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LIVING IN THE AGE OF FEUILLETON

Joanne Burns, *aerial photography*.
Five Islands Press, ISBN 0 86418 6185.
92 pp., \$12.95.

Some poetry is admirable for its craft, some for its lyricism, or beauty, or depth. The work of Joanne Burns lacks none of these attributes, but its virtue resides chiefly in the author's clarity, and in the sharp, often stunning originality of her vision.

The most convenient category for Burns' work would be "social satire"; Geoff Page, writing in *American Book Review*, praises her as "Australia's most substantial (and cutting) satirist." True enough, though incomplete. In the short future-history with which Hesse prefaces *Magister Ludi*, the narrator makes reference to the "Age of Feuilleton," a period which "... appears to have had only the dimmest notion of what to do with culture. Or rather, it did not know how to assign culture its proper place within the economy of life and the nation." This is Burns' starting point; her satiric vision is the foundation on which she hastens to erect the framework of a more wholesome perspective:

like an orange pip that's dropped
under a stove

some time ago "belief" has slipped
from your private lexicon
and you don't even notice until
there's an occasion of repair
or renovation; or when you suddenly
stop to realise
you don't know what you believe ...
(from *so far so good*)

aerial photography uses the commonplace to interrogate, then transform, the reader's implicit, unconscious beliefs. Each poem is centred on some unobtrusive aspect of mundania: New Age mood music, white goods, the beach, talkback radio, mobile phones, television. Irony is achieved by separating the ordinary from its habitual context, and the author's defamiliarisation is deft:

the microwave oven
plugged into passive
prominence on a kitchen
wall or bench like
a tabernacle for the
bland, pinging out
easy miracles quick
as a jiff or a casual
fuck and reticent
as surveillance ...

(from *stir fry*)

Burns' powerful poetic imagination always serves her goal of stimulating an inventive, disturbing reflection. As a vigorous and respected feminist whose credentials span three decades, the proper place of women within the economy of life and the nation is of special concern. Her global perspective is intended to perturb:

... there they go: an
army of
girlie ladies dressed like brochures in
tomato
red, reliable as heart beats, swishing
in their
corporate uniforms ... you take a left
turn
away from this style of female
suffrage the
only men in red are clowns or
cardinals ...

(from *mere anarchy*)

But this is not an overtly ideological collection, nor is it serious in the sense of being humourless. The tone is wry and mischievous; even at her most savage, Burns is smiling with at least one side of her mouth:

the day, slightly anxious that time
is running out, decides on a personal
trainer to improve its sluggish speed,
doris is her name ...

(from *mere anarchy*)

Gravitas is not incompatible with the occasional chuckle. In his speech at this book's launch, Laurie Duggan remarked that "*aerial photography* makes you wonder why the multi-nationals left the field, and why poetry is seen to be a back number." The text is marvellously accessible, and the cultural commentary is fundamentally egalitarian, never elitist, arrogant, or bitter. In the broad church of modern poetry, Burns is more likely to be found sitting in the same pew with Bruce Dawe than with Les Murray:

the window's view of council sweepers
dragging and pushing brooms along
the gutters
and pavements at the speed of tai chi
students sends you all snoozy and
you soon find yourself on your knees
gazing into the fridge in wait for
some edible motivation to appear

(from *mere anarchy*)

This is Burns' eleventh book, and Ivor Indyk's cover blurb declares it her best. He may be right; it is certainly a departure from the beautifully surreal prose poetry which characterised *penelope's knees* (1996), *on a clear day* (1992), and *blowing bubbles in the 7th lane* (1988), though the place of culture and what society ought to do about it remains a constant theme across Burns' long career. There are no weak pieces in this collection, nothing unsubtle or needlessly obscure. It is an entertaining, informative read:

to be unblemished
is itself a blemish —
the world shines
through like a delicate
rash —

(*split infinitive*)

Overland editor Pam Brown credits Burns with "... seeing the Australian world and its historically youthful rituals as a very absurd and sometimes dangerous place." In the Age of Feuilleton, that could be an invaluable perspective, and perhaps the only honest one. Highly recommended.

