



TIME STEPS

SEAMUS HEIDENREICH



***It only takes seconds,* 2025**

cork, wood, plater, glue,water reeds

stainless steel, clock mechanism

battery, beeswax

30 x 30 x 20.5 cm

\$2,200



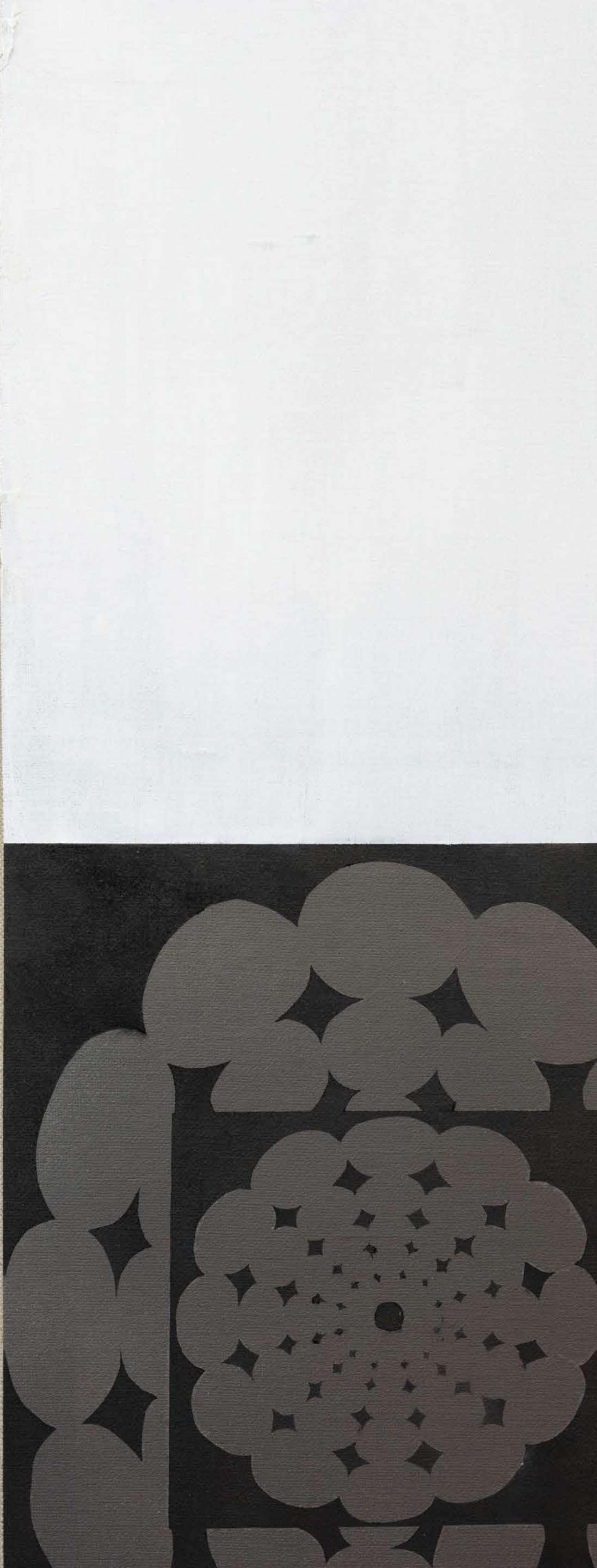








Hung, drawn & quartered, 2025
oil, raw pigment, charcoal gampi
paper, beeswax, graphite powder,
paste
153 x 198.5 x 3.5 cm
\$8,600







***A Bruegel elder*, 2024**
graphite, jute, plaster
5 cent coins, string
22 x 17 x 5 cm
\$1,200









***Solvitur Ambulando (It is solved by walking)*, 2025**
Bronze, rubber, mirrored composite panel hammered
copper range hood, glue
160 x 90 x 44 cm
\$6,000











Common marker, 2025
hammered copper, rubber
water reeds, cotton,
pyrography, soot, beeswax
tasmanian oak
100 x 27.5 x 13 cm
\$3,800







Untitled garden, 2025
casting wax, straw bale, chia seeds
nasturdiums, poppies, eggshells,
steel, wire, timber, dolly
90 x 50 x 50 cm





Reap what you sow
Sebastian Henry-Jones

Though it principally shapes the conditions in which all art is produced – in Sydney, across the relatively recent colony called ‘Australia’ and most of the world today – and though it is the root cause of all of the issues that we have made art about over the last 15 or so years; Capitalism, the economic system under which we live, is something that we never really explore in depth through our work in the arts. We are very good at listing the challenges that arts workers and artists face; not being able to make a living from our work, the cost of living, the nature of burnout, grant cycle churn. Though when it comes to doing what art should do best – imagining other possibilities and ‘alternative futures’ as so many exhibition texts claim – somehow we fall short.¹ We talk a lot about collective work, but in an industry within an economic system where competition on a labour market is a feature, over time our collective alternatives – I’m thinking mainly of incorporated artist run spaces – can easily become a collection of individuals, each focussed on harnessing collective activity for their own career progression. This is to say that, because of the economic reality underpinning culture, it is very hard for us to embody the radical language that we often use to talk about our art. I am a millennial, millennials having ascended professionally over the last 10 years, largely by mastering the language of identity politics, that – in an institutional context where those who speak it are upwardly mobile – removes class analysis from its analysis of society. As such, the subject matter for Seamus Heidenreich’s solo presentation – of the labouring peasant – and its comparison to today’s labouring artist, is a welcome change.

‘Time Steps’ is about capital and our navigation through it every day. At LAILA we see labouring bodies, a clock, seemingly frozen over or caked with white sludge (the repetitive, unending nature of wage labour maybe) and rough, tactile and organic materials that insist, perhaps, on the hand of the artist in the face of automated innovation. The title ‘Time Steps’ is a nod to a specific tap dance (Seamus was classically trained in tap in another life), to draw attention to the financial instrumentalisation of the very movement of our flesh under the big C (think Tiktok dance), and also, perhaps, a poetic reference to a means of escape. American art critic and Marxist Ben Davis writes that mainstream discussions of class begin and end with the idea that one’s class is synonymous with how much money one has. This rings particularly true in the Australian arts scene and its discourses as mediated through gossip and social media. Another belief which is slowly fading away in the scene, but still embodied in stiff institutional policy, posits class as a cultural question, as if the difference between being middle class and working class were a matter of cultural or social background. I am paraphrasing Ben Davis here: Such ways of looking at the question have their merits – income and culture are, of course, very important and are indicators of class. But they do not cut to the core of the matter. While the working class have different income, status and lifestyles from the middle and upper classes, if we leave the matter there, we miss the basic reason that class exists in the first place. And this is a direct quote:

*If class were simply a matter of how much money you took home at the end of the week, then it would seem that the more successful the working class was at organising to get a bigger share of the products of its labor (higher wages), then the more it would actually cease to be the working class.*²

Class isn’t simply defined by income but by one’s relationship to labour. Focusing only on wealth versus poverty misses key aspects of working class struggle, such as dignity at work, job security, working hours and conditions etc. Many who might appear middle class, like small business owners, often work long hours for little pay, blurring neat distinctions. A clearer understanding emerges when class is viewed through the nuance of labor relations: the working class is defined not by lifestyle or earnings but by its lack of control over work, and reliance on selling its labor power on the market. Though they earn hardly any money through their practice, the degree of control that artists enjoy over their labour and their product might distinguish them as middle class.³

In another part of their lives, the majority of artists will work a day job to pay for their living costs, and the nature of this work might distinguish them as working class depending on the qualities of their working conditions (it is common for artists to work a casual job). In other words, the figure of the artist/worker stretches across easy class categories, which is probably why the discourse about class, and conversations around industrial strategies of collective resistance in the arts never seem to reach a crescendo or consensus. I would like to quote at length from the great American art critic Lucy Lippard here, and her formidable 1977 essay *The Pink Glass Swan: Upward and Downward Mobility in the Art World*. She writes:

*The art world has evolved its own curious class system. Externally this is a microcosm of capitalist society, but it maintains an internal dialectic (or just plain contradiction) that attempts to reverse or ignore that parallel... Since the buying and selling of art and artists are done by the ruling classes or by those chummy with them and their institutions, all artists or producers, no matter what their individual economic backgrounds, are dependent on the owners and forced into a proletarian role... Looking at and “appreciating” art in this century has been understood as an instrument (or at best a result) of upward social mobility, in which owning art is the ultimate step. Making art is at the bottom of the scale. This is the only legitimate reason to see artists as so many artists see themselves—as “workers.” At the same time, artists/makers tend to feel misunderstood and, as creators, innately superior to the buyers/owners. The innermost circle of the art-world class system thereby replaces the rulers with the creators, and the contemporary artist in the big city (read New York) is a schizophrenic creature. S/he is persistently working “up” to be accepted, not only by other artists, but also by the hierarchy that exhibits, writes about, and buys her/his work. At the same time s/he is often ideologically working “down” in an attempt to identify with the workers outside of the art context and to overthrow the rulers in the name of art.*⁴

The entire essay is illuminating in understanding many of the dominant attitudes, ideological contradictions and social tensions felt heavily in Australia’s urban art context. Lippard goes on to say that most artists originally come from middle class backgrounds themselves, which in the 21st Century, makes the culture industry more resistant to a materialist understanding of society that prioritises the class structure, and more amenable to the language of identity politics, a way of talking about society that instrumentalises historical narratives and instances of injustice for individual, professional gain.

‘Time Steps’ might also refer to the connection across time between the artist labourer and the European peasant, a historic labouring class who experienced a shift in the way that food and resources were organised in society between the 16th and 18th centuries – from pre-capitalist Feudalism, in which production was encouraged through extra-economic means (military, judicial and political power), to Capitalism, in which peasants became legally ‘free’, but in which their never-ending labour became necessary through economic imperative.⁵ Living in a Liberal Democracy today, everyone in the Australian arts with an Australian passport can equate their ‘freedom’ with a certain moral, political and legal agency – something which we all share. But this politico-legal equality is not backed up economically, and the disparities between the financial circumstances that ‘equal’ individuals are born into, lock them and their descendents into generational cycles of poverty.⁶ When you consider the power that capitalism has over politicians in Australia and across the world, the political and legal freedoms of individuals without the commensurate economic agency doesn’t seem very fair at all.

Seamus writes to me that through their special relationship to materials, ‘the artist becomes a strange echo of the peasant: tasked with producing value from scarcity, highly visible yet structurally excluded, romanticised and economically displaced. In this equation, the artist is not simply a cultural worker, but a jester, a foot soldier, a maker whose tools have been captured before the work even begins.’⁷ The central wall work at LAILA makes this time-syncopation visible: In a gesture that in an Australian context reminds me of the work of Gordon Bennett, the pre-Modern lower halves of peasants have been cut into and overlaid by the very Modern, abstracted human forms associated with practitioners like Matisse or Picasso⁸ While Bennett used contradictions in art historical style and painterly innovation to comment on the coloniality of Empire, Australia and the art-industrial complex, Seamus makes the point of talking about class and labour in the arts. The patterned, crop circle-cum-wormhole markings reference the shape of the iced and broken clock across the room, drawing his critique over and across time. The works could seem romantic for the way they capture a pre-capitalist society, perhaps at harvesting time and before the private enclosure of common land. They could equally be read through the lens of a brutal realism, centered on the idea that working to live is the meta-force defining our existence today. Despite how hard one works the harvest may never arrive

The disappearance of labour from the content of artistic production has an art-historical story. Lippard’s Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object traces the flourishing of post-object and conceptual art in the late 60s and early 70s. During this time in America and other parts of the world, artists moved away from making discrete, physical things and towards art in the form of concepts, actions, instructions, and documentation. One motivating reason for this development was to resist the rule of the market, with the thought that if there was no object there would also be nothing to sell. But markets are adaptable: Museums learned to exhibit ideas. Collectors learned to trade certificates and documentation. Like many experimental uses of photography before it, what began in conceptual art as an attempt to escape commodification quickly became a new set of forms for Capital to inhabit.

In *The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath* (Or the memoirs of an ex-conceptual artist) published in *Art & Text* in 1981, Ian Burn looked back on the conceptual turn of the 60s, arguing that while dematerialisation didn’t successfully dissolve the commodity object, that it did dissolve the visibility of labour in artmaking. The concept of ‘dematerialisation’ – as Lippard defined it ‘a de-emphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness)’ – remains highly problematic. It seems that what we witnessed with Conceptual Art was an absolute separation of mental or intellectual work from manual work, with a revaluing of the intellectual and a devaluing of the manual. It is hard to avoid the analogy with the role of management industry – but would we say that the mental work of management was a ‘dematerialisation’ of manual work? Of course not – the mental work represents the withdrawal of mental decision-making out of manual production, in order that management might more readily control production and workers. If the analogy is applied back to Conceptual Art, one is left with endless questions about why art should mimic that structure, why at this particular time, and so on.⁹

By prioritising an idea over physical production, the material conditions in which artists were making their work faded into abstraction. In some instances artists themselves took on the intellectual labour of the managerial class, often overseeing the fabrication of their work in material form by others. For Burn, this was a political failure dressed up as aesthetic innovation. While it unlocked new ways of thinking about art, the dematerialised form also locked artists into a mode of production that was politically weak. In the same essay, Burn bemoans the loss of skilled knowledge in Australian fine art courses, whose curriculums were modelled on the American dematerialised form. Contrary to this legacy, Seamus has included a small, hand-forged bronze in the show – a lone figure encumbered with bags and goods, bent over in the effort of forward movement. He stands in for many art world figures struggling alone under Capitalism.

Why is it important to bring real discussions of class and labour back into the visual arts? I am writing this in the days after anti-immigration protests swept across the nation. Their popularity points not to a moral failing on behalf of working Australia, but to the failure of the intellectual left and its institutions to build an alternative program for disenfranchised people to rally around. A focus on class and labour before ideology will give you the primary, material reasons why the vast majority of people attended those rallies – they are looking for a solution to their financial alienation and downward mobility. It is surprising to see left-leaning progressives in the arts condemning mis-informed working people for the choices they make out of what they perceive to be their material security, when the left should actually be asking itself how it abandoned working Australia. A culture with class politics at its centre would be looking at forming solidarity with these people, and the intellectual work towards this could begin in our communities. Like all workers, the way that art and culture are structured today renders cultural producers as little more than raw material for institutions, to shape the stories that define society as they and their philanthropic backers see fit. It’s incredibly hard to make a living as a cultural producer today. To navigate this territory through a career as an ‘institutional’ artist or curator is a perfectly logical strategy, but an individual one nonetheless and one that has over the last few years produced the empty discourse of individually-focussed identity politics. A language infused with a class politics that points to an alternative way of organising our lives is risky for the person who wields it in an institutional/commercial context. But it is also a much more rewarding and collective language of change, perhaps towards a flourishing counterculture where individuals and cultural producers don’t have to feel like they need to labour alone.

1 In Sydney I can only think of Snack Syndicate as an art world insider that has consistently identified with specific alternatives to Capitalism like Communism and Socialism over the last ten years.
2 Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, Haymarket Books, 2013.
3 Artists understand and control the entire process of making their art from start to finish, while most working class forms of production are defined by a division of labour into smaller, repetitive parts each executed by different people.
4 Lucy Lippard, ‘The Pink Glass Swan: Upward and Downward Mobility in the Art World’. First published in *Heresies* no.1, January 1977.
5 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*, Monthly Review Press, 1999.
6 Only the other day was I talking to Tom Smith and Zoe Robertson about the fact that while under Feudalism a higher power would see it as their social duty to look after a peasant who had slipped through the cracks of the system, today in fact the cultural class have it much worse: The impersonal, bureaucratic nature of the administration of Neoliberal Capitalism, as well as its tendency to place blame on the misfortuned individual themselves, means that people falling on hard times are financially punished (working a casual job and not being able to work due to illness is a common example for artists).
7 Unlike the peasant who could down tools, the artists of today could not hold a general strike because of the low economic value that artmaking has in society. Because of this they are generally weak when it comes to their labour power.
8 readers with a greater knowledge of Western art history will be able to point to more specific likenesses.
9 Ian Burn, ‘The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (Or the memoirs of an ex-conceptual artist)’. In *Art & Text*, vol 1. Published by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, 1981.



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