

Chris Bennie Interview with Rebecca Ross

Making Arrangements maps out non-linear and personal narratives through a process of unpacking and cross-referencing artistic and archival materials. The threads connecting the materials explore ways that memory and reality coalesce, and the intangible links that anchor them in time and space. The exhibition takes form in an arrangement of moving images, photographs, paintings, collages, songs and ready-mades whose commonalities are linked by a recurring motif.

The following interview was conducted by Chris Bennie with Rebecca Ross via email over the course of three weeks leading up to the exhibition and was supported by studio visits and informal conversations about death, dying and flower arrangements.

CB: I first saw your work in the early 2000s at Metro Arts. I have a hazy memory of it, but I recall a video in which you trace the perimeter of a rooftop car park or abandoned urban space on foot. The video statically records your movement as you traverse the scene or approach the camera. While this work is deceptively simple, your performance clearly provides viewers with a reference to the predominant conceptual interest that has held your imagination ever since. You have been interested in mapping, and what seems like a representation of movement across diverse geographies since then. A cursory glance at your body of work reveals a substantial enquiry into diverse social, aesthetic and even political tensions that exist within regional, urban and international contexts. Let's start by reflecting on your personal and cultural relationship to your current place of residence — the Gold Coast and its broader metaphorical potential. What methods do you employ to assess or interpret the way you and your community traverse the specific geographic and social landscape of that part of the world?

RR: In the past my practice has been outward focussed and living on the Gold Coast the surface of things always beckons your attention, whether it be glistening buildings or glassy waves. Traversing the Gold Coast for me is about tracking changes in the landscape and observing the changing face of the highway heritage, the blocking of space by the ever growing height and volume of high-rises, the tearing down of old buildings and the revealing of new facades. These changes extend to the natural environment where tracking the weather is a pastime informed by my location in proximity to the surf and the airport; both clearly influenced by fluctuations in atmospheric conditions.

More and more I find the simplicity of observation and conversation of primary interest, and the way that key moments of these interactions drive artistic process and anchor ideas to outcomes. In the past these observations were focussed on exploring geographies by traversing sites. This practice has shifted to tracing memories, cross-referencing places in my mind and in my private space rather than in the landscape, uncovering emotional and psychological connections, and reallocating meaning and materials to an artistic context. Like finding your way in the ever changing spaces of the Gold Coast the process has been a continual state of reorienting myself and my work.

CB: As a former (and likely again) resident of the Gold Coast I was enamoured with the complex relationship between its psychological and geographic landscapes. The place hosts glaring contrasts between glitz and glamour, unemployment and crime and are etched across a 50 kilometre stretch of Australian coastline. This to me represents a complex picture of our human condition in which I have difficulty assessing what part of it might be absurd and what part of it might be sublime. The fact that artists like yourself, who have contributed measurable and contemporaneous outcomes within the region have not received national attention points, I think, to its complexity, and to some extent its continual cultural and stylistic reinvention. In 2013 you staged a significant social media campaign to halt the demolition of Miami Ice, a well known and much loved ice works built in 1947 using two former army huts. While the campaign did not eventuate as hoped, your investment in it signals an important political corollary operating in your life and work.

From this perspective, I can't help read your work through a political lens. It seems that mapping, and indeed memory, have important implications in the analysis of the ways in which we not only traverse geographies, but are 'allowed to' traverse them. What can you tell me about the politics of the Gold Coast with regard to how you personally traverse it and now orient yourself having lived and worked there for nearly a decade.

RR: The Gold Coast is so many things to so many people. I'm really interested in what the Gold Coast represents in Australia's collective consciousness and what it represents in reality to those of us who call it home. There are many exclusive and exclusion zones; high up in high-rises, gated communities, gated islands even, public spaces that are rendered private when big events come to town, and then there's the dawn patrol who keep watch over prized point breaks at their morning peak. These temporary zones and sites are constantly rejigging the geography, similar to the way sandbanks reposition waves. Then there are permanent changes to the cityscape, Miami Ice is one of those.

The other day driving through Miami visiting Walls artist Henry Jock Walker asked me "What's Miami Ice?". Whilst I responded by telling him what it was I realised that I no longer know what it is myself. That notion speaks to Making Arrangements, looking at memory and materials that embody past experience, pondering what it is now, and acknowledging and questioning the junctures and fissures of and in memory and meaning.

CB: In 2016 you staged a solo exhibition at Boxcopy ARI, Brisbane in which your text based video and exhibition catalogue struck a chord with me. The video displays a sequence of short statements in black font on white background. The statements are whimsical, absurd, poignant and sometimes simply strange. What's not immediately obvious to viewers however is the fact the statements are observations of slogans on t-shirts that you had witnessed in your daily travels in and around Burleigh Heads. I love that methodology, and while there is a DaDa quality to the work, it is grounded in a very specific geography and period of History. The fact that you published the essay for this exhibition on the front of a white t-shirt reinforces this interest, as it is likely those of us with that t-shirt/catalogue have worn it walking along Burleigh Esplanade. The qualities of this work brings me to your interest in botanics in your new work. You're working with digitised super 8 footage of gardens and flower beds. What led you to this subject matter?

RR: I had settled on the title for the show whilst working through some big life stuff; it's a response to dealing with the arrangements we make in life, including the arrangements we put in place for death, but also to the small and somewhat insignificant arrangements of household items we make in drawers and boxes, and the ways we arrange our living spaces. In essence it's about living and the spatial logic associated with that.

I found the Super 8 in the studio and had the film scanned. It revealed a number of subjects, the botanical observations being the prominent focus. In our conversation about an edit of the Super 8 the idea of editing the single motif of the flowers and plants, subjects I have been fond of since a very early age, had a perfect alignment with the title. They were all shot in the same place, in Woolloongabba, and are the outcome of an ongoing practice of the *dérive*. I began to look at the recurrence of the motif in my archive and artworks, and via that process uncovered a logic for arranging and linking disparate objects and materials.

CB: I've been doing a lot of photography lately. I like to go walks and see what I can capture. Today I went to Roma St. Parklands and explored flower photography. I think it's an underrated subject. It's actually very difficult to compose flowers or a garden because they don't have edges, unlike the frame of a photograph. Flowers blend into their surroundings seamlessly. They are also arranged in clusters or constellations and exist at the edge of pathways or homes. They possess a great sense of decorum and without doubt brighten our day. The motivation to unearth and highlight old footage of flowers with a contemporary art context as a motif for personal experiences is sweetly poetic. What else have you unearthed and arranged?

RR: The arrangements in the exhibition are made up of materials that reveal both text and motifs associated with flora; all visual metaphors that stem from making real life arrangements, and from considering the somewhat simple and decorative as much deeper and distinct in meaning. Yes, there's a sweet poetry but there is also a sadness and a celebration. Flowers like humans are very delicate and slowly decay. There's a lily that grows in my garden, a day lily, the flower only lives for one day, I've seen it two consecutive springs now. I think there is a parallel with memory and experience here whilst also being a memory and an experience in and of itself.

I am interested in how these botanical motifs and specimens can conceal and reveal in a similar way that blooms do so by opening and closing by the sun's clock. For example flourishes are used to highlight architecture and a bunch of flowers might conceal a wrongdoing or reveal an attraction. Camouflage is a synthetic foliage when in the gallery space is tied in a tension of concealing and revealing simultaneously. I think all of the elements in the show are working in this way, offering up information that is entwined in my personal memories and experiences, and linked to another time and space. There are objects like the breeze block that were unearthed in my backyard, and then there's songs, photographs, fabric and books that are scattered along a personal timeline. There's also an array of intangible things that have been unearthed; like the garden beds that you mention, these are the things that don't have edges, they are elusive and without clear definition.

CB: The exhibition has been carefully arranged, with objects, paintings and video presented in a dynamic way throughout the space. There are pieces included in the exhibition that invite viewers to consider the theme of arrangement from a historical and personal perspective. The inclusion of your year-10 Art feedback form attached to the reverse of the painting you made at that time, alongside super 8 footage and a Spotify playlist of songs with 'rose' in their title, for example, points to evidence of a personal stock-take prior to a significant life event. The fact that a defining motif in the show are flowers reinforce what this event might be and, I anticipate, will not be lost on audiences. Your savvy confusion of the implicit personal character of the theme, in my opinion, is a mark of good contemporary art. How successfully will visitors decode the exhibition do you think, and to what degree can contemporary art function as a universal truth when charged with monumental subjects such as death.

RR: Thinking about contemporary art and death is a rather striking subject for me however I don't think I can answer your question directly. It seems that contemporary art itself will never die as there will always be artists and by definition contemporaneous moments. It's a confusing idea, almost like a closed loop cycle. I've been reading about the potential emergence of A-mortal human beings and I wonder how the world, and culture especially, can function when things don't need to be passed on to the next generation because the knowledge bearers will always be alive.

Collectively and conceptually in this work I am presenting the viewer with a bouquet that is at once deep and meaningful, decorative and superficial. I think the experience could be likened to someone giving you flowers randomly or for no good reason, and rather than enjoying them your mind starts wandering, wondering what they (the person and the flowers) are hiding, and if there is a hidden motivation in the gesture. I think the show can be read in this way. The viewer can take from the works whatever they wish whether it be a purely aesthetic appreciation or whether they spend time to seek out the intended meaning and metaphors.

I once got sent a flower arrangement for Valentine's Day but I never found out who it was from. That was a missed opportunity for an arrangement. I'm sure there will be a few experiences like that too.