

Natascha Stellmach's *Complete Burning Away*

Opening Speech by Marcus Canning at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA)

In today's Australian there was a review of the Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize and the Bondi leg of the Sculpture by the Sea franchise by Christopher Allen.

It opens with "an artist friend of mine has had a harsh but effective test for judging dubious works of art: would you pick it up off the footpath if you saw it among the junk of a council clean-up? Many works shown in commercial galleries or advertised in the pages of glossy art magazines would be left behind in the gutter if assessed on this no-nonsense basis. A less dramatic test is the old-fashioned one of whether you would want to own it, or more precisely live with it. This question has renewed relevance in an age when so much contemporary art is experienced as a passing sensation, typically looked at for a matter of seconds, acknowledged as cool, then expunged from short-term memory. But what if you have a slightly longer attention span and more demanding expectations of art than a momentary micro-stimulus of interest and surprise? What if you think of good art as something that continues to attract your attention, stir your imagination and disturb your sensibility in some deep way, but never allows itself to be unwound into a simple slogan or what is loosely known in art-speak as a concept?"

Now, whether you think Christopher Allen is a complete ponce or not, after spending some time with Natascha and her works today, then some of this seemed somehow appropriate, especially in the cultural climate of reception to contemporary art that we are more and more experiencing in Australia.

Now, when I heard about this roll Kurt Cobain into a joint and smoke it up project I admit to a Christopher Allen moment of convenient liberal write-off.

I didn't want to be interested in it.

It smelt like something even more boring than teen spirit, it smelt like a weakly delivered act of fraud propositioned for dubious reasons.

The photo taken by some tree climbing paparazzi fiend and spread across the planet of Kurt Cobain's dead denim clad leg complete slacker skater sneaker and seen through the doorway of his greenhouse suicide site sprung to mind.

Trash-bag Courtney Love photos of her clutching the pink teddy bear bag in which she purportedly kept said ashes sprung to mind.

The later mystery surrounding the theft of the ashes and the questioning whether this was just another desperate Courtney Love cash-in attempt sprung to mind.

The idea that 3 months after this theft, an artist in Berlin, originally from Australia receives some of the ashes and decides to make a work about it, whether through confidential and magical means or not – it just smelt bad.

I didn't want to be interested in it.

The longer I have spent with it and thinking about it however, the more interested I became, initially much to my annoyance.

The opportunity to actually engage with it both as an entire body of work, and as a series of individual works only compounded this interest.

The chance to speak with Natascha about this project has added another layer of complexity to a project filled with complexity.

Today, even if I am still not entirely sure whether the whole thing was made up, I am regardless a convert.

I had Kurt Cobain's suicide note to read out tonight.

I had a short treatise on the history of Hashish, including reference to the 1st century godfather of terrorism Hassan el Sabbah, 'The Old Man on the Mountain', from whom the word hashish, and assassin comes.

I had quotes from Kenneth Anger's original celebrity tabloid 'Hollywood Babylon'.

After speaking to Natascha today and spending time with the work, I threw them away as they seemed like unnecessary props that were just not necessary.

Individually, these are powerful works that just keep giving.

Together they form an opus of open-ended meanings that will never be resolved and will keep being elusive.

There is poetry here.

There is razor sharp commentary here.

These works expand and contract and they will not be forgotten easily.

They are works that do not need to be didactically justified, it would be reducing them to pin them down.

Out here is the public arena in all its puerile kindergarten excessiveness, in each of the chambers is a series of meditations on aspects of the human condition.

This is ultimately not a body of works about celebrity death or Kurt Cobain.

It is a body of works that contain an extraordinary and expansive narrative that have, to use art-speak – a highly conceptual core – a core that branches out, takes a series of trajectories and lands in a number of unexpected places.

As I said previously, PICA is a place of many meditations and contemplations for the next month, and it brings me back to the quote from the Australian, and how it kind of illustrates the cultural climate in which we exist, which often balks at art that is there to make us think.

Contemporary art is not meant to be easily understood, that is its purpose and in many ways its point. It is not meant to be instantly loved by one and all, it is not a McDonalds Happy Meal. A verge full of trash is a verge full of trash. A contemporary art space is not a verge full of trash. It may be a space on the edge where ultimately non-popular and non-populist activity occurs, the aesthetics of some of that work might be trashy, but it is not a verge full of trash, and it is also not a shop.

Now is not a great time to be making thought-provoking non-commodifiable contemporary work in Australia. Now is not a great time to be an institution dedicated to developing and presenting this work, and it makes the work of such institutions all the more important.

Now is however Right Now, and I want to give huge congratulations to everyone here at PICA for making this program happen during tough times.

Marcus Canning

Director Artrage, Perth, November 5, 2010