collaboration as unusual. "It brings together two independent skills navigated to the point that they become indistinguishable from each other." He is particularly intrigued with the idea of collaboration and believes that "when you work with someone who is totally compatible it has a multiplying effect on creativity ... Their collaboration creates a broader discourse, more complex and multi-layered".

Gray travelled with the artists to the **Robert Smithson** earthwork *Spiral jetty* in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. This iconic monument of conceptual and environmental art had for years been a key image in the work of Brown and Green. Gray describes their response to the site as an important insight into the synergy of

their thinking. "They spark off each other," he says. "It's all an expansion of ideas."

He sees the ambitiousness of their subject matter as a quality that makes the work particularly suitable for a public collection. "The grandness takes it out of the domestic ... The issues they address are politically volatile and socially disturbing." He also refers to the way their painting technique can engage the public. He points out that Green spent a long time looking at the traditional oil techniques of glazing and scumbling. "He knows about technique and Lyndell also respects it ... It's not photorealism in the sense that all signs of the artist's hand and brush are obliterated ... There's a joy in working on a paint surface. It's painterly in a way that satisfies the viewers' desire to respect the skills of an artist."

*Timothy Morrell*

## ARIEL HASSAN

Primarily a painter, Ariel Hassan also makes sculptures, photographs, videos and sound-based work. Even when exploring these other media, he always returns to his painting. Hassan's sculptures begin as painted maquettes made in his studio. He likes that these sculptures, like his paintings, are made by an individual, as opposed to being the result of a

Far left:

Lyndell Brown & Charles Green, *Outpost*, 2011. Oil on linen, 170 x 170cm. Collection of the artists. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS, ARC ONE GALLERY, MELBOURNE, AND HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE

Timeline:

1984: Charles Green, *Contemporary Tantra*. Watercolour on paper, 70 x 100cm. Private collection. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS, ARC ONE GALLERY, MELBOURNE, AND HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE

1987: Charles Green, *The Fate of Animals*. Oil on linen, 188 x 188cm. Private collection. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS, ARC ONE GALLERY, MELBOURNE, AND HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE

1994: Lyndell Brown & Charles Green, *The Vale of Kashmir*. Oil on linen, 122 x 122cm. Collection of Kings School. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS, ARC ONE GALLERY, MELBOURNE, AND HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE

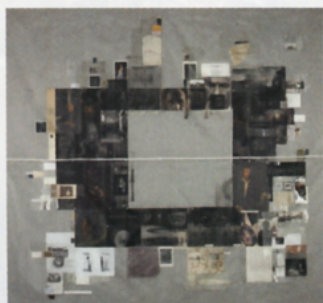
2000: Lyndell Brown & Charles Green, *La Voix*. Mixed media, acetate, photographs, gold embroidery thread, Chanderi handwoven silk, 180 x 240cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS, ARC ONE GALLERY, MELBOURNE, AND HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE

2005: Lyndell Brown & Charles Green, *Styx*. Oil on linen, 152 x 152cm. Private collection. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS, ARC ONE GALLERY, MELBOURNE, AND HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE

2008: Lyndell Brown & Charles Green, *History painting: Tarin Kowt, Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan*. Oil on linen, 155 x 155cm. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND AWM, CANBERRA

**1997**

Four-month residency at Sanskriti Kendra near New Delhi, the first of some 15 trips the duo has now made to India and Tibet

**2000****2004**

Green becomes a contributing editor to the New York art magazine Cabinet; Brown receives her PhD from the College of Fine Arts in Sydney

**1998**

Green complete PhD on artistic collaborations in post-1968 art

**2006**

Green is appointed head of the University of Melbourne's art history program

**2005****2008****2007**

Green and Brown travel to Iraq and Afghanistan as official war artists