

## Ingram interviews Armanious: “the potting shed cosmologist”

This conversation emerged following on from Australian artist Hany Armanious’ artist project over summer 04/05 at the Auckland Art Gallery’s New Gallery.

**Simon Ingram:** We’ve talked a little about solidifying and grinding in your work. For instance, the particular way the clappers and the bells are cast makes them very evident records of filling or piling up, while the pepper mill is a common device that grinds down, and belongs to a class of tools like lathes and mills. It seems that in *Centre of the Universe (central core, softcore, hardcore)* there is a reciprocal action hidden in what comes across as a lumpen or archaic sort of system, where forces act on solid things in different directions and comprise a kind of ‘maintenance agent.’ If this were the case then the peppercorns all over the floor are a kind of cosmic remainder, a bi-product of this process. My question is what is being maintained (or balanced, subjected to pressure)? What does this evidence?

**Hany Armanious:** What I think is being evidenced is a type of essentialist interrogation of form. A type of system that must be doomed from the start given its strict parameters. The system says ‘go forth and reveal the nature of all things *from the centre out.*’ Yet one gets bogged down trying to define this middle point from which all things must emerge, and what does emerge are replicas of this impossible middle. Questions arise such as what came first the container or the contained? The lathe or the pepper mill? The fire or the flame? The machine is a by-product of another machine. I suppose it’s a kind of poetics of denial or an insistence on the delusions of the real.

**This is very interesting to me. If I understand you correctly this second machine is art? Its job is to re-enact what can’t really be known or established. What we know as art comes about at least in part through a mad ‘needing to know’ of origins, of sources. Art shows itself as trying to get the measure of the impossibly middle which isn’t the same as saying it actually gets this measure. It’s the trying that counts?**

There’s something in this knowingness of art – an accepted unspoken knowing that the whole enterprise is make believe... But it still looks for answers. In a sense the gallery or museum – or studio for that matter – could be seen as a safe-house for the playing out of some need to believe. Even when we look at art that’s centuries old there’s this sense of yearning and never quite arriving at some allusive utopia – *picturing the dream*. What this drive in art is all about isn’t so simple; once I thought it was like the ordering of one’s failed aspirations.

**I don’t want to make too much of the title, but it seems the work has aspirations to universality that might immediately make the cheeks redden of**



Hany Armanious, *Centre of the Universe (central core, softcore, hardcore)* (2004-5). Courtesy of Michael Lett, Auckland and Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney.

**those bought up on various post-modern extrusions of post-structural thought (or at least make them nervous). Hasn’t the argument run something like ‘there’s one thing of which we can be sure and that is that there is no truth.’ Yet, here we have a complex tableau, a model of the universe perhaps, that seems to assert a systemics operative through all things. I find this very interesting for the sorts of truth effects it summons up and the way it abrogates certain modes of so-called ‘criticality’ (or thinking that run along lines of a kind of dummarse-literalism) while still seeming critical. How would you respond these sorts of comments?**

If the work makes some people’s cheeks redden then that’s a good thing. I’m not sure why it would necessarily contradict any post-structuralist thought because it does allude to the hopelessness of finding truth, but at the same time there is a hint of real revelation which is reached on the rocky road of bad faith. The only way I can really function effectively in the studio is when I seriously have to kid myself. You follow that silly thread till it looks like it’s nearly in tatters then suddenly vistas of beauty emerge from this psychotic pantomime. Be it the truth effect or



just a great shape that effects you emotionally, you just know that something seemingly insignificant is working in really big way.

**Maybe it's a question of scale. Of a ratio of sizes between you and the work. You seem to be saying that you can't overwhelm or determine meaning. Meaning or maybe meaningful-ness comes or it doesn't and the best way for it to arrive, and arrive well, is for you to focus on building a factory for production, replete with both a firmness and delicacy to materials. Does your work work on you as much as you on it? Are you 'in' the work as Pollock used to say about his being 'in' the painting?**

One does get pretty immersed at times. I don't think this is a particularly unique way of working. I try and give as much as possible a chance to exist and in the end I have to decide if a thing is worth the space it occupies. But during the process it's useless to try and understand the type of exchange that's happening and you wind up getting all self-conscious. When I do think about it I try to tell myself to be generous and light – maybe it's a way of avoiding a tendency to be ungenerous and heavy.

**When you were in Auckland working on the show there seemed to be very specific parameters that you worked within. It was as if certain material and sign-oriented relationships led the way; they made decisions and one of your roles seemed to be to facilitate certain unions between things. To me your work comes across as beautiful in a particularly human sort of way; its maker is mixed in with clay of the potting shed so pretty soon we get the measure of you. Or is this too narcissistic?**

That's really nice of you to say that Simon, because you never really know what sort of affect your work

**Left:** Hany Armanious, *Centre of the Universe* (central core, softcore, hardcore) (2004–5), installation detail. **Right:** *Untitled* (2004) 165mm x 155mm, clay, wood, wax. Both images courtesy of Michael Lett, Auckland and Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney.

is having on others. You get all caught up in this unreasonable edifice of your own making and which exists on the good will of those around you... But how much of that is about me personally seems immaterial. I'd prefer to think of myself more as a public servant.

**Hany Armanious is a Sydney-based artist whom the Auckland-based artist Simon Ingram enjoys talking with.**