

far and wide: Narrative into Idea

Barbara Campbell, George Egerton-Warburton,
Michael Lindeman, Alex Martinis Roe and Tom Nicholson

Curated by Jasmin Stephens

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far and wide: Narrative into Idea explores how five Australian artists — Barbara Campbell, George Egerton-Warburton, Michael Lindeman, Alex Martinis Roe and Tom Nicholson — infuse their conceptual processes with narrative. While the approaches to narrative in the exhibition are well-known, the exhibition focuses on a particular strategy for dealing with narrative which is to form and frame narrative through an organising idea.

The first part of the title, *far and wide: Narrative into Idea*, is intended to reflect these artists' appreciation for the momentum associated with any story. The second part describes their use of cultural forms such as oral history, sign writing, the open letter and the diorama to devise and set in train processes that harness and extend the narratives they are working with. The vistas suggested by *far and wide* point to the range of narratives in feminism, the media, psychology, labour, craft and play they are exploring. Lastly, the concise nature of the phrase *Narrative into Idea* is indicative of the concentrating processes they engage with and the manner in which these artists combine the expansive properties of narrative with refined thinking.

'Narrative' can be defined as an account connecting events. When some kind of transmission is involved, it is a word that is used to draw attention to what surrounds a story — who is doing the telling, who is the listener/reader/viewer and in what circumstances. In the case of these artists, their connection to narrative is expressed in a relatively explicit fashion. The exhibition considers how they produce a heightened awareness of their intentions at the same time as anticipating viewers' own narratives. That said, although all the works in the exhibition have their inception in individual sequential narratives, they do have different relationships to their 'stories' and to the issue of 'narrative' in general.

The five artists span several generations. The most senior, Barbara Campbell, has a thirty-year practice and the youngest, George Egerton-Warburton, was recently a Gertrude Contemporary Studio Artist who has commenced

studies at the University of Southern California. The exhibition does not aim to historicise a tendency in Australian art by presenting works that are representative of artists' practices. Nevertheless, by selecting new, recent and older work from different points in the artists' exhibition histories, opportunities have arisen for the appraisal of works in the context of a more extended time frame. As the curator of the exhibition, I have sought to respond to the artists' expressive thinking, attention to aesthetics and regard for the processes of exhibition making and performance.

Barbara Campbell developed her video installation, *Conradiana* (1994), after reading Eleanor Coppola's account [*Notes* (1979)] of the making of the film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), by her husband Francis Ford Coppola. *Apocalypse Now* was famously inspired by Joseph Conrad's canonical novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Typing Conrad's text nearly six times, Campbell sought to undercut the grandeur of the European romantic imagination by juxtaposing the text with video footage shot on the Jungle Cruise at Disneyland. Campbell looked to daughter Sofia's (who is now a film director) observation that the film's location in the Philippines was like the Disneyland ride. In performing the typing of the manuscript, Campbell was also making visible the female labour that facilitates the achievements of individual male genius.

Campbell's work exemplifies the curatorial premise of the exhibition. By honing her idea, she makes room for audiences' viewpoints by planning for her intention not to dominate their apprehension of the structure of the work. She may be arranging and orchestrating its intertwined narratives but she is not 'telling' the story.¹

As a student, **Tom Nicholson** began collecting print media images from protests, celebrations and rituals across the world in which people holding images of people were depicted. In his video, *Printed pages/ Bearing images/ 1998-2008* (1998-2008), time and space are compressed. The slow dissolve from one image to the next sets up a 'complicating or confusing of victim and culprit, of the body that bears and the figure that is borne'. Nicholson now



Barbara Campbell, *Conradiana* (detail), 1994, exhibition view *Return to Sender*, University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, 2012, photo: Carl Warner

recognises that this idea was the origin of his long-term banner marching project involving banners of blown-up digital prints of hand-drawn faces. The 'collective form-making' generated in this early work is underlined by Nicholson's recent comment, 'I have long been attracted to what I'd call prospective forms in art ... They are attuned to our ability to imagine, and to incarnate that imagining through forming. This is something really important to art, but also to our behaviour politically.'² Arguably, by allowing his collecting process to take its course, Nicholson was able to absorb the rich potential of his idea and, importantly, defer any overarching interpretation.

Michael Lindeman seeks to recuperate the vernacular and rarely acknowledged aspects of life. One of his paintings is a replica of a letter of certification he received as a dishwasher attendant for Sizzler Restaurants. Another is a replica of a handwritten letter to the viewer entitled *Dear Art Enthusiast* (2014) in which Lindeman simultaneously recalls his casual job and questions society's

expectations of artists. In recent abstract paintings he has traced the resemblance of retail newspaper advertisements and non-objective painting.

Lindeman embraces the open letter as a form of contemporary portraiture with considerable possibilities for commentary and humour. Drawn to Pop Art and its critique of social distinctions, his letters effect an elevation of the banal through strategies of appropriation, replication and translation. Lindeman's confessional register, however, is held in check by his sense of the absurd and the accentuated surfaces of his paintings.

Lindeman's textual referencing of forms from graphic design, literature and popular illustration is one example of the dynamic of Conceptual Art and its legacy in the exhibition. While all the artists display a critical relationship to society's dominant narratives, stylistically, Conceptualism's influence is most evident in the formal language of Campbell's work.³

A story from Circolo della rosa (2014) is the first in a series of films by **Alex Martinis Roe** in which she maps the genealogies of collectives and networks in Europe and Australia that are affiliated to the feminist tradition of 'sexual difference' (which seeks to critique rather than gain entry to the existing social order). Martinis Roe's interest in the notion of collective authorship has led her to research and practise feminist approaches to collaborative knowledge production.

In this work, she uses the idea of 'affidamento', a 'manner of relating' conceived by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective and which translates as 'entrustment', to portray the rapport between the two women in the film, Laura Minguzzi and Mariri Martinengo, and her relationship to them as the film maker. Perspectives from oral history and postcolonial theory inform her desire to shape an 'ethics of participation' that challenges the conventions of traditional documentary making. As the narrator, Martinis Roe assumes an immediate position and tone that is consistent with her critical view of objectifying communication processes. Acknowledging that the older women are part of her own genealogy, she also avoids idealising their attachment.

George Egerton-Warburton cultivates the awkward relationship of actions to thoughts and impulses through the application of irrational methodologies. The naivety of his works makes a virtue of not over-analysing things. To someone whose performative practice is characterised by misadventure and misfits, the humble diorama offers clarity - one's whole life contained within a single field of vision - during a period of turmoil. ⁴

The diorama is a viewing system that has an ambivalent cultural status as it shifts between the world of elite museums and the DIY realm of the hobbyist. It enjoys an indiscriminate relationship to cultural hierarchies because of its association with the learning and accomplishments of high culture and its capacity to satisfy our innate desire for displays of veracity and skill. Egerton-Warburton gravitates to its intimacy and drama. In reverting to the diorama, he demonstrates an unerring eye for the counter narratives

engendered by the uncontrived and the artless. Egerton-Warburton derives a certain consolation when fashioning his hand-built works in the face of the 'compartmentalisation' of life. The promise of a more untrammelled life as an artist, however, is illusory. The dematerialised labour of the artist is no less a burden than the gender inequalities highlighted by Campbell or Lindeman's experience of the casualised fast food industry. His musings on labour are echoed in the technologies of typing, sign writing, newspaper typography and digital compositing and their vocational sensibility. Despite the works in the exhibition giving such prominence to their conception and design, the exhibition has a strong sense of craft about it. Even Martinis Roe's preferred term for her work as film instead of video invokes a creative tradition - the craft of film making - in which Egerton-Warburton's wood and Martinis Roe's words could conceivably be related.

far and wide: Narrative into Idea considers the relationship between narrative and conceptual thinking. Its focus on methodological questions, the way in which the artists form and frame narrative through an organising idea, is intended to foster a closer reading of artists' work at a time when, as Hannah Mathews has written, 'the Conceptualism promoted by Conceptual Art has seemingly permeated and become an essential presence in all levels of contemporary practice'. The exhibition offers only one view of this broader question but its emphasis on artist's process seems suited to the scale and purpose of UTS Gallery with its proximity to the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building.

Along the way, I have had reservations that the specificity of my curatorial premise could promote a unifying aesthetic or a dichotomy between invention and execution in the exhibition. Such accomplished artists, however, were never to be constrained by any undue emphasis. Above all, curating *far and wide: Narrative into Idea* has been the opportunity to engage with rigorous practices that are a testament to the rewards of thinking slowly.

Jasmin Stephens

Independent Curator, Sydney



Tom Nicholson, *Printed pages/ Bearing images/ 1998-2008*, 1998-2008, high definition video stills

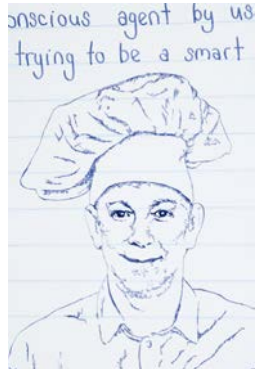
Footnotes

1. *Conradiana* grew out of the performance *Backwash* which was presented at *Australian Perspecta* in 1993 in Sydney and later in Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne and San Francisco. It was subsequently acquired by Griffith University Art Collection in 1997.

2. 'Q & A with Raafat Ishak and Tom Nicholson' with Ryan Johnson and Danny Lacy in *Raafat Ishak and Tom Nicholson. Proposition for a banner march and a black cube hot air balloon.*, exhibition catalogue, Shepparton Art Museum, Shepparton, 2012, p 35.

3. Hannah Mathews' essay for her exhibition, *Power to the People: Contemporary Conceptualism and the Object in Art*, in which she makes the distinction between Conceptualism as a style and as a diversity of critical practices has been an important reference. See *Power to the People: Contemporary Conceptualism and the Object in Art*, exhibition catalogue, Melbourne Festival and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2011, p 7.

4. Conversation with the artist, 6 August 2014.



Michael Lindeman, *Dear Art Enthusiast* (detail), 2014, photo: George Piper

List of Works

Barbara Campbell

Conradiana, 1994

typewriter text on 20 Chinese rice paper scrolls and video, scrolls 457.2 x 30.5 cm each, video 7:00 minutes
Griffith University Art Collection. Acquired with the assistance of the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body
Courtesy the artist

George Egerton-Warburton

Leonardo, 2014

resin, orange peel, wool, wood, wire, 30 x 20 cm

Recycled wood, recycled concepts, 2014

wood and acrylic, 75 x 112 x 78 cm

The accountant, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 cm

Untitled, 2014

mixed media, 60 x 120 x 80 cm

White men dancing, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 cm

Courtesy the artist

Michael Lindeman

Dear Art Enthusiast, 2014

pencil and acrylic on canvas, 204 x 142 cm

Dear Michael, 2014

pencil and acrylic on canvas, 204 x 142 cm

Invisible Hand #3, 2012

acrylic on canvas, 183 x 130 cm

Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney

Alex Martinis Roe

A story from Circolo della rosa, 2014

high definition video, 8:19 minutes, material courtesy of Laura Minguzzi and Mariù Martinengo and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective Archive
Courtesy the artist

Tom Nicholson

Printed pages/ Bearing images/ 1998-2008,

1998-2008, high definition video, 98 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane



Michael Lindeman, *Invisible Hand #3*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 130 cm, photo: Greg Piper



George Egerton-Warburton, *The accountant*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 cm, and *Leonardo*, 2014, resin, orange peel, wool, wood, wire, 30 x 20 cm

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9 September – 10 October 2014

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Curated by Jasmin Stephens

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Michael Lindeman is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney
Tom Nicholson is represented by Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Cover: Alex Martinis Roe, *A story from Circolo della rosa* (detail), high definition video still, 2014