

A backward glance

Monday 17 March 2008

One of the interesting challenges about doing an artist's residency abroad is how to allocate your doing time: for culture, leisure, travel, research, work. The benefit comes from doing all of these things without losing sight of the thing you came to do. To be sidetracked in a place like Australia is very easy. However, I've managed to combine a very British expedience with a very Australian informality and done more than I imagined I would without wandering off.

Since the last time I wrote, seven weeks ago I've been working at Newington Armory, cogitated over how to approach my project, travelled up and down the NSW coast, flown to Melbourne to see the art and architecture, researched into the history of many of the buildings constructed as institutions for the care of children, had interesting conversations with people who have some involvement with or relationship to some of these historic sites, visited a number of galleries and museums in Sydney, walked in the Blue Mountains (and been air-lifted out!), been to the beach and actually begun to think more fully about ideas.

As a result the shape of the 'art plan' I had in the UK before I came is not the shape I am working with now. In response to developing an understanding of where I am and how best to make in the way I want to in the time that I have my plan has unfolded into a series of walks and talks in and around buildings that used to be children's homes rather than delving into archival boxes for evidence of the material culture of these places. Quite a surprise to me as I was convinced the objects from this past would dominate my ideas. Having arrived knowing a little about the Burnside Museum in North Parramatta it was interesting to find out about a number of other institutions in Parramatta which were constructed for children who were 'exposed to moral danger'. Parramatta was the second settlement in NSW so much of the history is stored and preserved here in the buildings, street names, parks that were once reserves or farms, and at the Heritage Centre. The Female Orphan School at the University of Western Sydney Rydalmere campus was the first three-storey building in the whole of Australia. The other key buildings I have been looking into are: Parramatta Girls Home and Lynwood Hall (in Guildford a few miles south of Parramatta).

I am developing a 'sites of memory' project having decided to go on individual walks with women with childhood memories of these homes. The aim is to make a series of three-dimensional, print-based work which document the hour or so we spend together. This work is underpinned by my interest in documents and heirlooms and what these mean to people whose childhood was interrupted by family dramas that resulted in a period in the social care system. I am also interested in somehow making visible the huge numbers of women (and

men) who went through the experience of time in care. Making artistic work about the history of children in institutions is timely. The new Labour Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd made history when on Wednesday 13th February he said Sorry to all the stolen generations. This was the opening address of the new government. It has opened wounds, and opened eyes to life stories (not only Indigenous) that have been profoundly denied by too many. I have been very fortunate to be here whilst the country publicly discusses a history that is in living memory, it has helped create opportunities to see the insides of buildings previously closed and engage people who might have been more reticent in the past. The possibilities have gone way beyond my expectations. My art making has been very research focused to date, I am working on gathering things - conversations, photographs, flora - to produce the final work. In the way of other people's art making I have chatted to a mix of artists about their motivations and seen some interesting shows.

SYDNEY

Western Sydney: Parramatta and Granville

A lot happens here at the Parramatta Artists Studios (PAS) and a lot more happens in western Sydney than eastern Sydney realises. PAS have been running Artsmart a professional development programme for artists in the region. This extensive, informative programme has been very well attended. I have been an invisible participant listening from my studio whilst making work not actually sitting in only because I have to prioritise. There is a life drawing class every Wednesday evening organised by Heath Franco a painter here at the studios. Renowned film maker and screen writer Khoa Do (www.khoado.com.au) has a studio at PAS and has been rehearsing a new piece for the Riverside Theatres (www.riversideparramatta.com.au). PAS also hosted the launch of the Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE) publication Artfiles (www.artfiles.com.au) and Michael Dagostino curated the current exhibition, Always Driving into the Sun, to coincide with the launch. ICE is very active here in the west developing projects for and with artists and young people in the region. They recently worked with London-based arts organisation Proboscis (www.proboscis.org.uk) on a workshop series designed for artists to explore processes and ideas. They also initiated a number of film programmes during the summer including Africa on Screen and Springboard, and in the autumn the Arab Film Festival.

Eastern Suburbs: Paddington

John Spiteri the Australian artist who was awarded the Artquest/PAS/ACAVA UK residency exhibited work in a group show, New Moon, along with fellow PAS artist Huseyin Sami at the Sarah Cottier Gallery. A discreet show in an intimate space which complemented the work of the nine artists.

Inner West: Homebush and Newington

Newington Armory has a recently established arts programme which in March/April includes Art Express (www.sydneyolympicpark.com/au/artexpress) the annual Higher School Certificate exhibition. A selection of students' work is shown here as well as at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW). It was interesting to see the breadth of media used from painting to installation to video and much of the work is very accomplished.

Among the artists using the studio at Newington is Cath Fogarty, a ceramist who also works at Regional Arts NSW (www.regionlartsnsw.com.au). She gave me a brief and interesting insight into the kinds of arts programmes being developed in north and north west NSW where communities are much smaller and often without public art facilities.

Central Sydney: Redfern and Waterloo

Rea the digital media artist I worked with in the UK in 1999 has recently exhibited work in two venues in NSW. The first was a group show at CarriageWorks (www.carriageworks.com.au) a new and spectacular venue which was previously the Eveleigh Rail Yard. The site has been transformed into an amazing contemporary art space. The show, Hand in Hand, was a joint venture by Boomalli (www.boomalli.org.au) and Performance Space (www.performancespace.com.au) (who are resident at CarriageWorks) to showcase the work of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islanders, Maori, Samoan, Nuiean and Fijian artists from Australia as part of Mardi Gras 2008. Rea's video installation, maang (message stick), is a haunting piece which asks questions about the Maralinga atomic bomb tests ordered by the British and carried out by Australians which displaced the Pitjantjatjara people in 1950s.

In the foyer Perth-based artist Sussi Porsborg was invited by Performance Space to install her ongoing participatory project, Portable Cenotaph, an opportunity for the public to make small handmade flowers and corsages constructed from discarded military fabrics. People are able "to construct their own wearable acknowledgements of war and loss." I had an interesting chat with her about the public response to her project and arts programmes in Western Australia.

Claire Healey and Sean Cordeiro 'fast becoming Australia's best-known artists' are also working at Newington Armory. They have been based there during the summer making a new body of work, Disruptive Colouration, for Gallery Barry Keldoulis (GBK) (www.gbk.com.au) who have moved to a new location in Waterloo. Disruptive Colouration was the inaugural show for the new space. Originally from Sydney and now living in Berlin they began collaborating in 2002. I thought the pieces were exquisitely made. The sliced and stacked electric blue tardis entitled Same Day Service or Sooner was a particular favourite as it was beautiful in itself and reminded me of childhood and home. "The show considers how

'disruptive colouration', the 19th century term for camouflage, takes many forms in our contemporary world and how the real workings of our globalised economies are hidden, disguised, and little discussed." The last time I saw Claire and Sean at Newington they were having a car delivered. An old model, beautiful, moss green (not sure of the date or make but another reminder of childhood and home) which they are using for their installation as part of the reopening of the Casula Powerhouse. They once dismantled the interior of a caravan and stacked the pieces back inside and we talked about how the car was too nice to deconstruct. I look forward to seeing the piece at the opening at the beginning of April, hopefully still intact...

Central Business District

I went to see the 08 Archibald Prize at AGNSW (www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au) with Tom Polo, a painter based at PAS. As with any major art prize the Archibald courts much debate. The winning work, You are what is most beautiful about me, by Del Kathryn Barton has had a mixed response. Many of the works in this show have formal, more traditional leanings but Del Kathryn Barton's work is much more illustrative. The award is prestigious, a \$50'000 cheque for the winner. In the words of a Sydney Morning Herald critic: 'her style has a Viennese ambience - a touch of Klimt and Schiele and a dash of Hundertwasser... unashamedly decorative...'

My trip to Hyde Park Barracks Museum (www.hht.net.au) was the first of my excursions to do art and culture in early February. The museum is one of 12 historic buildings managed by the Historic Houses Trust (HHT) "entrusted with the care of key historic buildings and sites in NSW. The museum tells the story of many occupants, from its original purpose as a convict barracks from 1819 to 1848 to its phases as a female immigration depot, asylum for aged and infirm women and later as courts and government offices." I was impressed with the way this building has been preserved, in the way the structural details have been restored, skillfully presenting the past. The room displaying the finds from the archeological digs is brilliant. I am continually intrigued by the many roles such buildings have had over time and how they somehow retain these characteristics. I find that the past is very much present in NSW.

NEW SOUTH WALES

Orange

I took a stunning, four and a half hour train journey with Orlagh Woods from Proboscis through the Blue Mountains and out to the Orange Regional Gallery (www.org.nsw.gov.au) to see Rea's second video piece, gins _leap/dubb_speak. This installation has been toured in Australia by d/Lux/Media Arts (www.dlux.org.au) and is an exploration of childhood memories. The piece "traces and tracks the memories, connections and on-going relationships to country/place/identity of four Gamilaraay women." Maria, Susan and Sharmaine are three women Rea went to school with in Coonabarabran. Rea is the only one has left their country.

The four large screens present images - details of the landscapes of their country - accompanied by meandering conversation between the four school friends as they reminisce about life experiences in and beyond their Indigenous community. The work is memorable for its visual richness and the fact that the public is 'allowed' to overhear their dialogues. I loved this work. My introduction to Australia was through Rea when I first met her in 1999 and her particular knowledge and insights have enabled me to begin to better understand Australia whilst I've been here. So to see this work was very significant for me.

VICTORIA

Melbourne

Whilst in Melbourne I managed to catch the last day of Richard Billingham's 'first ever major survey' show at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) (www.accaonline.org.au). The video pieces and large format photographs of ZOO, the works about his family and other landscape studies were well curated in what is quite an unusual, but likable, building. The show was excellent and I wish I'd had the opportunity to return ACCA to look at it and the building again.

It has been good going to exhibitions here. There's an honesty in a lot of the art I have seen and liked that I find refreshing and unpretentious. I've found some of the venues intriguing too - converted places which are not hiding from the fact that they used to be something else (and are in some ways still what they were), and new spaces that are making their mark.

Interesting.

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