



ReOrsa Art Space No. 1

51 High Street, Bracknell, Berkshire
24 – 27 October 2007

Reviewed by Lesley Saunders

If you didn't catch this exhibition (it ran for only four days), don't despair: the visual artist and exhibition organiser, Janet Curley Cannon, is determined to find more spaces for professional visual artists in the Thames valley area to show their work and make connections, with each other and their local communities. Janet, along with artists Jenny Parkes and Tonia Maddison, are setting up a database of such artists: visit www.reorsa.org for further information.

ReOrsa means rising again, and the exhibition is closely tied to regeneration in its many meanings and manifestations. The gallery space is a (temporarily) empty commercial unit in the pedestrianised high street of Bracknell – one of those towns too close to London to have nurtured its own cultural life without the dedicated efforts of arts development officers and their like. The Bracknell Regeneration Partnership has been instrumental in providing studio space in buildings scheduled for demolition in the town centre for several of the artists exhibiting in the show, and the rent-free exhibition space was given to them with just three weeks' notice to get other artists involved.

All of which makes the exhibition even more impressive in its aesthetic self-confidence, conceptual accomplishment and the range of media on display – installation, digital print, video, painting, collagraph, ultrasound scan... Highlights for me were Janet Curley Cannon's profound transmutations of ordinary urban scenes, patterned meditations and modulations on utilitarian, transient or throwaway things, such as *Poznan Gaz* and *Pavement IV*; and Jenny Parkes' delicate paradoxes in corroded/eroded bits and pieces found and re-made into objects of rich and ambiguous significance – *Bed of Roses* is constructed from an abandoned, up-ended spring-mattress that has been threaded with bright copper wires from which hang small metal parts like sacred ornaments, then strewn with dried rose petals and a few of the dead leaves it came with. It is suspended in mid-air like a grille or filigree curtain, dividing space without closing it off. Then there were the colourful acrylics and oils by Angie Steiger: yellows, lavenders, warm earths and blue-greens sometimes lit by gold leaf, expressive of an inner space in motion; the finely-worked surfaces in Tom Cartmill's paintings, monochromatic webs of creams and greys traversed by river-like flights of stronger stuff; and Tonia Maddison's spare and delicate layering of colour with the translucency of skin, little abstracted townscapes that are placed in space like flags or windows. I also liked the installations *Lost Pollinators* by Jo Thomas and *Beguile* by Lynn Andrews, each in their different way inviting the viewer to participate with delight, puzzlement and regret in the fragile relationship between the cultural and natural worlds. Deborah Batt, Dee Bingham, Michael Garaway, Jennifer Leach and Vicky Vergou all offered intriguing and engaging works which provoked complex emotional as well as cerebral reactions, leaving welcome room for exploration and response.

The space itself is, at second and third glance, quite marvellous – a scuffed and stripped-out shop unit, the exposed electrics in their red casings making a small dramatic installation in themselves, it has a starkly whitewashed ground floor with, of course, a plate glass front that lets in a vast amount of light. The landing and stairs at the back of the building pass one or two cupboard-like rooms, which have been ingeniously translated into installation-spaces. And the first floor is walled, in total contrast, with brick. The way the pieces have been mounted in relation to each other and their environment is a testament to the visual risk-taking that ReOrsa represents.