

## Art + Film catalogue extract, essay by Adrian Martin

### PREFACE

Natasha Bullock and Brendan Lee, Curators

*Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.* Walter Benjamin

Benjamin's prophetic and widely quoted statement from his famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' heralded the impact of film upon modernity. In modest and recontextualised terms, *Art+Film* continues his enquiry by exploring the pervasiveness of the cinematic medium and the dynamic effect it has had on contemporary art in Australia.

The exhibition features a range of emerging and established Australian artists, whose work responds to the cinematic experience, either through direct appropriation of films, stylistic and thematic references to particular movies, or through in-depth analysis of film's very materiality – its particular blend of light and time. In a discursive sense film can accomplish what many philosophical theories cannot: the human capacity to model the world and to play at modelling possible worlds.

The eight artists selected for *Art+Film* include Chris Bond, Philip Brophy, Starlie Geikie, Lily Hibberd, Christopher Köller, Brendan Lee, David Noonan, Simon Trevaaks and Ricky Swallow. Their work references the cinematic through diverse means. Large-scale photographs, phosphorescent paint effects, digital soundscapes, video, DVD and sculpture explore cinematic codes relating to light, sound, cinematography and *mise en scène*, whilst also investigating film culture and paraphernalia.

In sculptural terms, Bond's time-capsule, *Aspect Ratio Key Ring* (2003), comprised of eight rectangular pieces of wood on a key chain, is a precisely constructed document which represents the scale of cinema screen aspect ratios – from the early silent film screen to the cinemascope; and Geikie's sculpture, *With my veins running fire and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs* (2003), re-presents the female cult character through the tropes of the horror genre.

In regards to the moving image, Lee's video installation, *Shoot me* (2003), uses randomly generated camera angles in the production of an action sequence to demonstrate film's ability to create the impossible; Noonan and Trevaaks, in *SOWA* (2002), incorporate stage-like sets and film, locating the viewer in a space between fact and fiction which remains unanswered; and Brophy portrays the filmic and sonic environments of the future in epic proportions in his illusionistic work entitled *The Sound of Milk - Prologue I* (2003).

Despite its essential 'stillness', photography shares a special relationship with film. The sheer scale and spectacular impact of Köller's photographs, from the series *Milano* (1999), demand that the viewer be absorbed into the cinematic space as inspired by the Italian auteur Antonioni.

From the haunting photograph of Swallow's carved wooden mask referencing the *Scream* trilogy of films (*Picture a screaming sculpture*, 2003), to Hibberd's glow-in-the-dark paintings that chronicle cinematic encounters with light (*Blinded by the Light*, 2002/3), this exhibition considers the potency of cinema – the most popular of all cultural forms.

1. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), *Illuminations*, Ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape LTD, 1970), p.229.

### A CINEMATIC FABLE

Adrian Martin

These days, the history of cinema resembles a crime scene glimpsed suddenly in the glare of flashbulbs at the start of a *film noir* thriller. Something has happened, something has changed; an investigation is taking place. A trauma has derailed the natural unfolding of the medium's history. Now the cinema lies broken, in pieces on the floor. It is time for the artists – those other artists, the ones from the galleries, not from the film studios or the cinémathèques – to move in, scavenge, and reassemble the pieces in unusual, perverse combinations. Deconstruction, they like to call it, nodding to the reporters on the scene who hold their notebooks open, ready for a story.

Everywhere in the landscape of modern art, films lie about in disconnected segments, made strange forever more. Contemporary Australian art joins gleefully in this adventure, since most of its artists have grown up in a self-conscious, cinephilic, popular culture, forging their own intense, obsessive attachments: Ricky Swallow with his dramatically re-sculpted masks from sci-fi and horror movies; Starlie Geikie's modelling of cast rubber chainsaws, weapon of choice in contemporary horror movies; Brendan Lee's recycling of high-points from action films; and Chris Bond with his microscopic investigation of the curious objects littered around Xanadu at the end of Orson Welles' classic *Citizen Kane* (1941) – to mention only four associated with this exhibition, *Art+Film*.

Such art basks in the fallout of the cataclysm that took cinema out of its comfort zone and into a moment of messy truth, when it exploded into a thousand, manipulable fragments. But when, exactly, did this rupture take place? Most expert witnesses date it somewhere around the end of the Second World War, or at some key point during the post-War reconstruction of civilisation's sad fragments. To that point in time, cinema – especially Hollywood cinema and every national cinema that strove to emulate it – was Classical. Thereafter, amidst the ruins, it became Modernist. Film theory elevates this sea-change to the status of an 'epistemological break', a total, radical change in the way cinema is conceived and practised.

This is the story that the philosopher Gilles Deleuze tells in his seminal two-part work on cinema written in the 1980s, *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image* – pinpointing the dramatic moment in cinema history as that 'rupture of the sensory-motor link' that occurs in the films of Roberto Rossellini and Alfred Hitchcock, marked by on-screen figures of children wandering in Europe's post-War ruins or the paralysed, zombiesque heroes of Hollywood condemned merely to watch events unfolding.<sup>1</sup> It is the same story that, more elliptically and cryptically, the famous Nouvelle Vague hero Jean-Luc Godard conjures in his massive audio-visual essay *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, completed in 1998 – especially when he dissolves Classical Hollywood into an abstract succession of sublimely disconnected, ghostly images and intense, non-narrativised gestures drawn from Hitchcock.

1. Gilles Deleuze (trans. H. Tomlinson, B. Habberjam & R. Galeta), *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

In fact, looking back now from these monuments of history-writing, it seems that everyone was always on their way to telling this very story. Julia Kristeva in 1975, for instance, sensed that in Charlie Chaplin's milestone *The Great Dictator* (1940), 'the image laughs, identity crumbles', forcing a 'discrepancy between sound and image, discourse and representation, or the 'impious fracturing' possible in camera movement itself', thus rendering the film-viewer 'still inside a phantasm, but at a distance from his own fascination'<sup>2</sup> Or, further back in 1967, the critic André S. Labarthe (maker of many documentaries on Modernist artists), argued polemically that the notion of *mise en scène* – 'the performance of the actors, the quality of the dialogue, the beauty of the photography, the efficacy of the editing' – now summed up everything that had withered into useless, sterile decadence in Classical cinema, while a new, Modernist cinema promised the radical intoxications of collage, randomness, excess, playfulness.<sup>3</sup>

If the terms of Labarthe's polemic sound familiar, even if his specific examples (the mid '60s films of Poland's Jerzy Skolimowski or Brazil's Glauber Rocha) do not, that is hardly surprising: perhaps every avant-garde, in every medium, tells a version of this story, adjusting the dates, periods and tendencies as required for the tale to work on an avid, primed audience.

In reference to cinema history, the dramatic dialectic internal to the story can even be extended. If we read the manifestos of an earlier era, such as the 1920s, we find the stages of the story exactly reversed: in its silent era, cinema was taken by its arty defenders (including the Surrealists) as already Modern – because it transformed the things of the world, via the camera-eye and the light-pulsations of celluloid, into evanescent, oneiric particles – and then the coming of sound crashed the medium's glorious momentum by installing the Classical principle of Story as sovereign. Thus nostalgia for a certain golden era of silence begins, and the later Modernism, reborn, will duly return to and evoke it ...

The person who has thought most deeply about the immortal story of the struggle between Classicism and Modernism in cinema is the political philosopher and historian Jacques Rancière, in the essays collected in his recent book *The Cinematic Fable*. In a far-reaching analysis – touching on the culture of art as well as film – Rancière challenges many of the easy suppositions that we work with today, whether as critics, curators or artists riding the current interface of creative media and technologies.

For Rancière, it is a hard, cold fact that the Classical principle of Story in cinema is far from having been killed off – as, indeed, any visit to any multiplex will quickly verify: 'The young art of cinema has not only reconnected with the ancient art of storytelling; it has become its most faithful guardian.'<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Modern and Postmodern art ceaselessly fragment and rework – 'defigure', in Rancière's preferred term – the medium of cinema for their own, new ends; but this activity always requires, vampirically, the eternal, prior existence of perfectly intact Story films. Cinema, in one half of its identity or destiny, quickly became, in its history, the apotheosis of what Rancière calls the early 20th century's 'art of the aesthetic age', the first great Modernist moment that runs from the writer Gustave Flaubert to

the filmmaker Jean Epstein – and how apt is his description for so much contemporary gallery art which deconstructively 're-sees, re-reads or re-disposes the elements' of its cinematic references:

This work unmakes the assemblages of fiction or representational painting. It makes the gesture of the painting, the adventure of the material, appear underneath the subjects of the figuration. Behind the dramatic or novelistic conflicts of wills, it ignites the explosion of epiphany, the pure splendour of being-without-reason. It empties or exacerbates the gestural language of expressive bodies, slows down or quickens the speed of narrative links, suspends or overcharges meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, there is no breakdown in cinema history, no violent murder that announces the end of one age and the beginning of another, no Post-Classical state – a flattering story which artists and theorists have been compelled to invent. Rather, cinema's nature is, and has always been, fundamentally double. In Rancière's terms: the cinematic fable is a contrary fable. It lends itself to the most powerful, most solid, most Classical laws of Storytelling, while it simultaneously also offers itself up to the creatively Modern eye and mind.

This is the double terrain where the participants in *Art+Film* stand. The cinema goes on around them as an enormous, capitalist machine of formulaic entertainment, elaborating ever more elaborate ways to rivet its spectators and milk their money. And yet the cinema also detaches itself from that stark, social reality, offering its shadow-double to those who like to see its beauty broken down and spread out into a thousand flickering, twilight phantasms: phenomena of light and sound, the flash of an image here and a gesture there, a moment of recognition lost and found, a sensation or an emotion or an idea attaching itself to the echo of a story told too often, or a face smothered by stardom, now set free...

Almost twenty years ago, in the middle of an Australian art scene at that time exploring filmmaking on Super 8, I wondered about the place of fiction in a 'second degree' mode of art based on fragments, recreations and evocations of cinema. Fiction had been, for a predominantly 1960s generation of avant-garde film practitioners, the bad object par excellence, the stain of Hollywood that needed to be expunged at all costs. Then, in the 1970s, around the world, there was a tentative rapprochement between art and fiction film: a cautious, essentially cerebral engagement with the structures and conventions of Story, held at a Brechtian distance and scrutinised, sometimes satirised. The mid 1980s seemed to mark another evolution within the Australian scene (whose ranks included Philip Brophy):

These filmmakers certainly don't want to simply 'tell stories' ... What they seek to rediscover is the texture of fiction, its voluptuousness, its skin ... In this light, fiction becomes a dynamic, shifting play of intrigue, of positioning the spectator, of differing points-of-view and narration – and also of spectacle, display, performance.<sup>6</sup>

2. Julia Kristeva (trans. D. Burdick), 'Ellipsis on Dread and the Specular Seduction', *Wide Angle* vol.3 no.3 (1979), p.47.

3. André S. Labarthe, 'Mort d'un mot', *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 195 (November 1967), p.66 (my translation).

4. Jacques Rancière, *La Fable cinématographique* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), p.9 (my translation).

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5. *Ibid.*, p.15.

6. Adrian Martin, 'In and Out the Window: Fiction and Australian Avant-Garde Film', *Express Australia* (1984), special edition, p.9.

In retrospect, I see more clearly where this tendency was heading. Artists were slowly disengaging themselves from the critical-intellectual demand to address themselves to *specific* films that existed in the public sphere or popular culture. Rather they were aiming towards a sensual abstraction: the *typical* film, as it were, and our experience of it.

What is this typical film? Many things, on several levels.

The typical film is the apparatus of cinema itself, its essential precondition before any actual film unfurls - the screen, the projector, the architecture of the hall - as cunningly excavated by Chris Bond in his reconstruction of a historic *Aspect Ratio Key Ring* (2003), part of his funereal investigation of the ruins not only of Classicism but of Modernism too.

The typical film is the light which both illuminates a film set and impresses itself upon celluloid, as in Lily Hibberd's *Blinded By the Light* (2002/3) painting series - a continuation of her fascination, via cinema, with the devouring states of brightness and fire (reminding us of Pier Paolo Pasolini's statement that cinema is an ephemeral art 'written on burning paper').

The typical film is the movie soundtrack, detached from specific films, images or plots, made over into a collage-soundscape by those artists increasingly drawn to the total, immersive realm of installation. In Hibberd's past work, these sounds are drawn from existing sources; for Brophy in his live sensurround performance drawn from his cinema project *The Sound of Milk - Prologue 1* (2003), it is a sound-work without text, evoking, in abstract terms, the shape and mood of a sci-fi film to come.

The typical film is a repertoire of classic moments, known, inevitable, and yet always affecting and surprising: moving clichés of love, pursuit, desire, fear, triumph, revelation, waiting ... David Noonan's and Simon Treva's *SOWA* (2002) offers a new variation on their favourite motif, a lone protagonist (this time an adult woman) drawn through a highly charged, physical space, and eventually over into the realm of dream: this is cinema as labyrinth, as gauntlet, as journey - which requires not a hero and sometimes not even a plot, only the ritual scenography of space, place and movement.

All of these diverse evocations of cinema by art, whatever their purposes, exist within a new context that is becoming more and more apparent within the digital age. Now it is hard, if not impossible, for cinema to stand alone, aside from the continuum of culture as it may have once, proudly done. This is the time of 'between-images', as Raymond Bellour presciently called them in 1990, an audio-visual culture based less on the properties of any specific medium in isolation, and more on the passages and exchanges between them: still photography, film, video, computer, sound, graphic design. Every image exists now, potentially, to travel these multiple circuits, and to be transformed in that movement. This doesn't mean that all types and forms of art and culture are now blurred and indistinguishable; but it does mean that there are new dialogues between, and hybrids of, audiovisual forms springing up everywhere.

The dialogue between art and film now happens in its *relays*, its transformative stages and processes: sounds sampled and treated to accompany some other image; scenes from films restaged with actors in order to be photographed and then painted (as in Hibberd); detritus from obsolete film technology preserved and presented as Surrealist found objects (Bond); an iconic mask from a *Scream* horror movie sculpted and then photographed (Swallow); even an actor from the *Matrix* movies (Hugo Weaving) appearing as a displaced performance artist in Brendan Lee's *Shoot Me* (2003), where he becomes the target of cinema's technologically sophisticated (if politically dubious) 'gun-vision'. We have passed beyond the era of sometimes mechanical appropriations in Postmodern art to another kind of re-invention - not merely a strategic displacement - of the original.

Certain plateaux of our aesthetic age present themselves as opportune meeting-points for these all-pervasive shufflings and mutations. *Mise en scène*, for example, rises from its Classical tomb, and offers itself as the living ghost of an ancient theatre, a theatre of space and place, of pose and costume. In the *Milano* (1999), series by Christopher Köller, a Diana camera allows - in deliberately distorted, low resolution colour-saturation - a spooky monumentalising of Milanese architecture. When Story has long departed, or only its faintest traces remain, there exists the space defined by a city and the space defined by a pictorial frame - reminiscent of Peter Greenaway's reverie of a Modernist cinema that would be filled only with the forms, tensions and tricks of architecture.

In regarding fiction, gallery artists have often preferred to open out the Story element, fixing on ambiguous details or pregnant gestures that can pivot in several possible directions. Geikie's sculpture, *With my veins running fire and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs* (2003), explores the open moment of a typical horror-thriller film, mixed with the Gothic undertow of *Jane Eyre*: a woman, wrapped in a curtain, as victim - or is she? The piece ambiguously hesitates between pleasure and pain, agency and subjection, domination and resistance. Noonan and Treva's similarly offer (via a film loop) a moment poised between the resume and rewind buttons on a VHS or DVD: a moment of passage strung out, never ending, held in exquisite suspense.

But, elsewhere, fiction - and its sensory-motor links - tends to creep back almost despite itself, fulfilling Jacques Rivette's prediction: 'If you throw narrative out by the door, it comes back through the window'. Thus Hibberd's paintings, because they use the same photographic models, begin to suggest a new tale from diverse appropriations; or *The Sound of Milk* evokes an imaginary space that each listener can fill with few promptings, such is the power of the 'narrative music' which Brophy has long investigated.

Contemporary artists cannot do without the culture of Story as, at the very least, their backdrop. Detaching elements from the sphere of Cinema, a sphere at once magical and tarnished, they become engaged in what Rancière calls an act of aesthetic *redemption*: the attempt to re-invest in a face its original paths, to re-find the initial thrill of a tale as it was told the first time, to re-capture something of the innocence of the first filmmakers as they tinkered furiously with their combinations of form and content, image and sound. And for those of us who are into both art and film, this is perhaps our fondest dream of the present moment: a dance to the end of love between the two, a mutual redemption.



## LIST OF WORKS

### CHRIS BOND

Born Melbourne 1975, Lives Melbourne

*Aspect Ratio Key Ring* 2003

laminated, steel, MDF, acrylic, foamcore plaque  
structure: 119.0 x 28.0 x 28.0 cm  
plaque: 28.0 x 20.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist

### PHILIP BROPHY

Born Melbourne 1956, Lives Melbourne

*The Sound of Milk - Prologue I* 2003

digital video in DVD format  
9 minutes  
Courtesy of the artist

### STARLIE GEIKIE

Born Lismore, NSW 1975, Lives Melbourne

*With my veins running fire and my heart beating  
faster than I can count its' throbs* 2003

leather, cotton, metal, polyurethane rubber, plastic  
dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

### LILY HIBBERD

Born Melbourne 1972, Lives Melbourne

*Blinded by the Light* 2002

oil and phosphorescent paint on canvas  
91.0 x 153.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

*Perpetual Dream-State* 2003

oil and phosphorescent paint on canvas  
91.0 x 153.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

### CHRISTOPHER KÖLLER

Born Yorkshire, England 1943, Lives Melbourne

*Capital City* from the series *Milano* 1999

type c photographs  
overall: 200.0 x 700.0 cm (irreg.)  
Courtesy of the artist and Helen Frajman M33, Melbourne

### BRENDAN LEE

Born Melbourne, VIC 1974, Lives Melbourne

*Shoot Me* 2003

digital video in DVD format  
vinyl, large door viewer, monitor  
Courtesy of the artist

### DAVID NOONAN and SIMON TREVAKS

David Noonan Born Ballarat, VIC 1963, Lives Melbourne

Simon Trevaux Born Melbourne 1954, Lives Melbourne

*SOWA* 2002

16mm film in DVD format  
3 minutes  
Courtesy of the artists and Uplands Gallery, Melbourne,  
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery Sydney and Foxy Productions, New York

David Noonan

*SOWA Wallpaper Tile* 2002/3

silkscreen on paper

*Untitled Walls* 2003

wood  
dimensions variable

*Untitled Light Fitting* 2003

wood  
45 x 35 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, Roslyn  
Oxley9 Gallery Sydney, and Foxy Productions, New York

### RICKY SWALLOW

Born San Remo, VIC 1974, Lives Los Angeles

*Everything is nothing* 2003

jelutong timber and epoxy putty

24.0 x 30.0 x 13.2 cm

Private collection, Miami, United States of America

Courtesy of the artist and

Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Los Angeles

*Picture a screaming sculpture* 2003

piezo pigment print on rag paper, moulded frame, museum glass  
79.5 x 56.5 x 4.0 cm

Photographic direction: Fredrik Nilsen

Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney



CHRIS BOND *Aspect Ratio Key Ring* (detail and installation) 2003