



## public works

**Madonna Staunton, *Anxiety* (2012).** Gallery of Modern Art Foundation Collection, Queensland Art Gallery. Purchased 2014 with funds from the Estate of Jessica Ellis through QAG. On display, QAG, Brisbane, in exhibition *Madonna Staunton: Out of a Clear Blue Sky*, until March 1 next year.

Bronwyn Watson

ings are the most intimate and personal of artistic expressions, generally recording the artist's own response to experience, projects and planning, and rarely intended for exhibition.

Both prints and drawings, however, illustrate the way that an artist's thinking is not disembodied but intimately invested in his practice, so that we cannot imagine quite the same aesthetic idea being expressed in any other material form.

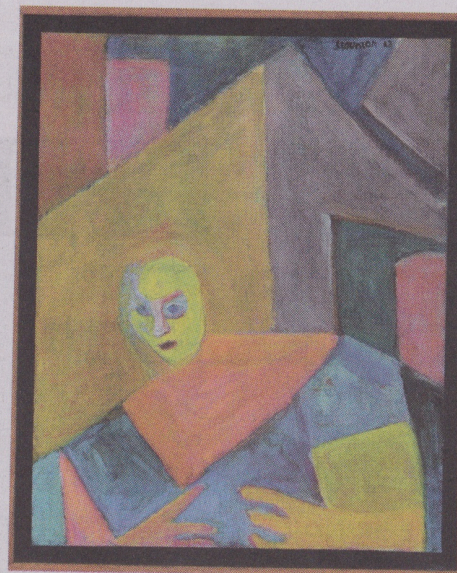
These are not the loud and spectacular or merely gimmicky art products that lend themselves to the great march past of the mass spectator.

They demand time and attention and — something often invoked but seldom understood — the participation of the viewer in the realisation of their meaning.

WITH a father who was a bookshop owner and a mother who was a librarian, poet and artist, Madonna Staunton grew up in a household full of books. Not surprisingly, she became an avid reader and started writing poetry at a young age. When she was 10, her mother, who was studying at East Sydney Technical College, started teaching her about colour theory. Her mother would bring home exercise books and teach Staunton everything that had been imparted in class. These exercise books provided Staunton with a level of learning about tone, tint, shade and contrast that was impossible to replicate.

Staunton, who was born in 1938 in Murwillumbah, northern NSW, was an only child. When she was about 13 the family moved to Brisbane but, because of Staunton's ill health, she ceased formal education and studied at home. When she was 21 she took painting and life-drawing lessons and joined the Queensland Art Society.

With such an auspicious start thanks to her mother's inspiration, Staunton has become one



Synthetic polymer paint on canvas board; 51cm x 40.7cm; 56.2cm x 45.8cm x 4.3cm (framed)

"This is such a profound piece about anxiety," says McKay. "It is a very personal image and the fact that she can articulate such depth of human experience with such an economy of form with only four or five colours and a dozen shapes is just incredible."

McKay says Staunton's use of soft pastel colours and gentle tones belies the subject matter. "That is what makes the painting so enigmatic. It is an aesthetic work, almost even a pretty work but, of course, it is dealing with a very uncomfortable emotion. It is a very generous work for such a bleak emotion and that is the charm of her practice and the sophistication of her understanding of the world."

McKay believes Staunton hasn't received the attention she deserves.

"She had her moment in the 70s and 80s when she was very much synonymous with assemblage," he says, "but I don't think she has been given the attention she deserves, maybe because she has changed styles a few times throughout her career. Often her change of style has been driven by circumstance. The reason she stopped painting the large abstract works was because of arthritis. She physically couldn't do it for the pain of it and that's why she moved to assemblage and collage."

"But when she hit her 60s she made a dedicated return to painting. Staunton is deeply reflective and very focused, and now with 76 years of wisdom and 50 years of practice, she can articulate the depth of human experience through her sophisticated compositions."

of Queensland's favourite artists, mostly known for her collage and assemblage works from the 1970s and 80s.

However, in the past 15 years Staunton has made a return to figurative painting, and one of her key works from this period, *Anxiety*, has been acquired by the Queensland Art Gallery. The new acquisition is on display in *Madonna Staunton: Out of a Clear Blue Sky*.

The gallery's curator of contemporary Australian art, Peter McKay, explains that this painting is "a high point of her last 15 years and almost the summation of her career".

He describes how it depicts somebody who is almost falling out of the picture plane. You can see how the hands are like opposing magnets, they can't connect. The face is like a mask and the brilliant, piercing blue eyes are not really focusing on anything.