

Adelaide Biennale 2012

Deflating Metaphors and Emerging Contexts: Messing with your Mind in a Material World

By Jennifer A. McMahon

“I am a scientist” sing the Dandy Warhols, the Velvet Underground inspired American rock group. The lead singer Courtney Taylor-Taylor hauntingly intones in his high tenor voice, by way of explanation, “We’ve gotta live on science alone”¹. We might well ask, “What else is there?” However there was a time when the materialist worldview of the scientific enterprise was seen to clash with the foundations of civilisation. Nature and human life were deprived of meaning by science, as the determinism of physical laws usurped the possibility of genuine free will, thereby disenchanting nature. Once we were above nature, but now we were mere components of it. “Disenchantment” as used in this sense is borrowed from the 19th century German sociologist Max Webber, who ultimately identified an antidote by way of the self-identity developed in virtue of community based self-consciousness.² Meaning was not a given but a construct and our social predisposition furthered through language guaranteed its development. Does this concept of community still rescue us from meaninglessness in an age of cultural pluralism? The Dandy Warhols chant the lyrics as though they would indoctrinate us rather than reason with us, as they sing, “Religiously I’m speaking on the science”, ingenuously marking the centuries old dichotomy between science and religion while maintaining that insouciance for which they are so well known. In fact, their creative practice belies the literal meaning of their words as argument gives way to attitude, a finely calibrated attitude of defiant freely chosen purpose; determinism be damned.

How is art positioned in a material disenchanted world? Most easily as entertainment, yet perhaps we find evidence that not all is settled regarding our so called materialist worldview when the public’s appetite for artistic attitude is noted. We seek to imbue life with meaning and as a consequence, our conceptions of experience are in a forever evolving state, with each new generation re-conceiving aspects of experience for a new age. In the forefront of the re-conceivers are the musicians, writers and visual artists who, by engaging with themes and topics of their time, unwittingly contribute to each phase of our ever evolving consciousness. Just as the Dandy Warhols allay anxiety over the supposed meaninglessness that results once science strips nature of all enchantment, so the visual artists represented in Adelaide’s 2012 Biennale draw attention to new conceptions of place, time and self which highlight the contingent nature of the narratives that underlie our day to day existence. Disenchantment or re-enchantment are increasingly redundant conceptions. Such narratives are always fluid. Among the ebbs and flows, new conceptions emerge, providing in effect new ways of being in the world, and in turn prompting a reshuffling of what we thought we knew.

Shaun Gladwell visualises autobiography. His adolescence, the young man of our time: skateboards, bikes, vast horizons, graffiti, male sweat - going nowhere but going there fast, in slow motion. My mum, my dad the Vietnam veteran, their history, my history, doing it cool, having mates; there is no conception of a problem here, just a way of being now.³ In the images shown here from more recent work, we see a wet-suited figure in rough sea, the image of which is out of focus. The sea must be surf, this is guy's stuff. But the clear confident images of youth are here replaced with a more tentative stance, as though a transition has begun and with it, all certainty is deferred. There is here no Dionysian Apollonian dichotomy; random pleasures are principled physics. There is no object for our gaze; instead we are delivered glimpses. The author isn't dead but he doesn't control the narrative either. No one does. Gladwell achieves an attitude that we get and in getting it, it infiltrates how we perceive the relation between our stories and our context; a tenuous balance we sometimes manage between force and freedom.

Jonathan Jones also adopts a water metaphor to draw attention to the fluid nature of perspectives which mediate our conceptions of landscape, in turn demonstrating the imaginative constructs which structure our mental landscapes. Jones demonstrates this by installing props among the colonial Australian painting in the Elder Wing of the Art Gallery of South Australia providing alternative conventions to those which structure the conception of landscape portrayed in colonial Australian landscape painting. This aim dovetails intriguingly with Philip Samartzis' work which conflates the visual with the auditory, blurring the boundaries between background and foreground, natural and constructed which we experience through his sound sculptures but which equally apply back into the stable and discrete convention of colonial landscape painting, reordering and in some cases completely disrupting our perspectives on landscape.

Nicholas Folland continues this line of enquiry. He constructs visual works with crushed, shattered crystal and glassware. The multi-reflective surfaces defy the fixed and stable gaze encouraged by the colonial painting in the Elder Wing, among which it is exhibited. Folland is interested in the interface between various perspectives, not only within the individual but between individuals and groups. It might be helpful at this point to recall Grant Kester's idea about taking on the subjectivities of others. According to Kester, a condition of communication is that we approach as a partial subject, allowing for the internalization of the other's subjectivity (the other's perspective regarding what they would endorse or value).⁴ This suggests communication requires more than an exchange of information. The first work we encounter when entering the gallery is a case in point.

As we enter the vestibule of the gallery, we are accosted by Richard Bell's poster of the American Civil rights protest at the Mexico Olympics in 1968. The two sprinters who took out the gold and the bronze in the 200 meters sprint, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raised their hands in the sign of the American Civil Rights Movement as the American anthem

played. An Australian sprinter who had taken the silver, Peter Norman, offered to take part. As a consequence of his show of support for the black activists on the podium of the Olympic stage, he was excluded for many years by the Australian sports establishment from various competitions and events. The conceptions of fairness, free speech and egalitarianism that shape our sense of Australian nationality is here given a hammering. The historical materialists⁵ warned us of the extent to which our outlook – including the very concepts through which we make sense of the world - is institutionalised. This thought proves an appropriate entree into making sense of the juxta-positioning of periods and sensibilities which characterise the exhibition as a whole.

On cue, Rosemary Laing's carpet works unsettle the orientation we are accustomed to take to John Glover's portrayal of his Tasmanian homestead which hangs opposite it. The same could be said for their effect on the languid mind set into which Hans Heysen's reassuring brilliance normally lulls us. With the obvious artificial quality of Laing's forest floors, their bright clarity and even textures, the materiality of the work imposes on our awareness and spreads to our perceptions of the Glover and the Heysen nearby. One upshot is that the colours are freed from their representational duty and the formerly perceived compositional unity is realigned by the imposition of the flatness of the surfaces on our awareness. However, this need not diminish the hold that the Glover and Heysen have on us. We simply find our perceptions re-ordered. What we thought we perceived as given, is now reconfigured. The intrusion of Laing's carpeted bush photographs into the colonial art setting, beautifully demonstrates the role of context and convention in how we configure the world, the malleability of perception, the plasticity of mind. Laing's carpeted work brings the colonial counterparts to life in unexpected ways. And it is not a matter of remaking the artistic intentions; appropriating the work for a different purpose. The aspects of the work which are now to the fore relating to colour, flatness and materiality which are normally masked by the picturesque conventions through which we have learnt to view the works, would nonetheless have been the delicious components with which the artists worked themselves. It is as if we have been allowed into their creative space. Not a case of colonial painting usurped but colonial painting redux.

Re-perceiving and reinterpreting is not only a matter of creative space but can involve taking seriously the notion of communication suggested above in relation to Folland's work. Instead of appropriating all reports, descriptions and statements into our own entrenched perspectives or narratives, we might allow the other's subjectivities some hold on us. *Evening Shadows: Backwater of the Murray* painted by H. J. Johnston 1835-1907 around 1880 was the first painting acquired by the AGSA and is often claimed to be the most loved painting in their collection. An exhibition of fifty copies of the work, made predominantly by amateurs and students over the years was exhibited in 1999 at the gallery. The painting itself is one of at least three versions painted by the artist. The imagery shows three indigenous people settling down beside a small tent as the fading light of twilight brings out the distinctive shades of grey and olive greens in the Australian bush. The figures are set in

the middle ground, dwarfed by the imposing gums and their reflections in the river. It is painted in the kind of revelatory manner that was to inspire Heysen. One could be forgiven for being seduced by the tranquillity of the scene. Such paintings train our concept of landscape, when we inadvertently divide our perception of the bush into foreground, middle-ground and background, looking through trees that would frame the scene and allowing only those aspects which serve the picturesque to enter our awareness. However, Tom Nicholson attempts to overcome the picturesque in *Evening Shadows*. He considers what has been treated as a detail of the painting as a central moment of the work and in so doing perhaps reawakens a heightened poignancy in our response to it.

One of the figures begins to cross the river to join the other two at the campsite and it is this detail which Tom Nicholson raises to the level of guiding trope. He links this scene to a political march by indigenous people held in 1939; a walk-off in protest against their treatment by the NSW government at the Cumeragunja Aboriginal Reserve which brought them across the Murray into Victoria. In this context we look back to the three indigenous figures in the painting and the calm is shattered. Nicholson replaces this painting with a floor to ceiling collection of the many painted copies of the painting existing around Adelaide. His work also includes a drawing in progress, a video and poster to be distributed across Adelaide of the “walk-off” of 1939, in the mode of an advertising campaign poster. In this way, the painting of *Evening Shadows* is rescued from the historical archives figuratively speaking and shown for its relevance today. Whether this constitutes another form of appropriation is a moot point given a dominant concern of the artists exhibiting here is the historicity of perception. In this context, Nicholson’s treatment of the painting would be more accurately conceived as intervention.

The redundancy of the picturesque in this case need not be taken as a vote against utopianism. I would rather my imaginative interludes occur through an artist’s imagination than say, through the exploitation of an underclass in a developing country’s luxurious resort. Increasingly escape is replacing imaginative engagement. We are in a period where art is throwing down bigger and bigger anchors to resist being swallowed up by the vast wave of entertainment; little wonder utopianism is gulping for air. Yvonne Koolmatrie and Timothy Cook however, work with traditional Australian indigenous materials, fibre and earth based pigments respectively, to create works which by growing out of particular traditional indigenous cultural symbolism, resists cynicism while engendering hope. Hope is achieved through the simple beauty occasioned by their work. Such beauty is like “water running through stone” to quote a trope of the biennale. The beauty of Ricky Swallow’s bronze casts of discarded archery targets and reconstructed debris also lends this sensibility to the exhibition. Swallow demonstrates, along with Koolmatrie and Cook, that beauty, in spite of chronic misuse of the term, actually weighs the anchor down on the side of art’s power to further genuine communication and make sense of experience.

For her part, Susan Jacobs reminds us that for many visual artists, the materiality of their particular art form is a key to their inspiration. On this occasion, the sensuousness of drawing and the unpredictability of casting inform Jacobs' occupation of the Elder Wing and her incursion into our perceptions of another of AGSA's much loved paintings J. W. Waterhouse's *Circe Invidiosa* 1982. Jacobs casts the marks made by a slithering snake's movement across four bronze panels and situates them to resonate in the sensuous line of Waterhouse's *Circe*. The painting portrays the very moment that the jealous sorceress Circe pours her potion of strange and dangerous herbs into the spring in which the young girl Scylla bathes, transforming the lower body of the young girl into a many headed monster. This play between the uncontrolled movement in Jacobs' panels and the power of Circe reflects the peculiar psychology of control, a slippage between two extremes. The notion of control and lack of it is also explored by Max Pam and Robert Cook in their collaboration using photography and literature respectively. Their disturbing tropes; compulsive burial, dead-man walking, only lovable in one's absence, self-loathing presents the extreme opposite to the artistic enterprise. Emptiness, nothingness, hopelessness, entropy, disorder, randomness: the very state incompatible with the conditions for art, the latter built upon the possibility of shaping experience and hence of hope. Pam and Cook have managed the ultimate contradiction.

Actual contradictions are arguably nowhere possible except in art, where contradictory elements can be presented at once. This possibility is made manifest by Pat Foster and Jen Berean, in their supposition of a melding of external and internal landscapes (that is, of the physical and mental). Enter Daniel Crooks with his blurring of spatial intuitions into temporal sequences, playing with our minds indeed. Do we carve up experience such that experience is a sequence of units or is experience flowing and continuous such that we come in and out of unities that we have to construct.⁶ As a visual artist, Crooks can show us in the one frame that this is a false dilemma. There is a third way beyond these categories, and it is Crooks way, which only art can show us: collisions in parallel.

However, just as one dichotomy is dissolved another one solidifies. The disturbing sculptural forms of Rob McLeish interject into this construction of meanings, loudly proclaiming the violence perpetrated by our very conceptions which would thwart certain ways of being in the world. His violent interventions on the delicacy of ballet or gymnastics seem to chastise us. For every finely tuned notion we enjoy, there must be perpetrated a violence against someone's interest or livelihood. One almost feels compelled to withdraw from the game at this point. This primes us in a heightened way to receive the full force of Rosemary Laing's inverted house photographs. Carefully constructed wooden house frames are installed inverted on hill tops and trees in the middle of the Cooma-Monaro district in NSW. The interests of those who would encroach upon the wool producing regions in NSW with their urban dreams cannot proceed innocently, anymore than any so called rejuvenation. Analogously, new conceptions replace old ones, and the language in which certain interests live is reshaped to effectively dissolve those interests. Art is war or at least, it is not for the faint hearted. Theodor Adorno would approve.⁷

This brings us back to religion and science, the most powerful institutions of the “Common Era”. What has art got to do with it? The present selection of artists demonstrate that much of what we take for granted regarding the norms of understanding: our daily and long term goals, our processes of deliberation and the actions resulting, are steadily evolving outside what have been the dominant institutions of our time. Perspectives abound. The Arts in their various forms and contexts provide a window into the emerging mind.

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¹ The Dandy Warhols, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, Track 5: “I am a Scientist”. 2003.

² Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Polity Press, 1985, p.2.

³ For information on Shaun Gladwell’s background and influences, see Peter Robb on Shaun Gladwell, “Lessons in Unlearning”, *The Monthly May* 2011, pp.60-63. For a discussion of Gladwell’s Official War Artist position, see Kit Messham-Muir, “In the MIME-Network”, *Broadsheet* 40.2 June 2011, pp.123-25.

⁴ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

⁵ Theodore W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 1970, translated and edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor, The Athlone Press London paperback, 1999; and Herbert Marcuse, ‘Nature and Revolution’ in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), reprinted in Clive Cazeaux (ed) *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, London and New York: Routledge 2000: 257-67; and *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics), London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1979.

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead’s and Gilles Deleuze’s respective theories of experience are compared by Steven Shaviro, in *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics*. Cambridge MA: the MIT Press, 2009. Also see John Dewey’s *Art As Experience* (first published 1934). New York: Capricorn Books, 1958.

⁷ Adorno argued that only aesthetic form is genuinely art, whose inner consistency exists relative to the network of all artworks and by its very existence acts as critique and revision of dominant and entrenched conceptual frameworks. See Adorno 1999.