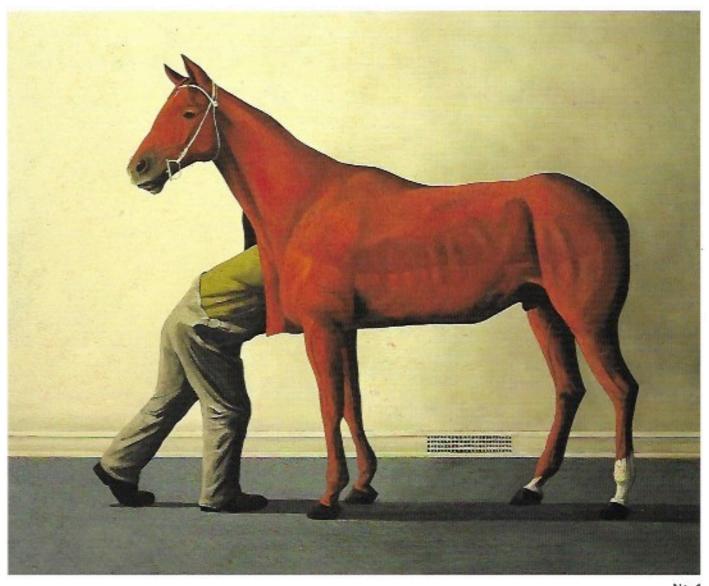# "PAINTING THE DEAD HORSE"



No. 1

# JOHN KELLY

## November 4 - November 29, 1997

# THE PICCADILLY GALLERY

16 Cork Street  London W1    Tel: 0171 629 2875    Fax: 0171 499 0431

Monday - Friday 10 - 5.30    Saturday 10.30 - 1.00

# Biographical Notes

| | |
|---|---|
| 1965 | Born in Bristol. Emigrated to Australia with his family when he was six months old. |
| 1983-85 | Studied at RMIT University, Melbourne, Bachelor of Arts, Majoring in Painting |
| 1992-95 | Masters of Arts, RMIT University |
| 1988, 1994-97 | Travelled in Europe and America |
| 1996-97 | Affiliate Student, Slade School of Art, London |

## ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1988 | Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, Australia |
| 1990 | Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, Australia |
| | Essoign Club, Owen Dixon Chambers, Melbourne, Australia |
| 1993 | Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, Australia |
| 1994 | Access Contemporary Art Gallery, Sydney, Australia |
| 1995 | Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, Australia |
| | The Piccadilly Gallery, London |
| 1996 | Masters Exhibition, RMIT, Melbourne, Australia |
| | Niagara Galleries, Melbourne Sculpture Exhibition |
| 1997 | The Piccadilly Gallery, London |

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1987-1992 | Various group exhibitions in Australia |
| 1994 | The Piccadilly Gallery, London |
| | Möet et Chandon, touring exhibition |
| | Fourth Australian Contemporary Art Fair, |
| | Niagara, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne |
| | Recent Acquisitions, Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria |
| | Salon des Refusés, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney |
| | Images, Access Contemporary Art Gallery, |
| | Sydney, Australia. 1993 |
| | City of Richmond Acquisitions Art Award |
| 1995 | The Herald Sun Art Prize, Melbourne |
| | Access Gallery, Sydney |
| | Royal Overseas League Exhibition, London & |
| | Edinburgh |
| | Piccadilly Gallery, London |
| | Basel Art Fair, Switzerland |
| | Deakin University, Recent Acquisitions, |
| | Geelong Art Gallery, Victoria |
| | The 1995 Archibald, Wynne & Sulman Prizes |
| | & Regional Tour of Selected Works |
| | Australia Felix – Benalla Visual Arts Festival, |
| | Benalla, Victoria |
| | Sulman Art Prize, Art Gallery of New South |
| | Wales |
| | Dobell Drawing Prize, Art Gallery of New South |
| | Wales |

| | |
|---|---|
| 1995 | St. Kilda Postcard Show, Linden Gallery, |
| | Melbourne |
| 1996 | The 20th Century British Art Fair, Royal |
| | College of Art, London |
| | Royal Overseas League Exhibition, London & |
| | Edinburgh |
| | Piccadilly Gallery, London |
| | Basel Art Fair, Switzerland |
| | Wynne Art Prize, Art Gallery of New South |
| | Wales |
| | 12th Biennial Spring Festival of Drawing, |
| | Mornington Peninsular Regional Gallery, Victoria |
| | Fifth Australian Contemporary Art Fair, |
| | Royal Exhibition Buildings, Melbourne |
| 1997 | "Oh La Vache", Halle Saint Pierre, Paris, |
| | France |
| | Basel Art Fair, Switzerland |
| | Piccadilly Gallery, London |
| | Vaches du XXe siécle et drôles de Bovidés, |
| | Musée municipal A. G. Poulain, Normandie, |
| | France |
| | Glasgow Art Fair, Scotland |
| | Wynne Art Prize, Art gallery of New South |
| | Wales and regional tour of selected works |
| | Royal Overseas League Exhibition, London & |
| | Edinburgh |

## COLLECTIONS:

Ballarat Art Gallery, Victoria
Benalla Art Gallery, Victoria
Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria
La Trobe University Collection, Victoria
Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Tasmania
Holmes a Court Collection, W.A.
Western Mining Collection
City of Richmond Collection, Victoria
Deakin University Art Collection, Victoria
Gallery of Sport, Melbourne Cricket Ground
Artbank, NSW
Private Collections in Australia, Europe & USA

## COMMISSIONS/GRANTS/AWARDS:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1988 | Projects Grant, Visual Arts Board, Australia Council |
| 1992 | The Melbourne Theatre Company 1992-1993 |
| | Season. Programme, I Hate Hamlet |
| 1993 | City of Richmond Acquisitions Art Award |
| | John Storey Memorial Scholarship, RMIT |
| | The Queen's Trust Grant |
| 1994 | Australia Council, Visual Arts/Craft Board Barcelona |
| | Studio |
| 1995 | Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts |
| | Scholarship Award |
| | St. Kilda Postcard Show, one of four prizes given |
| 1996 | "Comment L'Europe a cache la vache folle" |
| | commissioned frontispiece, Liberation 2.9.'96 |

# Catalogue

1. **"Man Looking into Phar Lap"**
   oil on canvas, 1997
   55 x 68

2. **"Horse and Cow Parts"**
   oil on canvas, 1997
   48 x 66

3. **"Dead Horse in the Slade Lift"**
   oil on canvas, 1997
   48 x 60

4. **"The Dealer's Visit"**
   oil on canvas, 1996/97
   32 x 48

5. **"Dead Horse in the Landscape"**
   oil on canvas, 1996/97
   36 x 48

6. **"Man Looking into the Rear"**
   oil on canvas, 1997
   36 x 48

7. **"Two Halves of a Horse"**
   oil on canvas, 1996/97
   36 x 48

8. **"Two Men Carrying Half a Horse"**
   oil on canvas, 1997
   36 x 36

9. **"Red Legs"**
   oil on canvas, 1997
   30 x 36

10. **"Looking for the Heart"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    24 x 36

11. **"Man Pushing a Horse"**
    oil on canvas, 1996/97
    28 x 30

12. **"Big Red Landscape"**
    on reverse: Four paintings for a Private Collector
    oil on canvas, 1997
    30 x 38

13. **"Heads"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    36 x 16

14. **"Post-Mortem"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    30 x 36

15. **"Man Holding Half a Horse"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    32 x 30

16. **"Dead Horse in the old Courtauld"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    22 x 28

17. **"Horse on Trestle"**
    oil on canvas, 1996/97
    28 x 36

18. **"Painting the Dead Horse at the Slade"**
    oil on canvas, 1996/97
    16 x 22

19. **"Dead Horse in the Slade Lift II"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    18 x 24

20. **"Torso"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    24 x 36

21. **"Head on a Block"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    24 x 36

22. **"Dead Horse in the Landscape II"**
    oil on canvas, 1996/97
    16 x 18

23. **"Half a Horse"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    6 x 8

24. **"Close but, no Cigar"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    12 x 18

25. **"Stuffing the Dead Horse"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    18 x 24

26. **"Covered Horse"**
    oil on canvas, 1996/97
    18 x 24

27. **"Man Looking into the Front of a Horse"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    8 x 12

28. **"White Painting"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    26 x 36

29. **"The Voyeur"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    10 x 10

30. **"Man Holding Horse's Head"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    10 x 8

31. **"Head"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    8 x 12

32. **"Head and Rear"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    6 x 8

33. **"Head II"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    10 x 10

34. **"Stuffed Horse"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    8 x 12

35. **"Man Looking into the Rear II"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    6 x 8

36. **"Man and Half a Horse"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    8 x 8

37. **"Two Men Carrying Half a Horse"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    8 x 8

38. **"Head and Tales"**
    oil on canvas, 1997
    6 x 8

*Sizes are in inches,
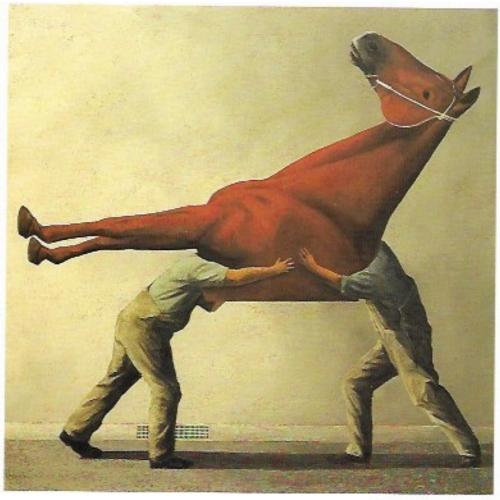height precedes width*

# PAINTING THE DEAD HORSE

Recent discoveries in neural science suggest our brain deals first in images – visual and auditory – before turning them into words and expressive meaning. It is a nice confirmation, if you like, of the old artistic instinct that poems, paintings, or whatever, first have to "be" before they can "become", however serious, intelligent or thought-provoking this might then eventually prove. All of which is a roundabout way of saying that, before we start trying to unravel just a few of the complex resonances and associations aroused by John Kelly's series of enigmatic paintings depicting the effigy of a legendary Australian racehorse of the 30s (Phar Lap) situated within an empty London studio/gallery space (the Slade/ex-Courtauld Institute Galleries where the artist has recently been working and producing these paintings while on a scholarship), we are, first of all, hooked by the sheer poetic force and variety of the strange imagery he conjures up from such unpromising sounding material and the simplicity and directness with which he then proceeds to set this down. We need, in short, to know nothing of the what, when and where of the paintings to know that we want to know a great deal more about all of these things.

There are, first, the "Australian" elements of these paintings to consider, that provide, in a sense, their original subject-matter and content. Kelly himself, though born in Bristol in 1965, went to live in Australia when he was just six months old. His education, training and visual experience have been largely shaped by the country while his choice of the Phar Lap theme, "A horse with a nation's soul upon his back/Australia's Ark of the covenant, set/Before the people, perfect, loved like God" in Peter Porter's evocative poem *Phar Lap in the Melbourne Museum*, is a story as Australian in its heroic essence as Sidney Nolan's was of Ned Kelly. Indeed, in a painting not being shown here but, significantly enough, in Australia and entitled *Homage to Sir Sid*, John Kelly pays affectionate tribute to a famous and repeatedly used Nolan image of a horse falling/rolling on its back and again, as Nolan uses it, an ambiguous image. And, given Nolan's often ironic treatment of various Australian legends, the series itself also becomes witty irony piled on witty irony.

But, before it all becomes impossibly "cool" post-Modern in flavour, John Kelly thoughtfully pulls us back with a group of startling close-up and disorientating studies of Phar Lap's rich chestnut-red hide – *Torso* (no. 20) and *Big Red Landscape* (no, 12) – which remind us of the artist's natural grounding in the experience of the red earth of the Australian landscape. And he also makes a nice pun on one of Phar Lap's nicknames – Big Red!

Then there are, of course, the questions of art-history and art criticism implicit in such subject-matter, issues which Kelly takes on with wit and relish, and with a real regard for its past, present and even, future position. Some of the paintings with figures, for example, suggest the centaurs of Classical myth, others, of the horse alone, of 18thC horse-painting, while at other points one is reminded of the pantomime horses of late 19th/early 20thC popular entertainment. In recognising all of these associations openly and at once he is also acknowledging the essentially post-modern elements which reside in the subject itself. For the original effigy of Phar Lap, the subject of continued public adulation in the Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, however remarkably life-like it may appear, represents no more than the skilfully preserved and stuffed hide of the horse, whose skeleton rests in New Zealand and whose, incredibly large, heart is in the National Museum, Canberra. Yet it is this very "deadness" which gives John Kelly permission in the first place, to undertake all kinds of liberties and indignities with Phar Lap – chopping in half, decapitating, dismembering and rearranging, having men disappear inside him, packing him into lifts – without, at any point appearing simply cheeky, clever or even disrespectful to the legend. Curiously, the sense is almost exactly the opposite of this, a melancholic and poetic sense of loss at Phar Lap's *not* being there, that makes this series of paintings into a form of meditation on death and absence. Kelly's obsessive, fertile imagination quietly underlines the thought that you don't have to haul a dead shark all the way from Australia and stick it in a tank of formaldehyde (a clue!) simply to contemplate the idea of death in the 1990s, and that the greatest wonders and sensations of our contemporary imaginative life still exist in those millions upon millions of connections that run to and from eye, brain and hand and then back through us.

*Nicholas Usherwood*
*September 1997*

No. 8

# The Art of John Kelly

As a child in Melbourne my father frequently took me to the strangely named National Gallery of Victoria. Every state in Australia had a 'National Gallery' in those days, except Canberra, the national capital. The Art Gallery incorporated the museum so that in order to inspect the stuffed bandicoots, mineral samples and dusty Aboriginal artifacts, we had to scurry past the pictures: the Sickerts, Signacs, the Burne-Jones's and the enormous Tiepolo, which always rather embarrassed the curators until they learned that 'The Banquet of Cleopatra' was about the best Tiepolo outside of Venice and Würzburg.

Most of the citizens of Melbourne only saw their local collection – and it was a distinguished one – as a vague blur, since we were always in such a hurry to view the *pièce de résistance* of the museum: Phar Lap. It was the most celebrated still-life in Oceania. The famous racehorse stood, impeccably stuffed, in a large glass case, and there was always a small group of awe-struck spectators around this mysterious effigy. Office workers would often pop into the Museum in their lunch hour just to pay their respects to the most celebrated dead horse in Australia. Many were eating sandwiches and sausage rolls as they stared up mesmerised by those unblinking glass eyes.

Now, a young and gifted Australian artist has re-examined and re-animated this equine icon and, with this remarkable and poetic series of paintings, at last liberated Phar Lap from his glass case and put him back on the walls of a picture gallery. It is to be hoped that the Melbourne Museum hastens to acquire one of these beautiful works for its permanent collection and proudly displays it a few paces from its mummified sitter.

*Barry Humphries*
*September 1997*

No. 2

# THE PICCADILLY GALLERY

16 Cork Street  London W1X    Tel: 071 629 2875    Fax: 071 499 0431

Monday - Friday 10.00 - 5.30                    Saturday 10.30 - 1.00