ON HANGING "WAR AND PEACE"

Peter Stupples

Curating an art exhibition is like arranging a dinner party. However carefully we prepare the guest list we can never be sure that everyone will have an enjoyable time. We may look in a variety of cookbooks, but are invariably circumscribed by the ingredients available. Are we going to make the best we can of what is in the cupboard – the chance tins, packets and frozen meat from shopping sprees that did not exactly have this party in mind? Or are we going to browse the expensive delicatessens for special treats that will blow the budget for weeks ahead? There will always be those who despise our offerings, not to our face, of course, blaming our parsimony, our poor choice, our extravagance, our failure of nerve, our absence of taste. Even so we will have provided a rich experience for our guests, an experience they will be able to relish among themselves for weeks to come. We will have given them the opportunity to point out to each other our almost infinite errors of judgement and to elaborate how they could have done so much better, whilst offering us the bland smile of guarded praise our impertinence deserves.

As there are dinner parties and dinner parties, so there are exhibitions and exhibitions. There will be different motives behind a dealer show and a retrospective at a public institution. The dealers want to sell, to talk up the value and significance of their product. They invite potential buyers, clients not only with an interest, but with the economic wherewithal to satisfy their urge to collect, to register their place in the social hierarchy – intelligent, discerning, wise and perspicacious, knowing a good thing when they see one, with an uncanny ability to spot the rising star. The retrospective will have been chosen with considerable care, rewarding an acknowledged achiever. No need to sell, but to cement a reputation, to secure a place in the canon. Invitations will go to those who have already helped to elevate the reputation of others, the academics, the civic dignitaries. The only concern here is to make sure that there is enough 'good' material on display to make the occasion an academic triumph and not an embarrassing flop, redounding not so much on the artist as on the head of the hapless curator.

The hang of the permanent collection of a public institution is much more problematic for the curator. There is something daunting about the very concept of a 'permanent' collection, a collection put together over a long period of time, by committees with differing objectives, with varying degrees of sponsorship, with the serendipity of bequests and gifts, with tastes changing with the speed of fashion. It is possible to play safe, to show a representative collection of the 'best' works in chronological order or grouped by genre, and then left to hang in these frozen associations for

decades. The less well-known works, and those about which the gallery staff may well be frankly ashamed, will lie entombed in storage until some maverick director should be possessed by a fever of deaccession, for which s/he will be blamed by succeeding generations. When Ned Rifkin was director of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia (he is currently director of the Hirsshorn in Washington, D.C.), he likened the historical role of museums in our culture to that of a word processor offering the user but two options – 'save' and 'display'.[1]

At the beginning of the twenty-first century permanent collections suffer from irrelevance in the lives of most of the citizens. They belong to a past era, when city or national fathers knew what art was, and collected those objects that were the exemplars of style, of skill, of cultural value, of historical significance, of educative gravitas. Like the town hall and the library, the art gallery was a repository of civic virtue and public good, where the treasures collected in the course of political and mercantile enterprise could be displayed like trophies, marks of wealth, success, and accolades of culture.

In the global village the civic art gallery must reinvent itself, write a new mission statement, give value for money to the rate payers, discover for itself a reason to be amongst citizens sated with visual imagery and aural distraction. The traditional audience has passed into the fading shadow-world of old age. The young do not hold the values of their elders in reverential awe. The only constant in the swirl of colour and noise in the global market place is change. 'Permanence' has lost all meaning.

Whilst 'save' and 'display' is still the mission for the permanent collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the challenges of the new age are being faced with the reinterpretation of these catch cries. 'Saving' is not mothballing, but cleaning, conserving, restoring. 'Display' now has the emphasis on 'play.'

The gallery has replaced the permanent hang by a kaleidoscope of ever changing exhibitions, the longest on show for a year, but the majority lasting only months. The permanent collection never occupies more than half of the space, and for most of the year somewhat less. Contemporary art, the art of the recently past, clustered about themes created by curators often from other galleries, is the order of the day – travelling exhibitions, assembled with limited objectives, yet also enlarging the imaginative world of an audience that expects novelty, bringing the art of cultures often not traditionally regarded as worthy of a permanent collection, delighting the teachers accompanying parties of school children clutching their project boards, the passing tourist, the jaded on gloomy days, and a few of the elders able to luxuriate in the eccentricity of the geriatriat.

Certainly from 1998 there has been a clear and articulated[2] shift of policy to embrace postmodern joy in variety, to break up the canonned ranks of the permanent collection, to disperse their presentation, to endow them with refreshed significances, to disembed them from chronology and genre, to tell, in new ways, the interesting history of the collection itself, but to tell contemporary stories, stories of uncanny juxtapositions that disinhibit previously frozen relationships. At the same time, in our dash to live, to give us pause, should we care to take it, to reflect.

In 2004 I was commissioned to curate an exhibition from the permanent collection along the line of refreshment. I moved with caution and a conscious conservatism that, in retrospect, seems like

retro-curating. The result was "Sites for the Eyes: European Landscapes in the Permanent Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery". Yet there were two aspects of this show that palely reflected the curatorial revolution made famous by Fred Wilson with his exhibition "Mining the Museum" for the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore in 1992.[3] There Wilson rearranged the permanent collection to highlight the role of coloured Americans depicted by white artists in a white colony that later became a somewhat unwilling signatory to the Declaration of Independence. My aim was to arrange an exhibition so as to bring forward 'landscape' in works that were traditionally accredited to another genre, where the landscape had been overlooked by the emphasis on some other aspect of the subject – religious narrative, everyday life, architecture, or stylistic bravura. This repositioning of the eye was assisted, some would even say highjacked, by the captions that went with each work – 'Celestial Lightscape', 'Mythoscape', 'Tamed Wilderscape', each one differently emphasising aspects of an image. In their waywardness the captions offered some new, verbal dimension to images that, in some cases, had been on display so long that, through overfamiliarity, their visual impact had faded to that of the electric sockets on the wall.

In 2005 I planned an exhibition to replace "Sites for the Eyes" and its successor, a show of historical Japanese arts and crafts. Whilst preparing the exhibition of landscapes, I was aware that there was another show in storage waiting to be (dis)played. I came across a large number of

Dunedin Public Art Gallery, "War and Peace", including Peter Roche's *Female Sentry* (1990), photograph: the author.

images of conflict, but, by contrast, an even more plentiful array of scenes of peace and tranquillity. The theme itself was given to me by an engraving by Agostino Carracci, showing Mars, the youthful God of War, being somewhat contemptuously dismissed from the presence of Peace and Plenty by the armed wisdom of Minerva. Whereas "Sites for the Eyes" had been posited on a traditional genre of Western art history, "War and Peace" would be a more overtly thematic show. Here prints and paintings would hang alongside each other justified by a curatorial logic that defied the genres. Newspaper cartoons would be found with landscapes, the high with the low. The lines of 'pictures' would be punctuated by sculpture.

There were a number of aspects to the curatorial logic behind this show. To satisfy the desire for order it was designed in four sections; three chronological - older prints and drawings, material related to the First World War, and images referring to the Second. The fourth section was a well of 'peace', dominated by scenes of tranquillity – landscapes, still-lifes, formal geometric abstracts. Yet this order was constantly interrupted, making it elusive. Two sculptures by Peter Roche – *Male Sentry* and *Female Sentry* (both 1990), harshly triangular painted steel faces, blared discordantly and

Dunedin Public Art Gallery, "War and Peace" including David Armitage's *The Wrestlers* (1967) and Raoul Bigazzi's *The Wrestlers* (c. 1928), photograph: the author.

flashed lights when any visitor broke a laser beam, creating a constant, but irregular, mayhem of alarm and anxiety. One half gallery was given over to Andrew Drummond's installation entitled *Sentinel* (1984), where an enigmatic figure creeps away from a forest of blasted trees, not unlike those shelled stumps among the puddled moonscape of Paul Nash's *Mudheaps after Shelling* (1917-18) in the neighbouring gallery.

My major curatorial intervention was to posit between the 'War' and the 'Peace' the uneasy status of the 'sentry/sentinel':

SENTRIES
Sentries guard the good life,
The land, the larder, laughter.
Sentries are on watch
For signs and shadows,
The forerunners of death.
Sentries give warning,
Point the way to safety,
Prepare to defend their own.

In addition to these three 'subjects' – war, peace, and watchfulness - threaded through the exhibition were images in which the imagination of the visitor was more stretched to find associations. One wall displayed Stanley Hayter's etching and lithograph of *Angels Wrestling* (1950), David Armitage's brutal painting of *The Wrestlers* (1967) and Barry Cleavin's complex etching of *Heroic Torsoes Attempting Resurrection* (1966), before which Raoul Bigazzi's carrara marble *The Wrestlers* flexed their muscles on the gallery floor. Elsewhere were images of broken relationships, of a marriage stretched with the bitter tensions of 'permanence'.[4]

The show was hung almost regardless of 'quality'. Thematic hangs are more democratic than the permanent display of the masterpiece. There is always a reason for a less aesthetically pleasing piece to be in a collection. That reason often has a story behind it that says something – more or less unflattering – about the collectors. I chose to bring out of the shadows of storage F Pearse's *Nurse Cavell Going to Her Execution* (1918) and Robert Hawcridge's *Bugler at Gallipoli* (1919). Both are scarcely what might be called 'gallery' pieces, but they have interesting stories to tell, both historical and artistic, and have proved of great fascination to visitors.

It was my curatorial intention to give those visitors a multiple experience: a chronological history of war, an opportunity to compare images of violence with those of peace and plenty, to identify for themselves the shifting emphasis on the romance and heroism of conflict and the variety of pleasures of leisure and work, the paradoxical aspects of the Christian story of death and redemption, the male inclined to fight and the female to nurture, and yet other associations for the visitors freely to create in their own imaginations. In this respect it was important there was no catalogue essay to present potted pointers to superficial 'meanings'.

It was also my intention to say something about the collection itself – the heterogeneous nature of the art in storage. The permanent collection says something about the history of the city of Dunedin, the culture of the Europeans in the south of the South Island of New Zealand, but also something about what they share with other settler collections around the former outposts of the British Empire, an empire carved out of the world by violence in the name of peaceful exploitation and Christian civilisation. The richness and paucity of the collection reflects its randomness, its imperial origins, its unwillingness to come face to face with its location in the South Pacific. This helter-skelter of images reflects the patchwork of our past, but above all highlights the particular way the acquisitions committees saw their brief – to adhere to Europe, to the canon of Western art, to wars and conflicts being waged far away, to turn a blind eye to conflicts close to home – there are no images of the nineteenth-century New Zealand Land Wars, of strikes and local social confrontations.

In *Art and the Power of Placement* [5] Victoria Newhouse makes much of the ways in which curators may effect an aesthetic appreciation of art. She compares various displays of the same travelling exhibition, "Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids", shown in three different locations in 1999-2000. She contrasts the theatrical settings of the pieces in Paris to resemble the tombs in which the objects were found, whereas at the Met in New York Dorothea Arnold singled out objects for aesthetic attention, emphasising the qualities of the few and the socially mundane character of the many. In both cases, however, the curator attempted a decorative hang, though their intentions were different.

In his positive review of Newhouse's book Richard Dorment[6] praises both the decorative hang and the chronological display, but castigates what he calls "hard-core thematic presentations" – "about five years ago a fad for thematic hanging swept through the museum world like a virus."[7] His main complaint is that "once a museum places a picture in a particular setting it can be very difficult to see it in a different way."[8] He goes on to point out, a little nostalgically, that in his opinion Jackson Pollock's paintings looked superb either in the artist's original studio, where they filled the space, or in the collector Ben Heller's apartment in New York in the 1960s, where they enclosed the lounge and could be seen to intimate advantage. These were what might be called site-specific hangs, with an emphasis on their aesthetic preciousness or their fashionable and decorative time-specific 'rightness'. I have no doubt that, in one sense, both Dorment and Newhouse are right. In those settings the paintings may well have been arresting, offering a particular visual delectation that it would never again be possible to capture. But equally, I would argue, those same works may be placed to different advantage in different settings with different company: the virtues of the one do not preclude the virtues of the other.

Are works of art always to be seen only in one setting, the same works in the same place with the same lighting and same company, offering us a singular way of being seen, their potential significance slowly atrophied by reverence? Any collection does a disservice to its holdings by incarcerating images in a prison house of the permanent hang.

The virtue of the thematic exhibition, it seems to me, is to be able to refresh our sight of art, to reinvigorate images by re-presentation in fresh company and novel contexts. 'Thematic' does not

mean random, but the telling of a story, or, in the case of "War and Peace", a variety of interconnected stories, stories that will be recreated in new ways by each and every visitor. Curatorial intentions there may be, but they will always be ignored, misunderstood, randomly selected. In particular those curatorial intentions should open up possibilities of seeing, rather than closing them down. The sensitivity that Dorment demands of a curator, quite rightly, is not undervalued by the thematic hang, but directed towards different, less historically hackneyed ends.

The day of the permanently hung permanent collection is past. *Vive la différance!*

1 Quoted in Judith Stein, "Sins of Omission: Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum", Art in America,* 81 (October 1993),110.
2 Foreshadowed in a speech by Priscilla Pitts on her appointment as gallery director in 1998.
3 See Stein (1993), 110-115.
4 These personal 'wars' were illustrated with three 1980 etchings by Jeffrey Harris, *What a Fool, The Storm* and *Next to Nothing,* and Bryan James's coloured woodblock print *The Anniversary* (1974).
5 Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2005).
6 Richard Dorment, "On Hanging", *New York Review of Books* (September 22, 2005),16-20.
7 Dorment (2005),16.
8 Op.cit.

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