

PR BE

FRONT COVER: The Dark Enterprise, 2009 (Detail)

JOHN KELLY

agnew's
GALLERY

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JOHN KELLY PROBE

13th October – 5th November, 2010

INTRODUCTION

By SUE HUBBARD

“There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.”

1984 *George Orwell*

John Kelly's career as an artist has, literally, been built on a milk carton. Born in Bristol, the fourth child of an English mother and an Irish father, he left England for Australia at the age of six months. Part of the exodus of working class migrants who emigrated in search of a more prosperous life, the Kellys settled in the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine where the family expanded to seven children. Though his father, David, worked hard in the local quarry, money was in short supply. Always good at drawing, John attended the local technical school intending to apply for a course in graphic design at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Instead he was encouraged to study fine art but was inhibited by a lack of funds. It was then that his mother entered the *Win-a-wish* competition on the side of a handy milk carton. And hey-presto, just as in the fairy tales, her wish was granted and John Kelly was able to fund his degree in art.

Kelly is proud of the fact that he has three passports: Irish, Australian and British. It allows him to take a broad view. His influences are eclectic and idiosyncratic, less art historical than rooted in Australian history and modernism, particularly the 1940s paintings of Sydney Nolan that retell the tale of the outlaw and bushman Ned Kelly, later immortalized by the novelist Peter Carey. There is a nice irony that John Kelly shares his name with one of Australia's most notorious and admired brigands. For Nolan, Kelly was a metaphor for the fighter and victim, the everyman hero with a passion for freedom who resisted the dictates of the establishment; sentiments that preoccupy his namesake.

Kelly's fragmented cultural heritage has bred an iconoclastic character, anarchic in spirit and independent in thought. His work returns again and again to issues of freedom and control. He takes on the

establishment and punctures bombast wherever he sees it. During the war the famous Australian artist William Dobell had been a camouflage artist ordered to make papier-mâché cows to fool the Japanese bomber pilots into thinking that the Australian airbases were lush green fields full of grazing cattle, while Joshua Smith had to paint cabbages along the runways. Their bizarre story appealed to Kelly's sense of the absurd. The futility of such an enterprise dreamt up by the authorities, juxtaposed with the seriousness which it was supposed to be enacted, seemed to be the perfect metaphor for the follies and foibles of both the state and large institutions.

Cows would become a dominant Kelly motif. In the late 80s he saw an exhibition by Philip Guston and was taken by Guston's dark, cartoonish imagery, even appropriating his dotted lines for his own *Dobell's Cows* paintings. *Cow Up a Tree*, an 8 metre high, four ton bronze sculpture that reproduces one of Dobell's camouflage cows stuck upside down in a gum tree, was shown during Les Champs de la Sculpture on the Champs-Élysées in 1999. The irreverent, surreal humour of this work, based on flood imagery from Australia, caused a sensation.

It was in his Master's dissertation *Simulacrum and Sophistry in Image Making* that Kelly defined the term simulacrum as 'something having merely the appearance of a certain thing without possessing its substance or proper qualities'. This analysis has constantly led him to deconstruct superficial meanings. Alert to pomposity and manipulation by the powers-that-be, he entered into a heated debate with the Australian Council for the Arts who insisted on the use of their logo in return for a small subsidy. This Kelly considered to be a form of branding, a view bolstered by his reading of Naomi Klein's *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs*. This desire for homogeneity by a major arts organisation was, he considered, the antithesis of art. A logo signified conformity, which stood in opposition to the free imagination of the artist. For Kelly being an artist is, above all, a way of thinking about and being in the world. An open term, it is not protected like that of 'dentist' or 'doctor'. It is here that Kelly's thinking echoes something of Joseph Beuys's philosophy. Beuys's famous slogan "Everyone is an artist" was not meant to suggest that we could all be Rembrandt or Renoir but that each of us – whether dentist or doorman – should bring a degree of creative awareness to his or her life.

In 2002 Kelly's exhibition at the Piccadilly Gallery, *Culture Jam*, played with a number of these ideas, ironically incorporating elements of the Australia Council's corporate logo, in response to a bureaucratic letter spelling out its correct usage, into his work. He also produced a set of concrete 'poems' based on his correspondence with them that questioned a newly published document compiled by Saatchi and Saatchi setting out appropriate strategies for the branding and marketing of the arts.

Despite his surreal imagery and, at times, wacky humour, issues of freedom, control and identity lie at the heart of his work. His recent sculptures are starker and more confrontational, though something of the element of play and whimsy still remains in his series of subversive models of art institutions and galleries. *Halo 2007*, a fantasy Irish pavilion designed for the Venice Biennale dangles from the ceiling in the shape of a Celtic Cross, each arm functioning as a gallery space. (The Irish do not, in fact, have a pavilion at the Venice Biennale). While *Mum and Dad @Tate Modern*, his most biographical work, shows two videos of his parents displayed in a model of Tate Modern, their voices criss-crossing like melodic themes, as they discuss what it means to them for their son to be an artist. His Dad, it seems, is not a great fan of his work.

Other of these sculptures are, all together, darker. His use of easels, brushes, wooden paint boxes and portfolio tubes – objects that were once the everyday tools of the average painter – only serve to remind us that for most contemporary artists such artefacts have become largely redundant. *The Probe 2007*, a model of University College, Cork's ambitious Lewis Glucksman Gallery, hangs from the ceiling, part Heath Robinson thingamajig with its long spider legs and part Soviet Luna space probe, circa 1959. It calls to mind the absurdist contraptions of the 1960s Belgian artist Panamarenko, who fused artistic and technological experiments to investigate flight in a series of spectacular and playful structures. Based on Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim in New York, *The Black [Dark] Enterprise 2009* hovers above the gallery floor like something out of Star Wars, threatening world domination. (There are, after all, Guggenheim museums in Berlin, Bilbao, Las Vegas and Venice and one is planned for Abu Dhabi. As a brand Guggenheim will soon be as ubiquitous as McDonalds.)

Great art galleries have now become symbols of national prestige and cultural identity. The minimal spaces, the ubiquitous white walls, the steel and plate glass all emphasise their roles as major institutions. Concealed within Kelly's uncanny replicas are a number of CCTV cameras which, with the stealth of Big Brother's all-seeing eye, silently probe the gallery space around them. Transmitting images back to monitors fixed to the buildings the role of viewer and the viewed is disconcertingly blurred. That *The Probe II*, created for the Guangzhou Triennial in China was bought by the Guangdong Museum of Art also adds another frisson. One wonders if the Chinese saw the irony of buying a work from a western artist that dealt with issues of surveillance.

Questions of freedom and civil liberties are among the most pressing of our times. There is a real danger that in trying to watch everyone in this age of terrorism that we actually watch no-one. Perhaps we should be asking our governments if pervasive surveillance is an effective response to terror and if it is

proportionate to the real risk posed. There is a real danger that it will destroy the very democratic societies it is supposed to be protecting and entrench the kind of corrupt, oppressive regimes that breed fanatical opposition and violence. John Kelly's work, playfully hidden behind a Boy's Own model making veneer and an acerbic wit, addresses these concerns, placing them unashamedly in the public domain.

Sue Hubbard

Sue Hubbard is an award-winning poet, fiction writer and freelance critic. She has published three books of poetry, Everything Begins with the Skin (Enitharmon), Ghost Station (Salt) and The Idea of Islands (Occasional Press), a novel, Depth of Field (Dewi Lewis) and a collection of short stories Rothko's Red (Salt.) Her selected art writings from 1990-2010 have recently been published as Adventures in Art (Other Criteria).



MUM & DAD © TATE MODERN

THE PROBE, 2007

THE DARK ENTERPRISE, 2009

MUM & DAD @ TATE MODERN, 2009

THE WHITE ENTERPRISE, 2009

THE CURATOR, 2009

HALO, 2007



(Detail)

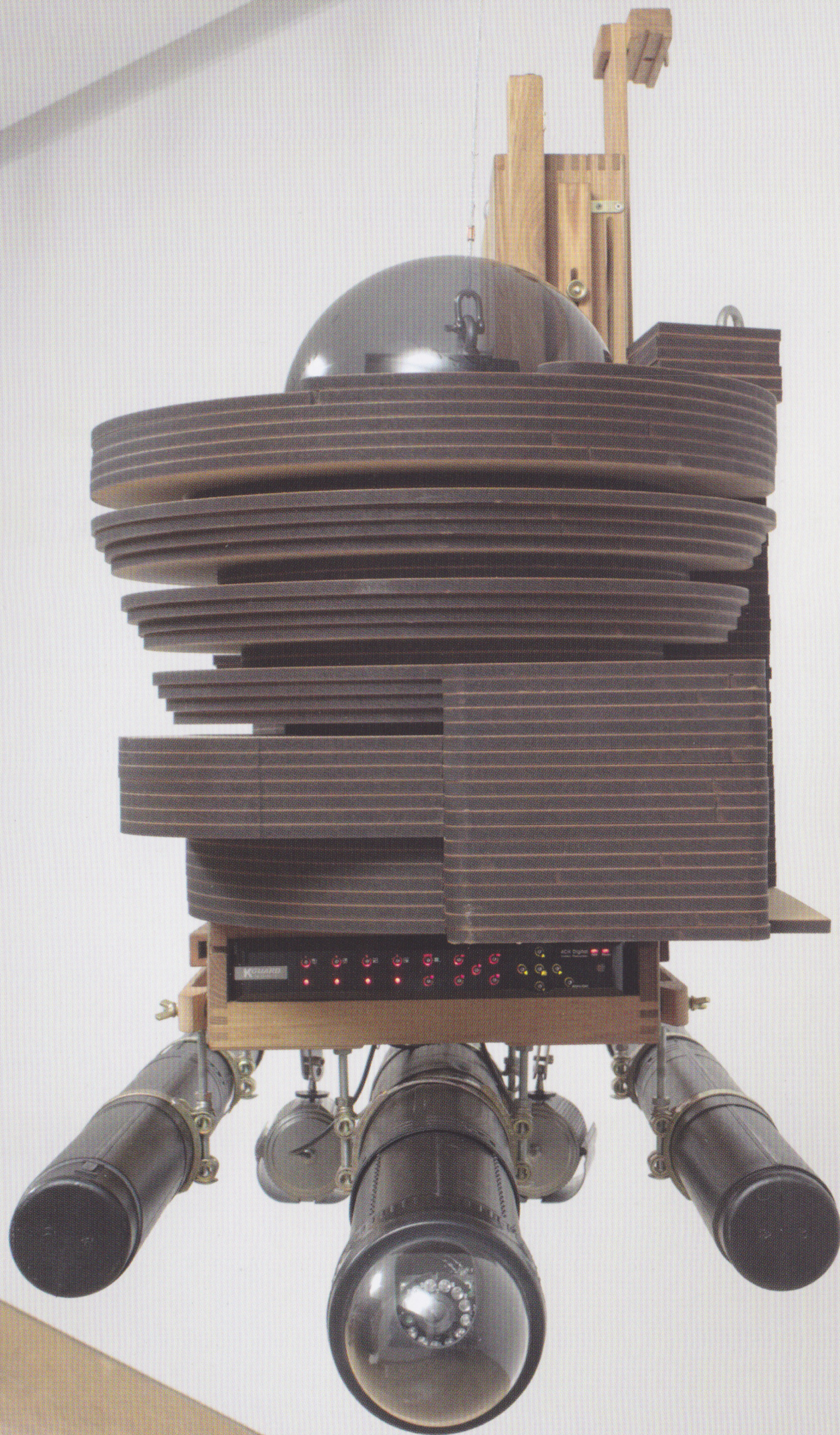
The Probe, 2007





(Detail)

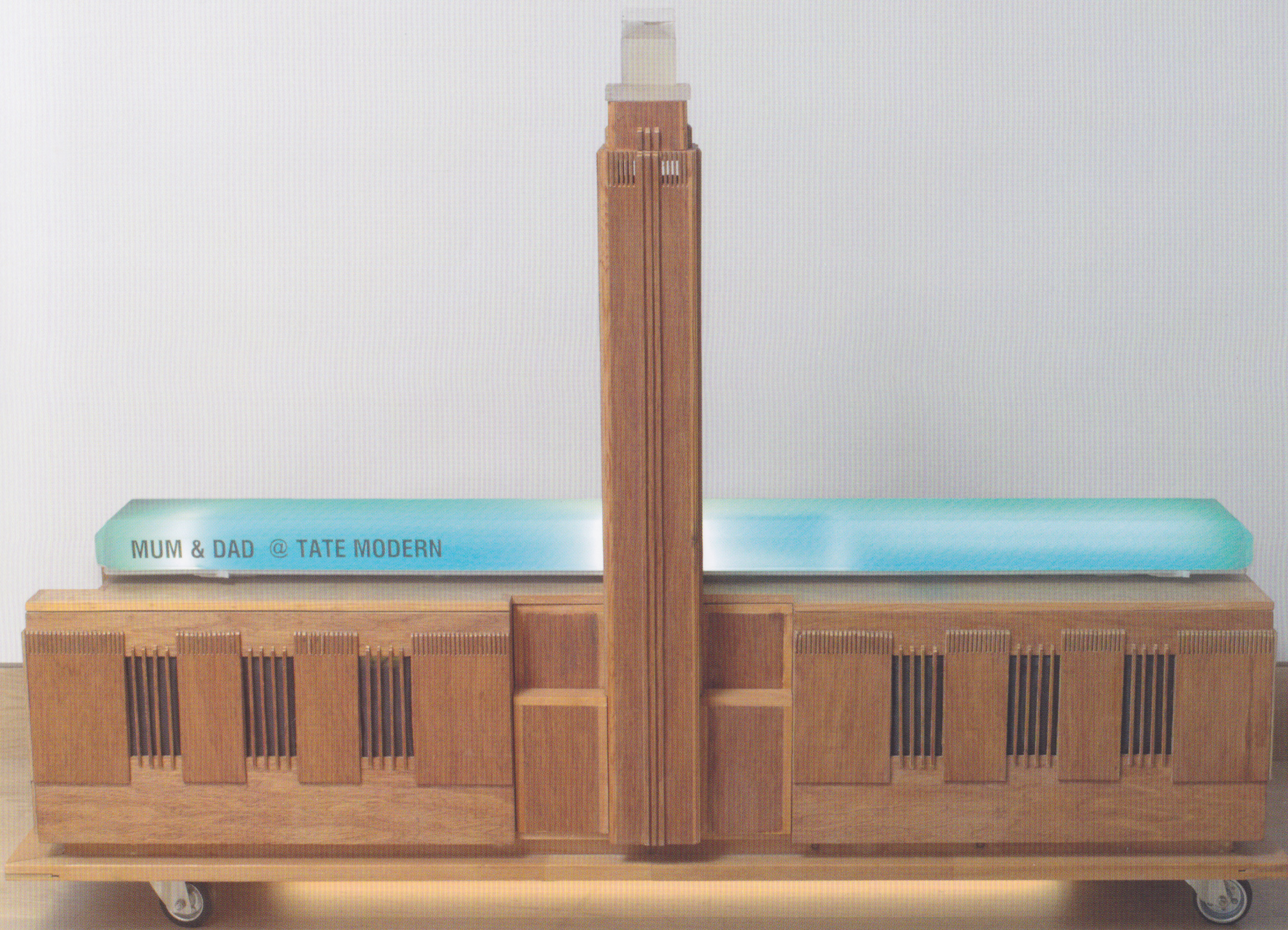
The Dark Enterprise, 2009





(Detail)

Mum & Dad @ Tate Modern, 2009



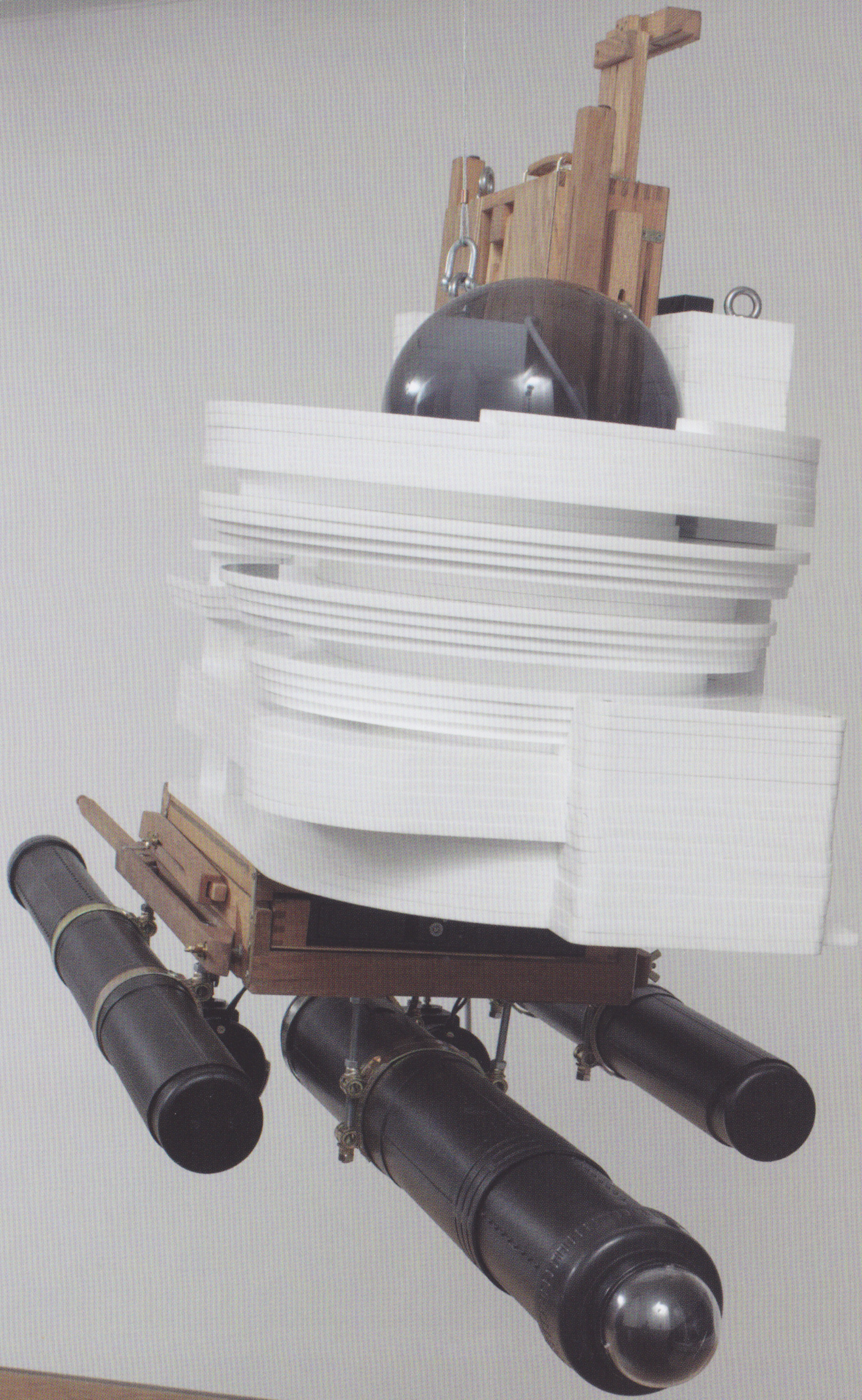
MUM & DAD @ TATE MODERN





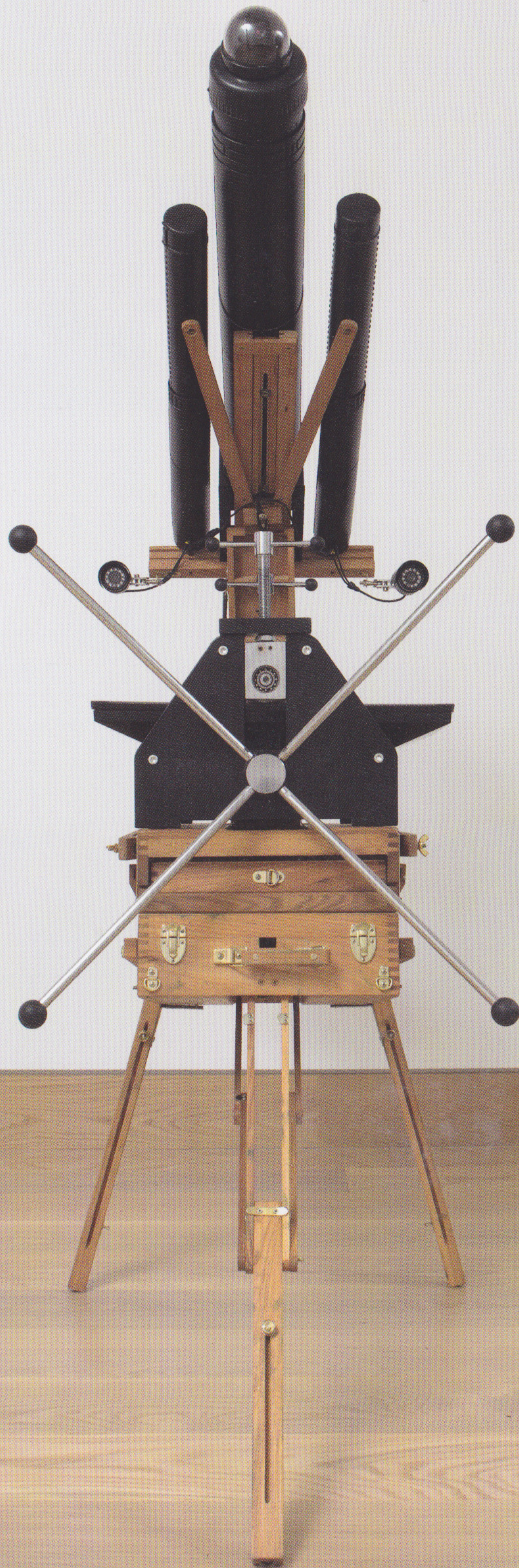
(Detail)

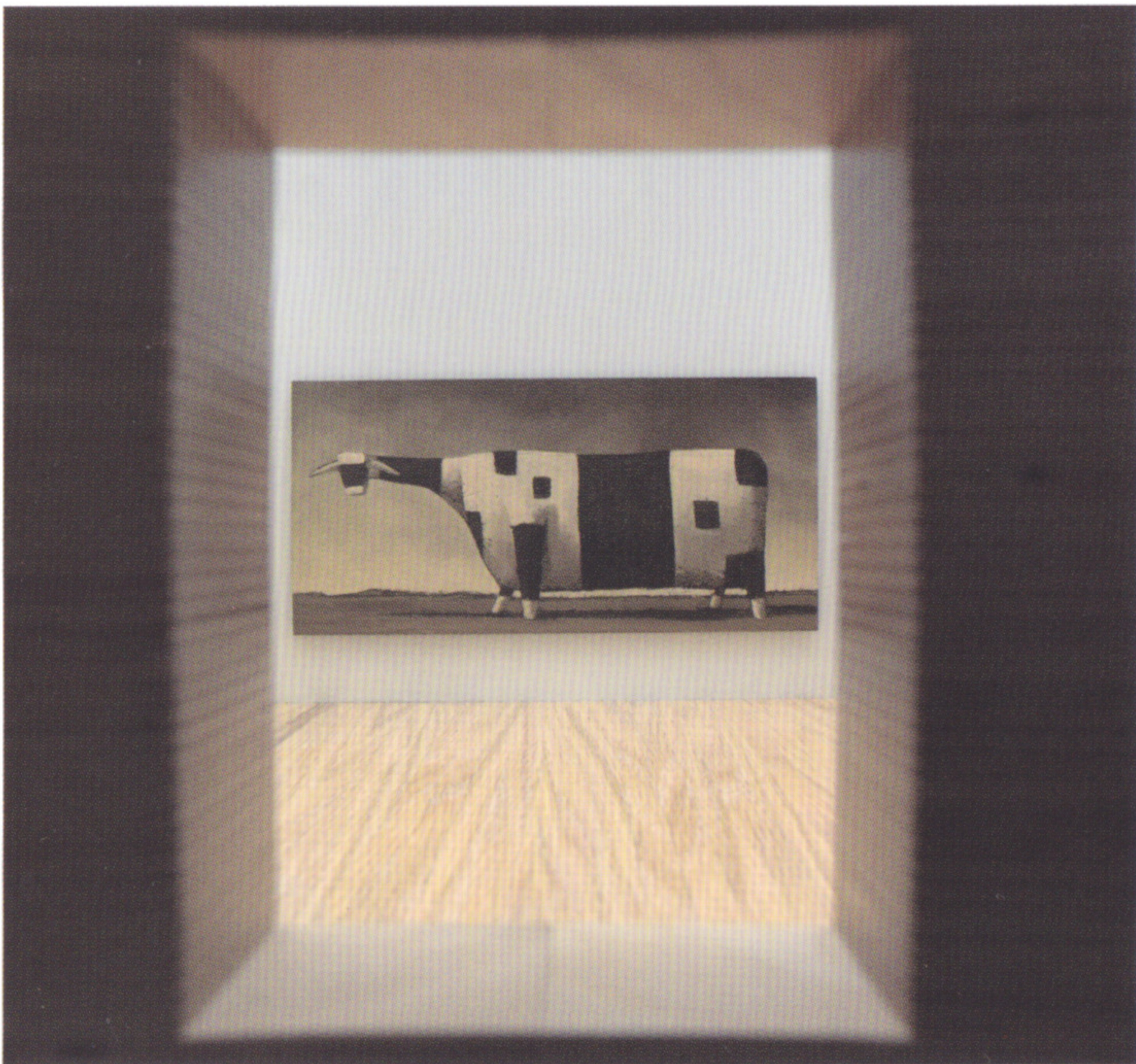
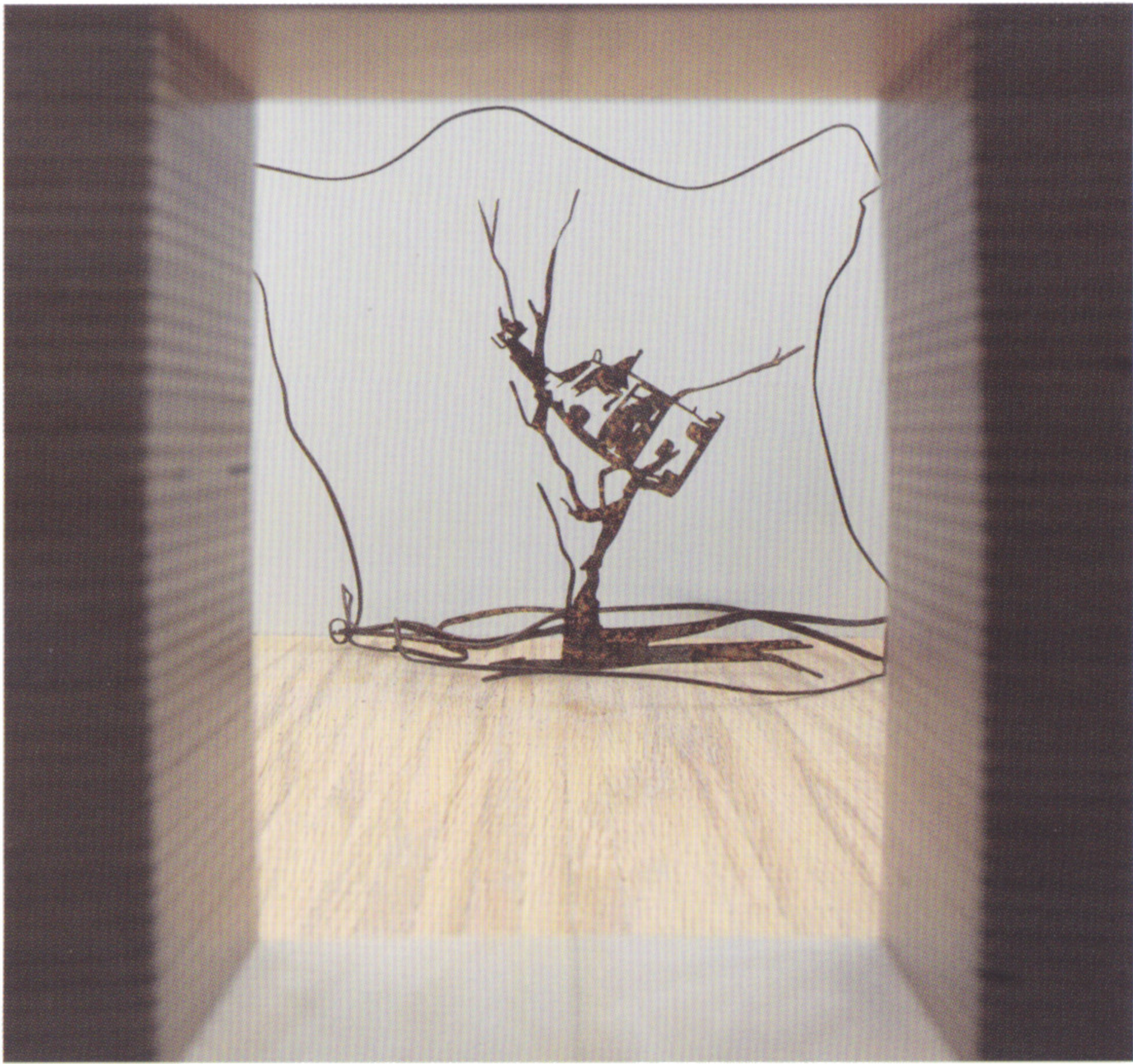
The White Enterprise, 2009





(Detail)





Halo, 2007

(Detail)



SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2009** *Double Bill*, Niagara Galleries, Melbourne
Self Portrait from Afar, Salamanca Art Centre, Hobart
- 2007** *Cow up a Tree*, Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporaine, Nice, France
There was an Australian, and Englishman and an Irishman,
Fenton Gallery, Cork, Ireland
- 2006** *Deconstructing Australia*, McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park, Melbourne
There was an Australian, an Englishman and an Irishman...,
The Piccadilly Gallery, London
- 2005** *Three Cows in a Pile*, Goodenough College, London
Australian Cultural Product, Liverpool Street Gallery, Sydney
Incorrect Usage, The Piccadilly Gallery, London
- 2004** *The Drawing Room*, Project Space, RMIT University, Melbourne
- 2003** *The Nice Paintings – From The Top Paddock*, Liverpool Street Gallery, Sydney
- 2000** *John Kelly*, L'espal centre culturel, Le Mans, France

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2009** *Today I joined the gang in the woods*, Triskel@EBS Substation, Cork
- 2008** *Farewell to Post Colonialism*, The Third Guangzhou Triennial, Guangzhou Museum of Art, China
- 2007** *The Green Fields*, Glastonbury Festival, United Kingdom
Looking Forward – 25 British Artists, Agnew's, London
Den Haag Sculptuur 2007, The Hague, The Netherlands
- 2005** *McClelland Contemporary Sculpture Survey and McClelland Award Exhibition*, McClelland Gallery, Victoria
- 2003** *Fair Game: Art & Sport*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
- 2002** *Parade des Animaux*, Monte Carlo
- 1999** *Les Champs de la Sculpture II*, Paris

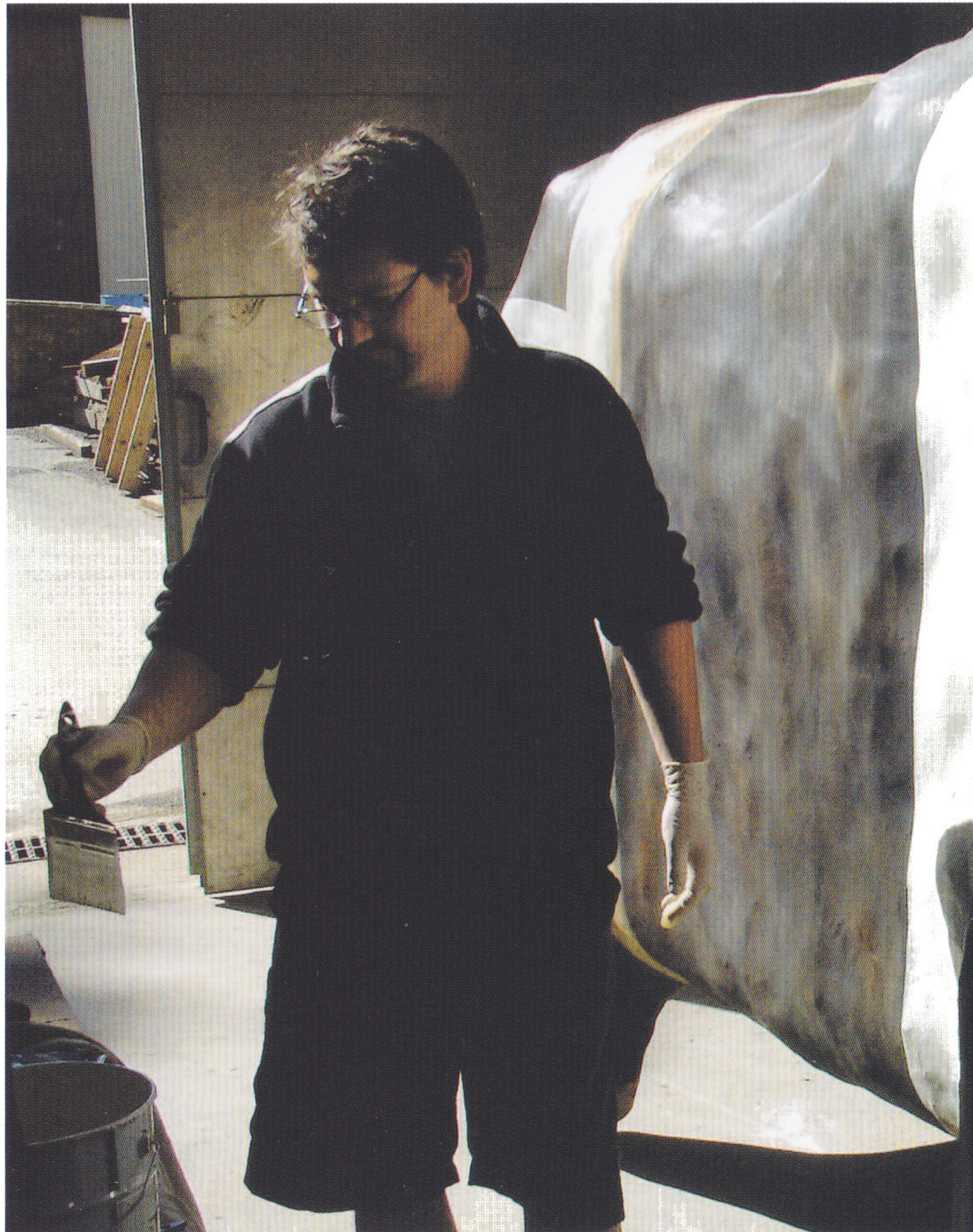
PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Artbank	Australia
Art Gallery of New South Wales	Sydney, Australia
Art Gallery of South Australia	Adelaide, Australia
Ballarat Fine Art Gallery	Victoria, Australia
Benalla Art Gallery	Victoria, Australia
Bendigo Art Gallery	Victoria, Australia
City of Yarra Collection	Victoria, Australia
Deakin University Art Collection	Victoria, Australia
Gold Coast City Art Gallery	Queensland, Australia
Guangdong Museum of Art	Guangzhou, China
Holmes à Court Collection	Western Australia
La Trobe University Collection	Victoria, Australia
Leeuwin Estate	Western Australia
McClelland Sculpture Park and Gallery	Victoria, Australia
Musée Municipal A G Poulain Vernon	Normandy, France
Museum of Victoria	Victoria, Australia
National Gallery of Australia	Canberra, Australia
National Sports Museum	Victoria, Australia
Queensland Art Gallery	Brisbane, Australia
Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery	Tasmania, Australia
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery	Tasmania, Australia
Trinity College Collection	Melbourne, Australia

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