

for Deirdre Hassed

Alan Loney

for Illuminate, an exhibition by Deirdre Hassed, at Kinross Arts & Spirituality Centre, Toorak, Melbourne, 3 October 2014.

it gives me great pleasure to speak, if only for a few moments, of the art & craft of Deirdre Hassed – I think it was William Morris who said that he was not interested in any art that was not also, and at the same time, a craft – in the works around us this evening, are works of art that depend utterly on the history and the spirit of a craft –

but before I talk about the works on display, I'd like to go back a little in time to when Deirdre and I first met – the place was Auckland, New Zealand, the year was either 1990 or 1991, and the occasion was a kind of Book Arts Fair, run I think, at least in part, by the Association of Book Crafts, based in Auckland, and concentrating mainly on bookbinding and calligraphy – at the Fair various people could be seen demonstrating letterpress printing, typesetting by hand, performing a range of procedures in bookbinding, and that special brand of handwriting that we call calligraphy –

also on display, was Deirdre, seated at a broad table, out from which strung a queue of people, all lined up, waiting for something – that 'something' was extraordinary, and I will always remember it – on the table in front of Deirdre were little piles of small pieces of paper, in various sizes and colors; also there was a row of bottles of inks in an assortment of colors; alongside these was a row of pens & quills, each of which had differently shaped nibs and which made a different quality of line when inked – and lastly, and what was not visible, was Deirdre's craft, from which she was able to draw on a considerable range of styles of lettering, which of course, we can see around the gallery walls today –

as each person in the queue stepped up to the table, Deirdre greeted them, asked them their name and how to spell it, asked another question about themselves, and on the basis of this small human interchange she selected one of the pieces

of paper, one of the pens, one of the colored inks, decided upon a writing style, and wrote that person's name on the chosen paper, and gave it to them – I had never seen anything like it before, but it did tell me that this almost unknown calligrapher had special talent –

well, that was about 25 years ago, and my great respect for Deirdre's work has increased over the years – since then, I have been privileged to have printed a number of editions of her calligraphy (and some are on display in this exhibition), and delighted that in turn she has provided me with a set of large redrawn Greek letters, based on one of the first ever Greek type designs made by Nicolas Jenson in Venice in 1471 –

so, what is calligraphy – is it any more than simply, handwriting – in all of the works we see today are letters of the alphabet, some would say we see text though I would have a problem or two with that, and we all might say that each work delivers a kind of message, and that most of these messages are derived from a range of religious, philosophical & poetic traditions, and all have something to do with how we might understand ourselves, others and the world at large in order to live a good life –

but if all we wanted was the message, then surely we could just print it out on the computer in our favourite font and bluetack it onto the wall – why bother decorating it with fancy flourishes – we've got the message, and the rest is puffery, isn't it – it is the same with the fine press book, the kind of book I make – if all we want is the story or the poem, why do we need beautiful handmade paper or complex bindings or intricately calligraphed capital letters – and yet I sometimes think that our society has forgotten Marshall McLuhan's insight that, when we read a message, we also experience the medium in which the message is embedded – if we asked a hundred calligraphers to write an old and common message that we are all familiar with, Know Thyself, we would have one message, but a hundred different occasions for experiencing that message differently –

here, the words on the wall are certainly words we can agree with or disagree with – or we might love or feel uncomfortable with the style & language of them – or we might feel happy to have these words in our house but not those words – but the words are there not only to look thru, as if their meaning is somehow behind the letters, but also to look at – we can look at their sizes & shapes, the way the letters intersect and overlay each other – we can dwell on how, within a single work, different writing styles contrast with and play off against each other – we can watch how writing and drawing intermingle on the surface, or seem to almost merge with each other – we can follow the shifts of color, or hue or density, even in a single letter or across a row of words – and we can speculate on how meanings emerge and subside into other colors, other shapes, other forms made by pen or brush on the surface of the papers that bear them –

a painter friend of mine, an ex-pat living in New York, tells me that one needs to be in front of a good painting for forty-five minutes before that painting really opens up to you – similarly, these work will tolerate a lot of looking, and I hope over the next month that many of you will have the time for much more than a cursory glance as you move from one patch of wall to the next one –

the art of handwriting is very old – American author Rochelle Altman puts it at about ‘the fourth millennium BCE’ when ‘the growth in both complexity and distance of trade created a need for some form of record-keeping’ – ‘there is no need for writing’ she says ‘when everybody speaks the same language’ – and the surfaces upon which writing was done were clay tablets, papyrus, animal skins, tree bark, and walls –

the modern art of calligraphy comes from a modern development – the great tradition of handwritten books which has given us such books as The Book of Kells, the Great Bible of Mainz, a great many Books of Hours, and hundreds of handwritten books from the Near East, Far East and Western Europe over some 1500 years, was effectively over barely 200 years after the advent of printing in the middle of the fifteenth century – its revival, along with the revival of craft as a meaningful, life-affirming activity, occurred in the late 19th century and the per-

son responsible for it was William Morris, and the return of calligraphy to the crafts was simply part of the whole Arts & Crafts movement –

for a long time, the revival of calligraphy involved a return to basics, to the great historical letterforms of the past, and most of that work was done by people like Edward Johnston, Alfred Fairbanks, Graily Hewitt, Rudolf Koch and Anna Simons – later crucial figures are Donald Jackson (who fronted a BBC television series titled *The Story of Writing*) and, more recently still, Thomas Ingmire whose extensions of writing into drawing, painting & back again, have revolutionised the craft in the last 20 to 30 years –

Deirdre Hasted's work spans all of these possibilities, from standard historical letterforms to new possibilities of the shaping of letters, or words, of clusters of words – and for her, the words in these works matter – their forms come out of her meditations on the words themselves – I have not rehearsed tonight her CV or her long history of exhibitions and involvements, nor the ancestral line of her teachers – all that can be got from her website at [Calligraphic Works](#) – what I wanted to do was to situate the craft of calligraphy as art, however briefly, and to talk a little about how these wonderful works can be looked at and absorbed – it is now my great pleasure to declare this exhibition open –

thank you