

The Body Politic:

Contemporary artists in Australia investigate place, identity, memory and history through the graphic image.

The Body Politic, the idea that a nation could be understood as a metaphorical body, was superbly visualized in the frontispiece for Thomas Hobbes' seminal text, *Leviathan*. First published in 1651, the book opens with a striking etching by Abraham Bosse. Born in the early 1600's, Bosse was a French-born, German Huguenot who made his living as a printmaker, producing exquisite engravings and etchings throughout his life. His work for Hobbes is easily Bosse's most remembered print, largely for his ability to visualize such a concise metaphor. His image for *Leviathan* is compositionally divided into geometric sections (in Bosse's *géométrique* style), the most captivating of which comprises the top half of the image. This section looks out over a cityscape and its surrounding landscape. Rising above it all is a towering crowned giant whose body is constructed from hundreds of tiny bodies. I begin with this representation of the Body politic, not because the artwork in this exhibition in any way endorses a Hobbesian worldview. Hobbes, having lived through the Thirty Years War and the English Civil War, had his own reasons for putting forward the idea of a social contract with an absolute monarch; we live in very different times and have lived through different histories. (Although, it is an interesting coincidence that Bosse was born within a few years of the Dutch East India ship *Duyfke* first landing in Queensland, forever altering the history of the Australian continent.) I begin with this image not because of what it depicts but because of what it does. Bosse gave us a visualization of the whole of the people and state in the abstract, in a way that points to issues still very much in debate today: the construction of place, urban life's dependence and effect on natural resources for prosperity, who is seen as a citizen in the eyes of the state, and all of it conveying the power images have upon reality.

I would like to posit the idea that the host of works in this exhibition can be seen as a new frontispiece for a new more complex body politic, one visualizing and encompassing how these artists investigate and respond to issues of the self, place, the land, memory, and the construction of the state and official history. But rather than a singular monarchical whole towering above, this body politic is a level, poly-vocal chorus. I say poly-vocal because this exhibition does not posit a singular vision or way of working, what these artists have in common is shared belief in the importance of their personal visions, articulate responses to their place and time, and like Bosse, an understanding of how to use the language of the printed image to make their contingent positions artifactual.

The work in this exhibition traces and embodies many different ideas, and any attempt to overlay the logic of categorical thinking from a curatorial perspective can only be an act of pure folly. Even so, it is in our nature to stare at the night sky and see constellations, and it is our curatorial prerogative here to define the overlapping boundaries that begin to appear within this large body of work. From our vantage point on the ground looking up, the conceptual stakes amongst this

work resides at the intersection of several overlapping points: Body, Place, Identity/Memory, and History.

Body/Memory

Neuroscientists tell us that our memories are not recordings of events stored in our computer brain waiting to be played back, but more akin to scripts that our bodies and minds read anew with each remembering. In a similar way, many of the artists here are looking to visit new rememberings within their perceptual and personal memory. While other artists in this grouping are looking to the body as a generative space, or chose to play with the documentary tools of science to create new ways of perceiving the self. Michelle Roberts, perhaps does all three as she mines the tools of Neuroscience to construct her installations, which are manifestations of memory. Blair Coffey similarly uses transparent medical images and x-ray photographs as a starting point for formal investigations into the 'medical gaze' in form and color. Bill Platz uses new and traditional tools, such as figure drawing, video, performance, carbon fiber and prints on linen, to investigate the zombie-fication of the human form, responding in part to an obscure Degas drawing depicting a young girl's visceral yawn. Carolyn McKenzie-Craig's work investigates how 'language and gestures of the body are used to construct normalcy', while developing printed images and large scale installations that confront the viewer on multiple registers. Ross Woodrow's work investigates the ways meaning has been constructed from authoritative representations of the body. And Glen Skein, who utilizes print, collage to create work that seems at once to reference the touch/skin, the body, and physical theater. Similarly Paul Eves prints collographs from found material, including vinyl LPs. He often layers and tears the surfaces of his work, creating what he refers to as his 'Wall' illustrating the metaphorical barrier that separates us.

Place

What is more innately human than to begin with the question of 'where am I?' and making artwork that delves into our relationship to Place, a shared body of land, and the environment. As if in answer, Jennifer Andrews's work engages nature through a drawing process, conjuring from images of Protester Falls, the site of Australia's first major environmental protest at Terania Creek. Clare Cowely's 'landscapes' draw from memory and imagination of place. And Russell Craig's surfboards depict imaginings of life under water, while embodying an ancient technology for navigating the waves. Tim Mosely, through his paper, books, and prints, bring representation in conversation with philosophical constructs. Jude Robert's deep investigation of water lead her to working in conversation with the river, using its waters to point to human intervention into the landscape.

Identity/History

The widening of the cultural discourse in the 1960's and 70's made more space for people whose voices the academic and societal establishment had long ignored. Negotiations of difference and agency within a pluralistic society with uneven distributions of power remain as relevant now as in the past. Artists have taken this thread in generatively complicating directions, such as, close readings of cultural signifiers and investigations of unprecedented cross-cultural experiences. Many of the artists in this exhibition continue to push this area of research and self-discovery, like, David Jones uses analogy and juxtaposition, mining visual and material culture for evidence of how power and control can be exerted through depictions of racial stereotypes embodied in the most mundane objects, like a child's doll. And Evan Gardener's rigorous confessional investigation of identity and gender dysphoria seems to be inventing new visual languages to address newly illuminated forms of alienation. Jenny Sanzaro-Nishimura's diverse body of work investigates the shifting constructions of both history and identity in visual culture. While others are troubling the construction of our so-called History by mining the archives that contain the artifacts and documents of our shared past, for example, Judy Watson's archival research and beautiful appropriation of historic documents pointing towards aspects of Australia's history of troubled institutionalized racism (not all that different from ours here in the U.S.). Jonathan Tse similarly makes books and collaged prints, drawing from a trove of immigration papers relating to his own experience as an Asian-Australian. Ryan Presley takes the move one step further, creating his own invented Aboriginal currency; generating documentary evidence of a world in which he would like to live.

A frontispiece is meant to illustrate the ideas embodied in a text, this ranging exhibition can be said to embody, if not illustrate, many striking ideas. And like a book, the connective tissue that holds this body of work together is the printed mark. Each artist in this exhibition is leveraging the graphic signature of the print in some way, whether they are using a traditional process and/or a new media matrix to capture and translate their gesture, or mining historic printed documents to create a collage vocabulary. All of the artists in this exhibition proceed with an understanding that their chosen process changes and adds meaning to the images and objects they create, and they evidence a visible faith that the stories we share define our relationships to one another. Collectively they form the silhouette of a new Australian body politic.

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