

## Gathering

# Benjamin Armstrong

Project Space  
RMIT University  
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by Ruth Learner

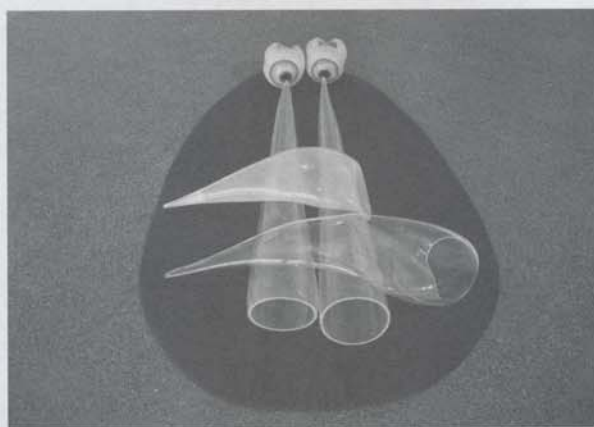
Benjamin Armstrong's *Gathering* is about singular vision. The works are muscular and dark, trumpeting and cloudy; yet all are tunnelled and rendered in glass, so tread carefully. These sculptures are animated specimens from his ongoing series of ink drawings. Shown at TCB Art Inc in 2002 and RMIT Project Space in 2003, these earlier works offered us a domain that is inhabited by the eye – each drawing a discrete scene from this world. Although in the drawings Armstrong's eyes were composed within landscape, they had an oblique relationship to it; peeping out from the beneath the ground, glimpsing space and reclining from framed outlooks.

With *Gathering*, Armstrong literally turns this obliqueness by degrees, establishing a direct viewpoint: the landscape becomes the gallery space. Armstrong's internal vision has come out into the world, at times manifest as traces (suggestive of eyes) as in the pair of smoky glass cones, *Evidence*. A few of the pieces are placed on elevated and ground-level cloth stages constructed by Armstrong, which have the appearance of honed armature from a medical museum. The wax eyeballs too are reminiscent of anatomical representation, evoking preservation and an exploration of 'divine architecture'<sup>1</sup>. The stages could also indicate a smooth transition from the inked, landscaped domain of the drawings. The slender legs and finely scaffolded spherical platforms ultimately enhance the singularity of colliding viewpoints, rogue sight and slumped spectacle. There is no let up from the eyes' relentless longing, their searching gaze. Rather than looking away to escape this melancholia, the sheer beauty of the objects captivates us. The further we explore, the more likely we are to encounter ourselves.

Bill Viola's 1986 video work *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* suggests a similar exploration (in a very different medium). His camera stares into the eyes of fish and owls probing for a connection, for some insight into this other species. What he captures though is merely a reflection in miniature. '...the closer you get into looking into another eye, the larger your reflected image becomes on that eye, blocking the very view within which you were trying to see... The Greeks... called the pupil the "puppet",

Below: Benjamin Armstrong  
*Remnant*, 2002/05

Blown glass, fabric, steel, wood & wax  
30 cm (h), 80 cm (w), 115 cm (l)  
Image courtesy the artist

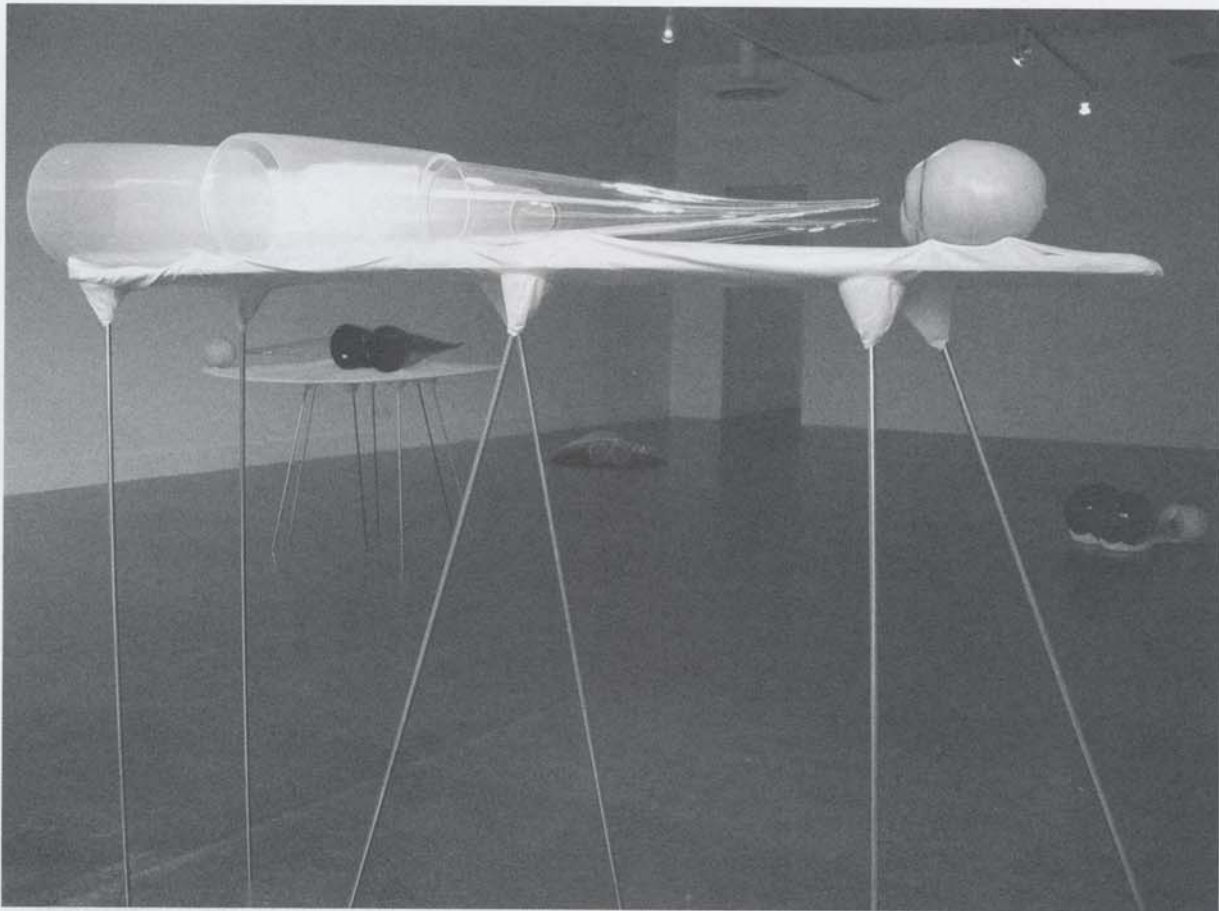


referring to the little person you see reflected on it.'<sup>2</sup> This inability to enter the other's world is most apparent in Armstrong's work. Yet it is also in Classical mythology that we find insight.

In Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, the blindness wrought upon Oedipus by his own hands is an embodiment of the blindness of his ill-fated path. *Gathering* evokes similar paths. Perhaps the incestuous memory is evident in Armstrong's forms that meld eyeballs with breasts with testicles, which emanate the fragile vision. The sensuality is palpable in glass when it is full blown, and again in glass that is flaccid. Rather than the smashing glass of Greek high-drama, in *Gathering* vision bends and contorts. It is this amorality that locates Armstrong's work in a contemporary setting.

In *King Oedipus*, Sophocles' Chorus acts as a mouthpiece for the audience, expressing the word of God and of the common good, giving the drama its ethical framework and offering relief from the relentless tragedy. The *Gathering* offers no such relief. Its beauty draws us in; its vulnerability repels us. It does not present a moral fable but rather an examination of an eternal and internal

Below: Benjamin Armstrong, *Gathering*, 2005 (installation shot)  
 Closest work: *Crossing*, 2003/05. Blown glass, fabric, steel, wood & wax  
 128 cm (h), 45 cm (w), 169 cm (l). Image courtesy the artist



dialogue between subject and object. In this it is open ended, for we cannot identify the object of its gaze.

Rather than loitering aimlessly, Armstrong's wanderers have intent. Their resolute life suggests the poetic manifestation of 'presence in absence' – that is perceptual states (such as the imagination) making something 'present' that seems to be 'absent' from the environment. Ultimately, such singularity of vision dwells in uncertain territory. In this context, the eye is neither a pure receiver nor pure projector of images. Armstrong has overcome these dual concerns by embodying the mind and body in the form of eyeballs and animated vision. Suggestive of Merleau-Ponty's lived body, the elements of perception are inseparable. 'Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.'<sup>3</sup> Consequently, memory does not 'project' itself on the present but is 'relived' through temporal perception. The body has its own consciousness, which is also rooted in perception.

*Gathering* evokes such breathing memory traces<sup>4</sup>, fusing representations of time and space into a form of pure

perception. Although Armstrong has created a gathering of sorts, it is made up of individuals. Each set of eyes is yearning for some thing familiar – a past, present and future that belongs to it alone. In this way, Armstrong leads us to reflect upon our own desires.

**Ruth Learner is a writer and editor.**

<notes>

<sup>1</sup> To do with aesthetic and theological understanding rather than medical practice. Kemp, M & Wallace, M, *Spectacular Bodies*, exhibition catalogue of *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*, Hayward Gallery, London, 19 October 2000-14 January 2001, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Viola, exhibition catalogue, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1999, p. 159, in exh. cat. of *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*, Hayward Gallery, London, 19 October 2000–14 January 2001, p 206.

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M (1945, translated 1958), *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Collin Smith, Routledge Classics, London, 2002, p.235.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Semon a pioneer of memory theory determined three stages of memory: *engraphy* – encoding information into memory; *engram* – the 'memory trace' of the nervous system; *epchory* – the process of activating a memory. See Schacter, D.L., *Searching for Memory*, BasicBooks, New York, 1996, p.57-58.