

arthur wicks

INSIDE / OUTSIDE FORWARD / BACKWARDS

Over several decades, Arthur Wicks has explored the paradoxes of contemporary life. His prolific output has encompassed painting, printmaking, performance and sculpture. *Inside/Outside: Forward/Backwards* presents a survey of Arthur Wicks' work, focusing on several of the key themes that have informed his practice: the relationship of the organic and the machine, the individual and society, motion and stasis.

In the centre of this exhibition rests a helicopter, its rotors gently spinning. It is unclear whether it has just landed or if it is preparing for takeoff. Inside, a figure draped in a cast-off suit idly spins the pedals, slumped over with fatigue from the effort of propelling this unwieldy contraption. Of course, it is the machine that is in control. The engine that drives the rotors also spins the pedals, and the passenger trapped inside is just another element of the apparatus. This figure has been cast from Arthur Wicks' own body: the artist is caught in his own machine. But this machine has not been constructed in a factory: it has grown in a workshop, it has evolved and its curving lineaments bear the marks of the artist's own hands.

The helicopter, *Icarus Ascending* (2009), is part of a family, too, the newest member of a sequence of vehicles. *The Artist trapped in Artaud's Cage* (2002/03) and *Premonitions of Conflict* (2008) hold the same uncanny figure, versions of Arthur Wicks' doppelgänger. Their bodywork is also carved, and they carry the bumps and bruises of years of travelling. *Premonitions of Conflict*, in particular, bears the scars of one of Arthur Wicks' most strenuous journeys, through the



Peace Car through Europe
at the Reichstag, Berlin
1990

Netherlands and Germany two decades ago, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Then, driving through the shadows of the Cold War and World War II, its protective carapace would have appeared a natural response to the pressures of history and war; now, its armour and weaponry are themselves relics, anachronistic survivals from an earlier stage of the evolution of the artist's vehicles. These machines seem to have been tested to the limits of their endurance. Even at rest they hover on the knife's edge between function and falling apart; in motion, they impose a wary caution on their audience.

Other machines, the ladder (*Free Fall: Slow Motion 2* 2008/09) and the boat (*Ship of Fools* 2009), feature miniature versions of the artist's figure, performing the same repetitive functions, rowing and swaying, forward and backwards. Like Sisyphus, endlessly pushing a rock uphill only for it to roll back from the very summit, these smaller figures go through the motions of their pointless tasks, over and over, with no end in sight and no goal accomplished. They are even closer to the verge of collapse than the larger mannequins. In the poignancy of their situation, constrained within machinery that has reduced them to mere cogs, they move the viewer to pity and even a recognition of kinship. Like the albatross skeleton in its cage (*Free Fall: Slow Motion* 1994/96), suspended and incomplete, stripped of its wings, all Arthur Wicks' proxies are endangered species.

Around these sculptural machines, a group of stereoscopic photographs, from the *Notes from the Solstice Voyeur* series (1975-2009), provide a record of the travels of the artist and his mannequins, past and future. The empty plains, the green coast and the world-city that stretches out to the horizon have all been photographed segment by segment, and stitched together into a single omniscient view. In these montages, the profusion of detail within a single location expands to take over an entire planet. Such images are, in their own way, handmade artefacts, just as much as the organic machines. They invoke the presence of one



TOP
Solstice Observatory
1987, mixed media sculpture

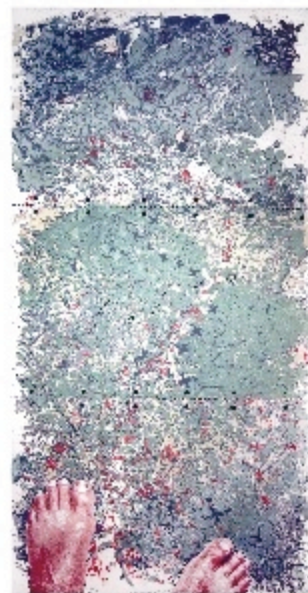
BOTTOM
Icarus Ascending
2009, mixed media sculpture

of Arthur Wicks' artistic personae, the 'Solstice Voyeur' who observes the world from the vantage point of its closest and its farthest distance from the sun.

Staring into these photographic vortices, the fragments seem to spin of their own volition, an optical illusion that echoes the helicopter rotors and the swaying motion of the puppet on the ladder. Overwhelmed by vertigo, it is no wonder that the passenger slumps inside the helicopter or the armoured car, barely supported by his vehicle's embracing framework, exhausted as much by the mental strain of absorbing his visions as by sheer physical exertion.

More detailed records of Arthur Wicks' travels can also be seen in the smaller prints that accompany this exhibition, drawn from several decades of work in the collection of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery. In these works, the artist makes his presence known only partially: not through the full-body casts that inhabit the machine sculptures, but in traces. The imprints of his hands rest on either side of *Collecting a Stone*, *Alchemist's Ridge CA* (1983) or *Untitled* (1977), his feet stand over *4 Steps, 3 Times* (1978) and *Two figures in a landscape* (1983) as if holding the image in place, fixing it on the wall to prevent these records too from spinning away from the viewer's gaze. Other images draw heavily upon the artist's earlier performances and provide images to repeat them, to carry out again the same rituals that are documented in works such as *Sand memories III* (1978) or *Four Seasons Guide* (1977). They hold the promise, or the threat, of the same repetition that has exhausted his sculptural proxies.

Several other prints on display explore in detail the themes that have evolved over time into the machine sculptures. In *Kreuzberg Water Kit* (1985) and *Boatmans Kit* (1985), smaller versions of the fusion of machine and organic can be seen as if in blueprint format, diagrams for the assembly of lungs and valves, tubes and veins. In the helicopter or the armoured car, the curves and



TOP
Tent Over Bethanien
1983, screenprint, sand

BOTTOM
Two Figures in a Landscape
1983, screenprint

irregularities of natural forms mesh uneasily yet functionally with the engines that propel them. So too do many of the prints bring together and unify components both physiological and mechanistic. In *Eye of the Witness Kit* (1985) or *Tent over Bethanien* (1983), we can glimpse an alternate union of genetics and engineering, in which radios are spliced into amorphous flesh and skeletal structures are grown to cover city streets. Here, the artist evokes the possibility of a weird science, where disciplines merge and cross-fertilise; just as in his artistic practice he blends medium with medium, performance and sculpture with painting and photography.

This reconciliation of themes and ideas that at first might seem disconnected or even antagonistic, in the world views they represent, recurs throughout Arthur Wicks' work. He is a master at setting up tensions with no intention of resolving them. In Hegel's theory of the development of thought, two apparently opposing ideas, the thesis and the antithesis, are unified in a single synthesis, which itself then provides the basis for the next stage of contradiction and resolution. So too in Arthur Wicks' work, ideas which appear inherently contradictory are brought together. Opposing ideas such as motion and stasis, the organic and the machine, are brought together and evoked within a single work of art. Arthur Wicks never settles for one or the other, but holds these opposing concepts balanced, and uses the impetus they generate to move on to the next stage. His work is powered not just by physical engines, but by the friction of contradiction.

Stephen Payne
Curator, Exhibitions & Collection
Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2009



TOP
Cultivating Sand Memories #2
1980, screenprint

BOTTOM
Boatmans Kit
1985, etching