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Abstract

The wisdom of the plants: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else — with the wind, an animal, human beings.... Follow the plants: you start by delimiting a first line consisting of circles of convergence around successive singularities; then you see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish themselves, with new points located outside the limits and in other directions.

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ANNE HOWELL

The rhizomatic Art of Kurt brereton

The wisdom of the plants: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else — with the wind, an animal, human beings.... Follow the plants: you start by delimiting a first line consisting of circles of convergence around successive singularities; then you see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish themselves, with new points located outside the limits and in other directions.

(Deleuze & Guatarri 11)

Artist and academic Kurt brereton's creative output grows like a rhizomatic ginger plant. He will stage a show of animations one moment, a performance the next, followed by an exhibition of paintings alongside a sculpture display. Branching off at another angle he produces a bi-lingual graphics and text book on HyperTaiwan. His art may seem to be chaotic in format, yet it has a consistent thread or logic running throughout. It speaks of disappearances as much as presences. It does so, not in the way Warhol did, with his silkscreen multiples referring to the disappearing original, nor as the Post-object Conceptualists did, drawing attention to the vanishing art object. brereton's art speaks of the disappearance of place — as it brings together time and space in a variety of specific cultural sites.

In his various productions, the Australian coastal-dweller Brereton conjures up beautiful beaches, wetlands, mangroves and escarpments. He shows them facing the stresses and strains of our current environmental crisis. Global warming, latestage capitalist greed (our desire outweighing our respect for our surrounds), or an indifference to local ecologies all come under scrutiny. brereton's focus is on his own lived experiences in his own backyard.

brereton's art-making practice does not stop at the aesthetic representation of natural life forms (from the estuarine littoral zone), it is also about the way people make rhizomatic connections and interact with their surroundings. This creative methodology takes as its model the rhizome — an underground horizontal stem, often thickened and tuber-shaped, possessing buds or nodes. Brereton grew up on a sleepy beach on the far north coast of New South Wales amongst a host of various rhizomatic life forms be it forests of mangroves, stands of pandanus palms or armies of soldier crabs. He likes to say that he didn't know what a tap root was until he hit Sydney to go to art school in the mid 1970s. His exhibition career

began in the early 1980s, when the Sydney art world was gripped by an influx of international philosophies, among them the post-structural ideas of Gilles Deleuze

and Félix Guattari. Brereton was instantly attracted to their writings, particularly *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Anti-Oedipus*, and he saw that their theoretical notion of performing ‘rhizomatic’ machines matched the way he was already operating artistically.

Deleuze and Guattari had brought the notion of the rhizome to the fore in order to question hierarchical information systems, and propose a revolution based on this non-linear form of growth and political action. This had struck such a strong chord in Brereton who, as a political anarchist and atheist, was forced to forge his own path through the various fundamentalists orders. When Deleuze and Guattari spoke of the rhizome as a model for a new way of operating, they referred to it in ‘organic’ terms: a swarm of bees, rats, ants, weeds — are rhizomes with multiplicities and performances. An image map is also a rhizome in that a ‘map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987 12).

Brereton argues that by operating laterally (map-like) across a range of analogue and digital media, he is defying the usual conventions of orthodox art practice that prefer an artist to focus on one clearly marked linear line of endeavour — in a tap root fashion. Brereton performs not only across media and job descriptions, his rhizomatic approach decrees that within one so called ‘work’ (or better, ‘growth’) there might be two or three different media components at play. In a single growth or ‘event’ then, one might expect to find things made by hand, alongside that which is digitally-produced. He might then use wood and metal side by side with spray paint or packaging cardboard from a rubbish bin. These fragments are his attempt to mirror the second and third degree nature of his daily life. ‘We live nowadays on a variety of different “plateaux” or planes at any given time — all of which are connected by a mass of roots, leads, cables and lines across time and space.’¹

In a bid to avoid giving a false sense of heterogeneity, he also uses stamps. For instance, he makes a stamp from a linocut, dumb object or paper stencil and places it within a bigger painted image, thus breaking up the whole and puncturing the frame. ‘Stamps for me are mobile signs,’ he says,

they are images that relate as mementos; or memory-images; they are a kind of alphabet that I add to constantly. I have hundreds of them ... anything can become as a stamp, even an idea. I like the printing and stamping process, it gives you a direct immediate graphic aspect. It instantly registers as a sign ... it is analogical, iconic — yet seconddegree in its abstractness.

Brereton’s aim is to avoid providing a one-sided didactic view of the world. ‘Everybody has their own perspective, there are an infinite number of realities ... I am railing against vertical narrow thinking that tends towards monotheistic,

universal and binary equations that always threaten to hammer us into simplistic outcomes.’

While Brereton has operated for over thirty years with the notion of a rhizomatic art practice upper-most in his mind, it wasn’t until his *Rhizomorphosis: the Morphology of Mangrove* touring exhibition (2001–02) that he overtly showcased the principle in a solo exhibition context. While this exhibition engaged with the metaphor of the mangroves — its plant life, its geography and fauna — brereton’s vision is certainly not limited by the Australian shores. Quite the contrary, while he may draw on themes of, say, the Illawarra region where he lives today, his bigger strategic picture has been a global one.

brereton has been a regular visitor to Taiwan, Korea, Thailand and Japan for more than a decade now and is currently an Adjunct Professor at University of Technology, Sydney and University of the Sunshine coast where he supervises international postgraduate creative arts students, mostly from Asia. Brereton sees this academic life, primarily in multi-disciplinary creative arts field, as a significant part of his overall social and cultural contribution. His connection to other cultures has a long and strong history, including teaching at Tranby Aboriginal college in Glebe during the mid-1980s and gaining his doctorate on the invention of the famous tourist site of Ayers Rock (as opposed to Uluru) as an advertising icon. In 1989 brereton took academic leave and lived in Thailand and Indonesia for a year conducting research into the politics of tourist imagery.

brereton’s artworks, which can each be considered as ‘bulb sections’ in his overall practice, can be read in any order — there is no beginning or end, only interruptions.



‘rhizophora (against straight line thinking)’, acrylic and coffee on paper, 230 cm x 190 cm, 2004.

Eternal Monuments for a Short Time

They [time-images] reach the absolute, as instances of pure contemplation, and immediately bring about the identity of the mental and the physical, the real and the imaginary, the subject and the object, the world and the I. (Deleuze 16)

brereton's recent animations, *Mt Keira-Time* and *Edgewood Estate-Time*, were produced for a series of exhibitions across Taiwan during 2006. In Australia the videos were shown during 2007 at De Havilland Gallery in Wollongong, and at Flinders University Museum Gallery in Adelaide. Installed as a wall plus screen/monitor set up, the audio-visual 'machine' performs as a loop without beginning or end, so as to provide — as brereton puts it — lots of 'middle activity'. The weather comes and goes and so does the passing of housing estates, bushfires and traces of human habitation. In time-lapse motion Brereton dances across a blank page/canvas, a landscape bereft of any signs (taints) of human life, then up springs a house, then another, until the viewer recognises the signs of those standardised, new shiny "little boxes" homes that comprise modern housing estates. Then just when the landscape is about to be engulfed by dozens of slick houses, a little flame springs up, growing into a fully-fledged bush fire that wipes out the lot. The style of the animation is snappy, up-beat, like an hysterical music video clip. Yet, along with the amusing Benny-Hill-style antics comes a message of ecological foreboding.

These tightly meshed message bundles are created from a combination of digital and traditional techniques. brereton uses photographs to record thousands of actions (drawing gestures) that are then digitally altered to boost colours and sharpen reliefs and then animated in the computer to make a video-performance come to life. 'I find that I am focused on overlapping images and blurring boundaries', observes brereton. 'For me the music term "sampling" is useful: an art event, or sound event both construct networks of creativity out of many fragments or elements. This is an art practice or methodology based on the concept of the "remix"'. A "remix" involves shaping second-degree polyphonic registers — it's about making multiple rhythms mixdown together, synchronised, cut, pasted, and collaged. We might start with one sound, image or gesture and end up transformed into something else altogether. This is the cartoon way consumer culture operates too. Images, events, slogans, ideas are fed into one end of the capitalist machine and a shiny new product is shrink-wrapped at the other end.

brereton's early career as an actor and performance artist has directly and indirectly carried over into his paintings and animations. The role of the body is crucial to the aesthetics of every analogue art production and Brereton feels that

in an increasingly digital world the role of the body is taking on new sacrificial meaning. Rather than try to hide the clumsiness or rawness of the hand Brereton seeks to make his body an active and obvious player in his ‘analogue shoots’.



Art Realty

In his new role as a cashed-up and powerful buyer, Fraser says he is excited by the possibility that paintings not seen in public for years will be offered for sale. It's like the real estate market, in buoyant times really good things come on to the market and realise their true value.

(Mark Fraser, *The Australian*, June 25, 2007)

In 2002 Brereton staged the *Art Realty* exhibition at the Sir Hermann black Gallery, University of Sydney, in which he took a critical swipe at the commodification principle and it's confluence between the art market and the real Estate market. A series of painted landscapes were overlaid with real estate's apportioning of property via a system of grids. The grids, created a number of 'lots' within each 'parcel', and each of these was up for sale — just as our natural world is sectioned off into property parcels for ownership's sake. Along with the visual lots, came a set of ironic rules and conditions for playing the *Art Realty* 'game', for instance: 'conditions of sale — All lots are numbered and signed by the artist and come with a site map and certificate. Information on adjoining lots may be supplied if the owner-neighbours are all in agreement'. In *Art Realty*, each 'lot' was granted a number, so that, to acknowledge the art parcels were going to be broken up for sale was unavoidable.

In *Art Realty*, Brereton was also alluding to the commercial practices governing the art market. It was a two-in-one dig at the consumerist impulse that breaks things up into saleable components across a range of commercial markets. Ironically, while the sales hype in *Art Realty* was all 'go, go, go', the viewer/prospective buyer found themselves staring into a panel of non-descript marks, each art lot appearing like a mere fragment of some tree-and-leaf-jigsaw puzzle, nothing more. Just like the actual property or art market, Brereton posed the question: am I about to be ripped off? As he told me recently, often the most commercially successful paintings are those that strategically say nothing and resemble a piece of retro patterned fabric.

The subject matter of *Art Realty* also concerns loss — while it looks square on at (misguided) cultural valuations of our natural environment and cultural production. Brereton makes the point that the more valuable a painting lot becomes the more it physically disappears yet multiplies as second degree image, as advertising, packaging or logo. Ultimately, this exhibition raises awareness of the warped state of affairs in which the natural world can now be directly exchanged for carbon credit points. 'Fine art aesthetic systems of rarefaction and speculation also build up cultural credits,' brereton remarks.



'Lots of Forest' installation, De Havilland Gallery, Wollongong, 2006.



'Lots of bushfire', oil on canvas, 90 cm x 120 cm, 2002.

Dream Homes

‘This land is not unsung land. It is of ancient and sacred significance. It is our history as much as any other’s history ... Sandon point to us means Ngurumba: The past, The present, The Future’.

(Reuben Brown, Chairperson of the Korewal (La Perouse) Elouera (Illawarra) Jerrungarugh (Shoalhaven) Aboriginal Elders corporation)

property ID: 2006401929 The ocean View release build your dream home in one of the Illawarra’s most prestigious locations. This 746sqm block is one of very few left and will not last! Your dream can soon become a reality.

(Real Estate Advertisement)

Dream Homes confronts the rapid rise of the luxury housing estate at Sandon point just behind brereton’s studio. This development has galvanised the local community for the last seven years. In its earlier stages the proposed development was criticised by Aborigines and non-Indigenous opponents alike for threatening the environment as well as Aboriginal and European heritage. A cokeworks was found on site, and a number of endangered species were discovered living in its wetlands. However, the biggest outcry came when the 5000-year-old remains of an Aboriginal elder was uncovered in nearby sand dunes. Local Aboriginal elders dubbed him the Kuradji Man or Clever Man and the site was deemed sacred. Despite several contestations in the Land and Environment Court, the development went ahead and now the once pristine location has been transformed into a waterfront housing estate.

A notable painting is *Dream Home No 5*, oil on plywood, in which a white hard edged ‘dream home’ is superimposed over a coloured pastel drawing of the Kuradji Embassy. Ghostlike (the dream home is rendered as a white line side elevation drawing of the building), it sits hovering as if on the surface of the solid embassy building and surrounds. brereton’s ‘dream homes’ are more about visions than hard matter and offer less of a dream, in the utopian sense, and more of a dystopian threat. The solid context or background is the Aboriginal Embassy protesting and holding out against the Stockland housing corporation and local government orders. The dream of the Embassy is to reclaim Koori sacred land. Brereton highlights the tensions between the two competing value systems and visions — by rendering the dream homes as ‘concrete bunkers’ as opposed to the ‘corrugated iron shack tactics’ of the Kooris.

In witnessing both the past and present within the one frame, Brereton has brought multiple histories of the development simultaneously into play, and by breaking down the linear sense of time Brereton destabilises the notion of progress. Even while being inspired by the micro-world of Sandon point politics, these

paintings draw attention to the way late-stage capitalist rapaciousness for standardised energy-sapping homes inspire similar ‘ideal home’ choices all over the world. Fragile ecosystems are sold off to make way for prime location supersized housing estates. The group of paintings titled *Searise 2030*, (including *Bulli Point 2030*) that were recently exhibited at De Havilland Gallery, Wollongong, offer a direct engagement with the impact of global warming on the Illawarra coast. Famous beach-front views have been overdrawn with (and erased by) linear outline profiles of the bHp steel works. This ghost-like technique is similar to that applied in his *Dream Home* series. Imaginary views have been constructed of what the local iconic tourist beaches might look like in 2030 under five metres of seawater.



‘bulli point 2030’, oil on plywood, 50 cm x 23 cm, 2007.



'Dream Home No 5', oil on plywood, 56 cm x 48 cm, 2007.



'Searise (bulli) 2030', oil and coal on plywood, 150 cm x 64 cm, 2007.

Escarpment Series

Brereton creates a shallow depth in which the real shifts in the surface signs of our prior evaluations, politicised visions and estimations. Or it may be that the signifying level is foremost with the other reality riding, moving underneath, like a base pattern carrying a melody of ornamental motifs.

(Ken bolton 2005 2)

A large-scale painting of a native beehive in a gum tree, sculptures resembling mutant hybrid plants and a pristine escarpment invaded by modular houses: brereton's fascination with the disappearance of the 'natural world' is nowhere more evident than in his recurrent focus on the life-cycle (of ever diminishing returns) within the Illawarra escarpment. The life forms that exist on the escarpment behind his Bulli home, many of which are rhizomatic, have fuelled several series of high intensity projects.

The multi-media *Messiaen at Mt Keira* exhibition (2001) concerning the escarpment rainforest was first exhibited at the University of Technology, Sydney. Part of this project was a sound piece, *Lyrebird Mixdown*, produced for the ABC Radio National *Earclips* archive (available on the web) and was showcased at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2002 as part of the Meeting Messiaen program. Brereton also held an exhibition along this theme — titled simply, *Escarpment* — jointly with Ken Orchard, at Hazelhurst Regional Art Gallery in 2005 and at Flinders University Museum Gallery in June 2007.

In the large scale *Bulli Escarpment Estate*, the viewer is presented with what looks like a typical lookout view of the escarpment framed by Norfolk Pines. On closer inspection it may be observed that everything in the image has been produced by thousands of overlapping hand-coloured linocut stamps of houses. As Ken bolton points out in his catalogue essay, 'brereton's Illawarra is felt up close as an almost fluid medium in which human life is suspended. This landscape teems ungovernably. The history of time depicted is not that of geographic time but of rapid, more recent despoliation. brereton's Illawarra is kinetic with crowded life'.

Another series entitled *Tagging The Escarpment*, brings together a multiple perspectives and media treatments then erases the integrity of discrete forms (the notion of a pristine environment) by spray painting silver graffiti tags across the face of the paintings. The calligraphic fluidity of the tag overwrites and underscores the fragility of the ecology. The suggestion here is that it is no longer possible to see such views in a seamless homogenous fashion. The escarpment rainforest is not some infinite boundless resource or even a Romantic sublime immensity. Instead the viewer witnesses a fading pathological slide image of

browning foliage, burnt trees and dried out creek beds. Yet brereton's images and personal visions are still full of life, colour and suggestion. There is a sense of defiance and triumph of the ultimate indifference of nature.

brereton says: 'I've been lucky enough to spend many hours taking the time to immerse myself in the subtle aesthetic differences of gestures, colours and material nuances such as when walking through the rainforest itself'. These works provide an insight into the experiences of one who has spent many long hours studying the forest variations both as a natural science student and artist.



'Mutant palms at Sandon point', linocuts on inkjet photo, 62 cm x 220 cm, 2007.



'Tagging the Escarpment No 2', linocut, pastel, spray enamel, 72 cm x 228 cm, 2005.



'Native beehive cycle', linocut stamps, charcoal on paper, 150 cm x 300 cm, 2005.



'bulli Escarpment Estate', linocut stamps acrylic on paper, 150 cm x 320 cm, 2005.



'bulli Escarpment Estate', (detail)
linocut stamps acrylic on paper,
150 cm x 320 cm, 2005.

Mangroves

Ghostly white figures of mangrove trees, finger roots and eye socket holes stand prop-like on an estuarine stage. Here imagination follows matter. All life is interconnected, hyper-adaptive and flexible. Temporal and spatial references must be renegotiated. Stillness and patience force an attentive silence and a breathing that is long, slow and deep — in tune with the pulse of the river. The reward is a gradual introduction to the mangroves as a sympathetic organism — a body with much more going on beneath the surface expanses of dumb mud, reflective pools and unruly trees. (*Rhizomorphosis: the Morphology of Mangroves* — Artist Statement)

In Jean Cocteau's 1930 film, *The Blood of a Poet*, Orpheus dives into the underworld through a doorway that is, in effect, a watery mirror. Orpheus's (and the artist's) fall opens up a world of insights that lie outside the restrictions of spoken/linear language. Brereton, who has been walking with the mangroves thematically since 1975 (as a child he showed his first ceramics and sculptures in the family-run art gallery on the far north coast of New South Wales), reminds us that few people venture into the Orphic domain of the mangroves. Brereton observes that, 'Mangroves demand a quantum leap of entrance, of being inside. And once you have left the familiar solid shore, you must give yourself up to the laws of mud, strange sounds and mirrored waters.' In the exhibition *Rhizomorphosis: the Morphology of Mangroves*, mounted at the University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery, in Queensland and at Project Contemporary Artspace, Wollongong in

2004, Brereton draws attention to things existing silently underfoot

At this time Brereton began calling his art pieces 'image maps'— a phrase that relates both to their conceptual post-structural underpinnings and the process of their making. A map is something coded, a metaphor and an analogue that stands in place for something else and is a guide that helps us negotiate difficult terrains. Brereton constructs images conscious of the two main ways we tend to read images — by scanning them for tell tale signs, (Barthes's punctums), and also as a whole, that is via their overall gestalt effect (studium). Brereton presents the mangroves, therefore, as a mapping system — one that enables the foreigner to be guided through unknown terrain; and remarks that,

‘Art can serve as a map guiding us through strange new ways of seeing reality — a reality that is a kind of underworld in an Orphic sense. I love the way great art can carry you into an underworld of ideas, associations and emotions and safely return you to the social, yet somehow leave you changed for the travelling....’



artist in mangroves



‘Mangrove Nursery No 1’, tree root, copper wire, fimo, acrylic, 100 cm x 40 cm, 2004.



'Mangrove rhizomap No 1' (summer), linocuts, acrylic, gum tape on watercolour paper, 250 cm x 120 cm, 2004.

The notion of mapping also relates to the way these pieces are made with a number of media acting in collaboration and across time. They are assemblages of old drawings, fragments of abandoned paintings, linocut prints and new inscriptions. By performing on paper the images can be rolled up or folded in the same way as tourist maps. Every exhibition is a new installation made up of tidal offerings. His fragmentary, recycled approach is typical of his general approach to art: often engaging with beach flotsam and jetsam; old postcards, photos, his own images or texts. Steering away from the monolithic, he over-paints canvases and cuts up paintings to use in new ones. brereton's comment to me that 'life is organic so we all end up as black mud to support the next forest of organisms' supports an Orphic view of being a part of country.

For brereton being creative means living in a fluid state that raises possibilities, questions, doubts and solutions. Yet he does not envisage an aesthetic or creative solution as a fixed outcome. In line with the nature of how mangroves are formed via a system of reclaiming land by accumulating sediment through one's roots, brereton has built up a body of 'image maps', assemblages and sound pieces using the mangrove effect. Art can act like aerial roots attracting and positioning new ideas and ways of seeing, so creating island nurseries of meta-critical thought and in turn new shoots.

NOTES

¹ All quotations from Kurt brereton are taken from unpublished interviews conducted by the writer between May and June 2007.

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