

GNAP GUIRGUIS NEW ART PRIZE
11 APRIL – 31 MAY 2015

Welcome to GNAP15. This national contemporary art prize showcases the diversity of talented artists working across a range of media including sound, light, installation, video, painting and sculpture.

The broad approaches in contemporary art practice now allow artists to work across a range of media with work that is challenging and arresting. The diversity of media also allows us as viewers to question what constitutes contemporary art and how we understand this within our 21st century lives.

It's delightful to see the prize continue to evolve and build on the outstanding success of the inaugural GNAP13. This success does not come without a huge amount of hard work and I would like to take this opportunity to thank not only Shelley Hinton in particular for her mercurial curatorial skills, but also Gordon Morrison, the AGB staff and the GNAP Committee for their outstanding efforts in ensuring the successful presentation of GNAP15.

GNAP15 continues to build on Ballarat's enviable reputation as one of the country's major regional art hubs. With the collaboration of Federation University Australia's Arts Academy and its Post Office Gallery and the iconic Art Gallery of Ballarat, there has been a great deal of goodwill which is amply demonstrated in the quality of the exhibition and the standard of the artists this year.

Carolyn and I feel very honoured to have judges of the calibre of Hannah Mathews and Max Delany for GNAP15. Hannah, as a Senior Curator at ACCA, and Max as Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the NGV, both recognised and respected experts in contemporary art, bring a depth of knowledge to this Prize, which we suitably acknowledge.

We are hugely excited by the calibre of artists taking part this year. The fifteen finalists come from across the country, showcasing a snapshot of Australian contemporary art practice. With each of the artists exhibiting widely nationally and internationally, their inclusion in this Prize cements GNAP's place as one of the most important contemporary art prizes in Australia.

Finally, I'm overwhelmed by the support and enthusiasm GNAP has generated amongst the public. Public support of the inaugural Prize was sensational and I look forward to seeing everyone at GNAP15. This is a wonderful time to celebrate contemporary art in Ballarat and to enjoy all the delights of our wonderful city.

MARK GUIRGUIS

Any artwork worth its salt will present challenges, but those in this second Guirguis New Art Prize make demands on numerous levels, and the few seconds glance allowed by many gallery visitors will hardly suffice.

The work shown here is multi-layered and dense with associations and we will find ourselves constantly being tested and teased. Put simply, we need to be on our toes!

Chris Bond, for example, adopts the role of fabulist and in *The Devil's Spit* puts us in the uncomfortable position of having to separate historical fact from fiction. An intriguing mystery set in the Ballarat district, *The Devil's Spit* is presented as a museum-like arrangement of artifacts that are 'evidence' of a failed mission by five artists to investigate paranormal events. While some quotidian objects are plausibly the debris that survived, and other artifacts are mysterious, unlike anything we will have seen before, all bear a scrupulous *aura* of authenticity. 'Forensic evidence' also plays a role in Julie Gough's *The Gathering*, as found and made objects assembled on a table point towards a continuing crime, the obliteration of Aboriginal history in the artist's home state, Tasmania. In the video, a record of Gough's recent journeys in rural Tasmania, this seemingly inexorable process is suggested by images of property names like Chiswick, Oakwood, and Kinloch, road-kill, and cleared tree 'pyres'. *The Gathering* has at its heart what Gough terms 'The Impossible Return', a recovery of an elusive past and a spiritual reunion with her Aboriginal forebears in, as the title suggests, 'an otherworld assembly'.

Kate Mitchell's *Future Fallout* video is a kind of running sight gag, a joke made at the expense of those gullible enough to turn to psychics, fortune-tellers or others offering to assuage their fears. The artist presents herself as the 'bunny' – riding up to the door of a 'Psychic' shop, trying to open it only to find that the building falls down – over and over. There's clearly nothing behind the facade but it seems we never learn. Susan Jacobs' *Prospects* goes a step further and sets up her audience for a fall. Her video shows a tiny metal wizard being manipulated before magically melting and disappearing. The artist relates this process to Molybdomancy, a method of divining the future, but puzzled viewers unfamiliar with the quirky properties

of Gallium may wonder whether they have become victims of some modern alchemist's scam or of a magician's sleight of hand. While on one level the work may imply that our self-claimed prophets have feet of clay, in a broader sense the remarkable transformation of the wizard acts as a metaphor for the creative process itself.

Recently the Art Gallery of Ballarat *Eikon* exhibition demonstrated how the Christian icon acted as a kind of portal through which the believer could access the spiritual world. Jess Johnson's meticulous and enigmatic drawings share the icon's hieratic formality and similarly invite us to enter a different realm, one overflowing with contorted figures, seemingly endless tessellated floors and cryptic proclamations. The animated drawing *Mnemonic Pulse* challenges the stasis of the individual drawings as the figures and architectural features appear to spin before us. To really penetrate Johnson's arcane world we need to be privy to her sources just as to fully access Conrad Tipungwuti's artwork we would need to share his traditional beliefs. Nevertheless, we can intuit the spirit that animates Tipungwuti's paintings and respond to their striking formal character. They are soaked in his own culture – both literally in the sense that he has used the natural ochres of his land, and metaphorically in that his designs are derived from the Tiwi traditions of Melville Island. The delicate and rhythmical dotted lines that distinguish these *Rain* paintings originate in the traditional patterns painted on the carved poles and dancers' bodies that are central to the Pukumani funerals.

Lou Hubbard's *Dead Still Standing* brings to mind Andre Breton's description of Surrealism as the process of bringing 'two widely separate realities' together and 'drawing a spark from their contact'. In this case Hubbard has caused a spark by bringing a horse and decorative furniture into an unexpected juxtaposition, as if they've been caught in a freeze-frame while crashing together. The furniture is falling, the horse is deflating and impotent, and a sense of instability, doubt and tension prevails. Sometimes when faced with a puzzling work such as this we find ourselves hoping that the title will help us at least to understand the artist's intentions. Hubbard's title, however, may be taken as a parallel expression, with its own loading of ambiguity and irony. The title of Teelah George's *Picking rocks*, certainly plays a special role,

nudging us to imaginatively transform hundreds of blobs of Blu-Tack on a piece of recycled old cardboard into rocks scattered on a plain. While at first glance the placement of the 'rocks' may seem quite arbitrary, extended looking suggests they were sited and re-sited as dictated by the artist's intuitive sense of composition, her reach, and the physical character of the cardboard.

Mark Shorter's *Letter to Some Dead Greek Guy* pays homage to Aristotle's speculations about the existence of our antipodean world. Shorter has interpreted Aristotle's propositions in a series of delicate drawings and one of these, depicting cones marking out northern and southern zones, has been used as the basis for a suspended metal sculpture. As a reminder perhaps that it should be considered a purely noumenal 'object', the sculpture is painted in Chroma-Key Green. In the video, cross-sections of the cones appear as circles attached to the artist's naked body, as he stands motionless in a forest telepathically sending his 'missive to a long dead Greek man'.

'Audience participation' takes on special meaning with Dylan Martorell's *Leisure Physics*, an installation that incorporates urban flotsam and jetsam the artist scrounged from various locations in Asia and, of noticeably different character, from the streets of Melbourne. Touching parts of the work produces what the artist refers to as a 'sonic identity of place' sounds associated with the objects, so creating an aural experience of daily life in some far distant communities. Another work with a pronounced ambient quality is *Dichroic Filter Piece* by Ross Manning. Flickering beams of light from a data projector hit the dense forest of triangular 'shards' so that brilliant arrows of colour shoot off in all directions. While Manning is at pains to avoid any hint of mysticism or mystification by making the mechanism clear to the viewer, there's no doubt that the overall effect is magical and transcends the simple means. The light is intangible and bewitching and its mystery is, in a sense, in plain sight.

A number of Guirguis New Art Prize artists offer their audience a range of entry points to engage certain 'hot-button' political issues. We might, for example, be tempted to view Chris Barry's photographs of female Luritja artists simply as evidence of continuing Aboriginal disadvantage, but if we take time to watch the images scroll past it will become evident that the

strongest qualities expressed are positive and life affirming. There are undoubtedly signs of poverty and decay, but the photographs are illuminated by their subjects' humour, dignity and sheer delight in posing (note Joanne Wheeler as an odalisque). Here are revelations of character and personality, true portraits based on the trust and respect the artist earned from years of working at the Tangentyere Artists co-operative in Alice Springs.

The focus of Jemima Wyman's 'activism' is camouflage and its powerful psychological role in both protecting and arming those who use it. In *PSYOP* (an acronym for 'Psychological operations' as used by the military) we witness the secret training exercises of a group of New Zealand activists. Through the lens of Wyman's hand-held camera, we see participants dressed in ghillie suits designed and made by Wyman 'performing' strange initiation and training rituals. The masks and costumes appear to empower the 'actors' and to endow them with a demonic presence. Satire, as used to great effect in Mata Dupont's *Purgatorio*, is one of the most useful tools in an activist's kit. *Purgatorio* is a musical with all the pizzazz we expect from this genre but takes as its subject the plight of refugees. In an update of the second book of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Mata Dupont's cast members sing and dance their way through a bureaucratic maze of hurdles. The central character is the people smuggler who acts as an unctuous guide to purgatory, offering refugees paradise 'for a small fee'. We share the 'fourth wall' with the refugee, and are sweet talked and gabbed at by politicians, security guards and case-workers.

With Dominic Redfern's *Weeding*, a site-specific work made in Ballarat, we return to where we started, with a warning against relying on a cursory glance. Using gorse as the focus Redfern invites us to meditate on the manifold ways our attitudes towards the 'weed' reflect broadly held fears, such as those we have about environmental destruction, urban expansion, and 'invasion' by refugees. Over three screens, slowly panning close-up shots of gorse bring us into intimate and unexpected contact with a natural world of great beauty and complexity, but we also become witnesses to the plant's destruction as the artist immerses himself in the transformative, civilizing, process of weeding.

GEOFF WALLIS

In Bond's new work, *The Devil's Spit*, the creative energy of five invented artists is channelled from within the confines of a fictional narrative.

In March 1963, in an isolated paddock in Dean, just north of Ballarat, a group of five artists stood staring at a blackened, rock strewn landscape. They'd been drawn to the area by a journal article describing the scientific discovery of what locals had long called *The Devil's Spit*, a thirty metre stretch of black obsidian rock formed by prehistoric lava flows. Led by fraternal twins Ruth and Des Sewell, together with Peter Varga, Gloria Haines and Ian Haas, they spent the next year living in a caravan positioned directly over the obsidian in the hope of absorbing what Ruth termed 'ecstatic dark matter', spending much of that time crafting objects to be used in elaborate nightly rituals.

Sometime in early 1964 the five artists vanished, along with all traces of *The Devil's Spit*. All that remained was their caravan, discovered in the early 1970s by local landowners some five kilometres away, mired in the muddy river bed of Birch Creek. Inside the rotting, rusting hulk they found home-made ceremonial paraphernalia, sculptural assemblages, carved pieces of obsidian, household items and books, all of which were recovered and stored by Victoria Police's Missing Persons Unit until their repatriation to members of the Sewell family in the 1980s.

Chris Bond's *The Devil's Spit* is a curated selection of these remnants, organised into a museum-like installation that speaks of decay, failure, and uncertainty. The included objects and introductory plaque provoke an unstable balance of knowing and unknowing, dissolving distinctions between fact and fiction, authenticity and deception.

Bond has long been an advocate of fictional play, a technique that allows him to inhabit the bodies and minds of invented artists and writers as a means to create new work. Within this generative methodology, he employs pseudonym, identity simulation and self-deception in order to side-step self-conditioned responses to ideas, materials, and forms.

The process of fictional play demands a suspension or displacement of the self. It opens a psychological space where an artist can function as an actor within their own work, permitting a freedom of thinking and expression that allows them to discover, unleash and perform an imagined capacity for multiple positions and unconditional approaches.

The Devil's Spit activates this methodology. Within the work, Bond has constructed identities for each of the five artists, acting out their imagined personae in order to make objects on their behalf. These items exist in the installation as props, and in the absence of any other form of supporting documentation, they carry the ambiguity and credibility of the narrative entirely on their own.

With the methodology in hand, Bond is interested in the potential of these objects to operate outside of the narrative in which they were invented, to push into an area where an evaluation of their formal qualities might grant them some form of autonomy.

CHRIS BOND

Chris Bond

The Devil's Spit (cane, upright), 2015

oil, acrylic & soil on timber

114 cm

Courtesy the artist, Nellie Castan Projects,
Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Photograph: Joanne Moloney

