

Don Driver

b.1930

Taranaki Polytechnic

Don Driver's art is like one massive bulimic hurl filled with half-digested bits of 20th century art history: Kenneth Noland's Colour Field paintings, Picasso's Primitivism and wit, Kurt Schwitters's Dada constructions, Robert Rauschenberg's Pop art Combines, Marcel Duchamp's Readymades – the list goes on. Driver's achievement has been to meld all these influences, perfectly balanced and working together, to create something distinctly his own.

Although Driver has largely worked from the isolation of his New Plymouth studio, he had a formative experience as an artist when he travelled to New York in 1965. In the 1960s, New York was the art capital of the world. There had been a huge amount of creative energy and activity since World War II. In painting, Pop art was beginning to seize the initiative following the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism. The early 1960s saw a flurry of 'actions' that seemed to question the assumption that art belonged on tidy gallery walls. Allan Kaprow's Happenings, Claes Oldenburg's *Dime Store* project and Robert Rauschenberg's slightly earlier Combines all revelled in messiness. Driver seems to have been drawn to the central creative idea that Rauschenberg, Oldenburg and Kaprow shared: the elevation of refuse or rubbish as the prime material for art.

PS Handle With Care certainly has affinities with Rauschenberg's Combines. But Driver may also have seen work in New York by the influential Italian artist, Alberto Burri, whose assemblages of burlap (hessian-like material) bags and burnt plastic had so fascinated Rauschenberg during a stay in Italy in 1952–53. Distressed hessian and found tarpaulins would become a staple material for Driver and, as you can see in *PS Handle With Care*, he also experimented with melting plastic. When you consider all these cross-currents of influence, you can see that Driver's abstract assemblages of often absurd found objects were in tune with ideas that were in the air in the early 1960s.

The term 'found object' describes an artwork put together from undisguised, though usually aesthetically modified, objects not normally considered artistic. Usually these objects are mundane and utilitarian, or have been discarded as rubbish. The idea of dignifying such materials in the art gallery context was originally a shocking challenge to the consensus about accepted distinctions between what is and isn't art, although it is now widely accepted as an artistic practice.

Assemblage is when a work of art is produced using found objects; a bit like a three-dimensional collage. For instance, much recent installation art essentially has been assemblage on a large scale, often using architectural space.

With its distressed fabrics, predominance of black and implied cross form, *PS Handle With Care* has a sombre appearance, inviting comparison with Colin McCahon's work from the period. But, typically, there is a playful quality to Driver. The work is about visual and linguistic puns. The cruciform with black curtains suggests a window, perhaps referring to the traditional conception of an easel painting as a 'window on the world'. But Driver's window is boarded up and, with sly acknowledgement that we will be viewing it in an art gallery, he asks us to handle his rubbish/art with care. He even provides a handle for the purpose.

Andrew Paul Wood

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