

Dale Frank: Nothing if Not Criticised

DALE FRANK'S PRODIGIOUS OUTPUT HAS MET WITH ACCLAIM ABROAD AND DERISION AT HOME. BUT THAT HASN'T STOPPED HIM BECOMING ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST COLLECTED CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS. ANDREW G FROST REPORTS.

Dale Frank doesn't like to talk about himself. While keen to talk about his work, he brought to our interview the preconceptions of someone who has been burnt by the media in the past. "Is this going to be another hatchet job?" Fervent assurances that we leave the hatchet jobs to others were met with an unconvincing smile. We caught up with the artist at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney, where he was hanging his latest show and, although friendly, he remained guarded throughout, choosing his words and measuring each answer with care.

His caution is understandable. Since he burst onto the scene in the late 1970s, critics have been struggling to find patterns in his prodigious output. In the last 10 years alone he has had over 100 solo and group shows, exhibiting an amazingly diverse body of work, yet he believes critics have often attacked him personally and ignored the art. For his part, Frank prefers to remain elusive, concentrating

on the work, and happy to let the critics fight it out among themselves.

"Most people expect artists to fail anyway," he says, laughing. "That's just the pattern. That's what being an artist is. People enjoy a good failure because they feel as though they had some part in it. It makes them confident later that they can help in the resurrection."

Of course, Frank is anything but a failure, but he does remain an enigma. A biography written to accompany an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York tells us that Frank was born in 1959 at Singleton in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales. He is represented in Sydney by the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, in Auckland by Gow Langsford Gallery, and in Melbourne by the Anna Schwartz Gallery. He also has three galleries in Europe and one in New York. Frank left Australia at 19 to "pursue a professional artist's career in Europe and the United States". In 1988, after 10 years abroad he

returned to live in Australia permanently, and has continued to exhibit nationally and internationally while living in rural Queensland. Everything else, officially at least, is a mystery.

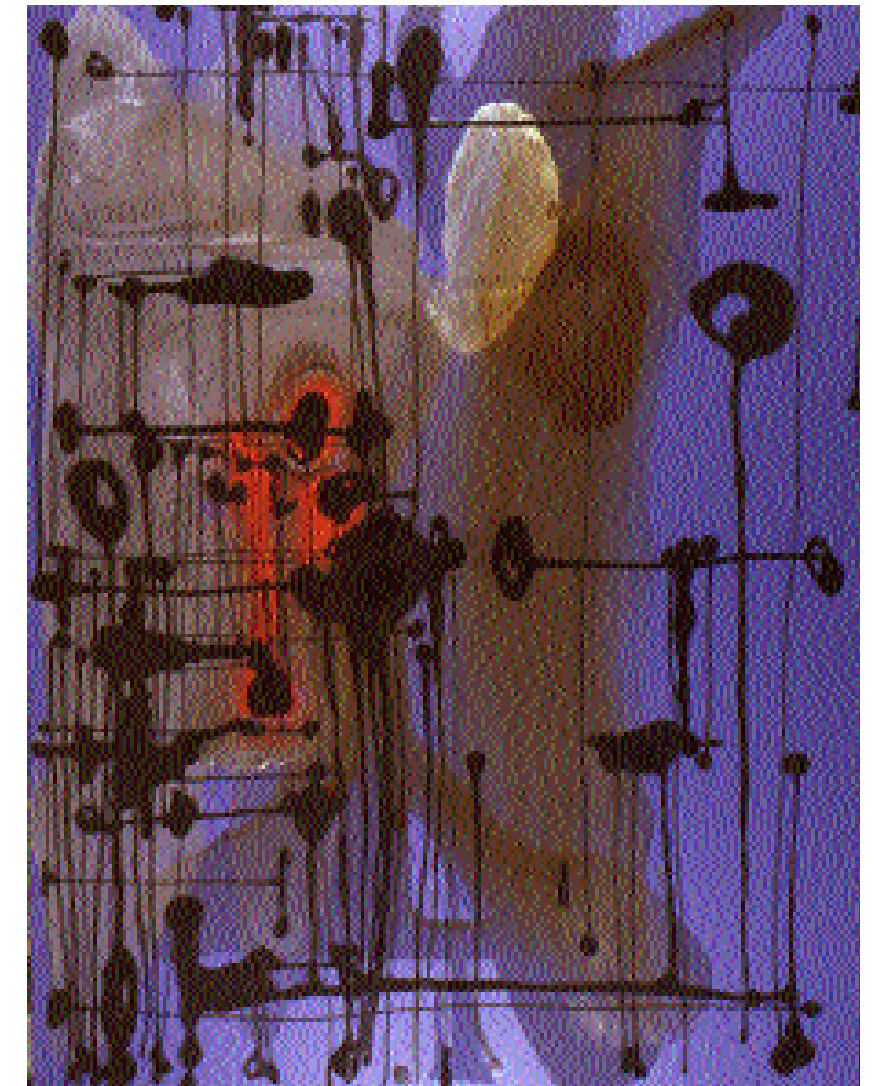
With exhibitions throughout Europe and the United States at prestigious galleries and museums such as the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Solomon R Guggenheim in New York, and favourable reviews in magazines like *Flash Art* and *ArtForum*, Frank returned from his international sojourn with a formidable reputation. For critics willing to engage with the rich potential of his output, he was the prodigal art star, back from the great 'overseas' with the mysteries of the 'trans-avant-garde' in his grasp. But despite this positive international reception, most Australian critics remained nonplussed, with the more conservative scribes keen to savage his work and frame him as the art world's latest bad boy. For every positive review of a Frank show, there seemed to be two ready to tear him down.

Why has he received a better reception internationally? "Because I am not in their backyard," he says candidly. "I'm not automatically dismissed on the grounds of personal prejudice, personality type, political agenda or even personal agenda." Here he knows that some dismiss his work for being "rude to someone at a dinner party 12 years ago". Despite the sometimes-vitriolic attacks on his work and, conversely, the respect he has earned by persisting with his practice, Frank remains philosophical about his relationship with critics: "Anybody who writes anything views through their own prejudices and through their own agendas. Writers are not writing about the work, but their own perceptions of the work".

In many ways Frank is a classical avant-gardist. Holding no allegiance to any particular artistic form, a Dale Frank show could be anything from paintings, or a series of found object sculptures, to a performance-installation where the audience is asked to dance in a gallery dressed up as a disco. He once collated 20 years of his art world correspondence and placed it in a large vitrine in the gallery, along with a \$20,000 price tag. (Surprisingly, it was one of those rare Dale Frank works which *didn't* sell, but caused a ruckus nonetheless – a former commercial gallery dealer brought in lawyers to assess whether there were grounds for litigation. There weren't.) His work echoes everything from Marcel Duchamp to the minimalist canvases of Marc Rothko or Yves Klein to the *décollage* practice of Mimmo Rotella.

Not surprisingly, one consistent criticism has been precisely this perceived lack of formal consistency, a criticism he rejects out of hand: "This idea of 'consistency' is a very Australian thing. If you're consistent you're known and you can develop a product over several years. People know what they're getting and think they're getting value for money. I think art is more than that. The thing that binds [all my art] together will be a lifetime's work". After 20 years the elements that tie it all together start to come into sharper focus. "The sculptures, the performances... everything. When you reach a certain stage, the work can be seen in a broader context, a longer timeframe." Can Frank speculate on what those unifying elements might be? "No", he says emphatically. "An artist should-

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Dale Frank, *Brother Blue, Brother Fold, Brother Flat, Brother Black, Brother Mould, Brother Smeg, Brother Cat, Brother Smack, Brother You*, 1999. Acrylic and enamel on linen, 240x200 cm. COURTESY: ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY

ABOVE: Dale Frank, *I'm Only Dancing*, 1995. Performance sculpture. COURTESY: ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY



Dale Frank, *The Bright Humming Painting for Little Tiger*, 1998. Acrylic and enamel on linen, 185x170 cm. COURTESY: ROSLYN OXLEY'S GALLERY

"I have paintings where the varnish moves underneath the surface for anywhere up to two or three years."

n't say things like that anyway, they can be quite easily taken the wrong way."

Persisting, we wondered if the echoes in his recent work of American abstractionists like Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell represented a deliberate strategy of quotation. "Quotation was never a consideration when I was doing the work. There is no conscious referring back to any abstraction. The work is not a rehash or remake of abstraction. Abstract painting has been around for 100 years."

During the 80s, Frank often used unconventional chemicals like thick varnish in his paintings. "I have done paintings where the varnish moves underneath the surface for anywhere up to two or three years. One collector bought one painting and over two years he ended up with a different painting. As he said, it was a surprise. Every few months he'd notice something different –

and it was always pleasant. Collectors grow to love works, and works grow to love collectors. They change. I wouldn't describe [these materials] as volatile, I'd describe them as... opportunely interesting."

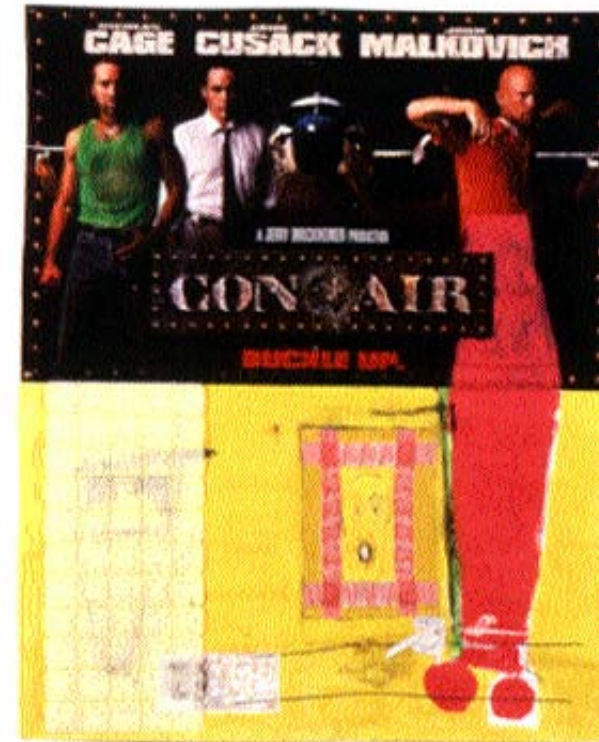
Frank conceptualises the potential of such materials to change as part of the work. His installation of paintings at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in 1998 was typical. Five varnish works were hung above a raised platform around the perimeter of the gallery space. "The whole idea of the work, and it was done specifically for the show, was that the varnish would run by the opening of the exhibition." Gravity did its work, and run they did. "It built up a stalactite/stalagmite situation, then joined. Another painting slipped completely and formed a pool on the white floor of the space. They [the NGA] understood what was happening – why the work changed –

and that it was an important aspect of it. What they exhibited, basically, was that change. The works are now solid and fine."

More recently Frank has painted on a fibreglass 'canvas', a material that he claims is as archivally sound as cotton duck. And besides, he just likes it. "The paintings are on UV-protected woven Chinese fibreglass. I just like the material. It's as safe as linen, conservation wise. It's a very technologically 'now' material to use." Where does Frank's use of the 'opportunely interesting' leave the collector? Art consultant **Hugh Jamieson** is a long time supporter of Frank and has 12 of the artist's paintings in his collection. He professes to have "no problem" with the use of reputedly impermanent materials, and considers them a conceptual and aesthetically integral part of Frank's practice. "In the end it doesn't alter the aesthetic nature of Frank's paintings," says Jamieson. "That's because the work is not figurative. If the paint is already dripped, and it drips a little further, it doesn't matter. A lot of people don't focus on the fact that he does beautiful paintings, they focus on the trickier aspects. There are colours in there that I would never have thought were beautiful... yet they are." Frank has stopped using fibreglass and in the past 12 months has returned to the more conventional medium of linen.

Frank has also had a palpable influence on a generation of younger Australian artists like **Adam Cullen** who, along with his alumni from the grunge scene of the early 1990s, has carried on Frank's aesthetic challenges. "What is so important about Dale's work," says Cullen, "is that he has demonstrated that it's possible to produce 'international art' while at the same time remaining quintessentially Australian. I see his work as embodying this complex antipodean paradox. He makes art that couldn't come from anywhere else." Hugh Jamieson concurs. "I don't want to sound provincial by saying his work is 'world class'," says Jamieson. "But it is international in outlook. That's certainly witnessed by the way he was taken up by the editors of *FlashArt* when he was living in Italy."

For many, the most perplexing aspect of Frank's work is the absence of easily discernible messages or any definable 'meaning'. It's what Hugh Jamieson means by the "trickier aspects" of Frank's output. Along with the artist's refusal to explain or



Dale Frank, *Con Air*, 1997. Paint, paper and mixed media on paper and printed vinyl, 230x186 cm. COURTESY: ROSLYN OXLEY'S GALLERY

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define what his work might be about, there is a sexually ambivalent playfulness to much of what Frank does. At the same time, as critic **Rex Butler** observed in *Like* magazine, Frank's work "seems to be motivated by feelings of resentment." While Frank dismisses such suggestions, one work in his 1998 Oxley show, which took aim at Sydney-based art critic, **John McDonald**, supports Butler's assessment. Frank painted text in the form of an outrageous homoerotic love letter to McDonald, then critic at *The Sydney Morning Herald*, recently appointed head of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia. The work was funny, crude and is likely to do wonders for the artist's career.

Apart from a brief period in the early 90s with the then-nascent Sherman Goodhope Gallery, Frank has been a longstanding member of the Oxley stable since the outset. **Roslyn Oxley** first met Frank in 1982 when the artist was in town for the Sydney Biennale that year. "It was before my gallery opened," she recalls. "We met and got on." In a show of solidarity, Oxley supports Frank's extremes, describing the artist as "obsessive, extraordinary, with incredible commitment." Does she worry about Frank's potential for controversy? "I'm not worried about any of my artists being controversial, so long as the work is good, that's all that matters." And how does she feel about works like the piece attacking McDonald? "I don't know how to answer that," she says after a long pause.

For most spectators, works such as the McDonald piece beg the question: "Is he for real?" But this is a problem that faces



Dale Frank, *View From A Top A Tip*, 1996-97. Varnish on Chinese dyed fibreglass, 240x360cm. COURTESY: ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY

**“Frank shows it is possible to produce ‘international art’
while remaining quintessentially Australian.”**

just about every contemporary artist at one point or another. As Frank refuses to elaborate, his audience is left to ponder the art as an extension of the artist's personality. In the same way that Vincent Van Gogh was 'tragic' or that Pablo Picasso was a 'genius', Dale Frank is considered 'avant-garde'.

Frank's career is testament to his abiding dedication to the persona of the 'artist'. From the elaborate, jokey and surrealistic titles to the schizophrenic shifts from one form to another, to the defiantly, deliberately elusive subject matter, Frank's work seeks not to entertain or decorate, provoke or disturb. It's simply there, human irrationality objectified. This is the balancing act that Frank's audience and collectors buy into, the whole thing *could* be a joke. Or it could be deadly serious. That we may never know is perhaps, ultimately, the point. The last word belongs to Frank: "Life is a cruel but wonderful joke. There is nothing more. This where the work is at. For me this is a shocking and new realisation every day." •