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UNDER CONSTRUCTION

GOING IN AND UNDER: EMILY CORMACK

Under Construction invites us to muse on the verb 'construct'. A shape shifting word, its meaning morphs from context to context. Construct is, after all, not just a verb, but also a noun. Once we have 'constructed' something, it can then become a 'construct'. If something is 'under construction', it can mean that we are in the process of becoming, or else it is that we work in the industry of construction. It is a duplicitous, adaptable word. However, belying the many and varied signified endpoints that the word 'construction' might arrive at are ideas of permission and privilege. Despite our native urge to construct, whether it is our identity or our shelter, both take for granted that there is a stable foundation upon which to build, that the constructor has sufficient permission for the privilege to construct.

And then there is deconstruction, which according to Jacques Derrida, is the dismantling of a text or a system along its own innate fault lines. Fault lines, Derrida explains, are the ambiguities within a text or a system that give shape through their contradictions. Just as the presence of negative space is what gives shape to form, so too does the word 'construct' reveal socio-political bias in the semiotic fault lines that course through it.

In Bundoora it is not hard to imagine that this word or its semantics could be analogous with the earth's geology. Here in the North Eastern suburbs governing systems flay along social fault lines that are as evident as any geologically driven uprising. The hard divide between Ivanhoe and West Heidelberg, for example, reveal the inequity of property ownership—the haves and the have nots of aspirational suburbia. Looking out through the oversized sash windows of Bundoora Homestead it is possible to imagine the rolling vistas, the vastness of Eucalypt and riverbed. However, in its place is the course that was pricked with the white posts of ownership as colonial stitch makers sectioned the land, excising lots—post-Feudal in shape though not philosophy. The expansive horse stud of old has now been consumed by quarter-acre lots, brick and tile lives, aerials and utility vehicles, many and varied, owning and living, but not often constructing.

Situated within our DNA are the dual human urges to territorialise and to construct. Construction, building, making, moulding and assembling are as native to our evolutionary drive as bipedalism, and yet the regulations that striate our contemporary spheres of existence insist that to construct is to own. One may not construct without first owning the land upon which construction is to occur. And here we meet our genetic impasse.

Stephen Paton's work in this exhibition speaks of this impasse, revealing the brittle layers of privilege that uphold society's civic structures. His 'cloaks' are sewn from an array of Council Infringement Notices, of which each offence highlights a narrative of injustice and inequity. As a Gunnai Kurnai man he has adopted the storytelling tradition of his people's possum skin cloaks. However, rather than telling traditional stories, Paton's stories reveal the equivocations of the legal system as it tries to overlay a single set of laws and codes upon diverse human terrain. For example, an endless bureaucratic battle between the artist and Citylink resulted in a Kafkaesque cul-de-sac of fines and the tale is told through the subtexts of date and descriptor contained within the Infringement Notices. The tale tells of a regime of daily parking infringements, resulting in an impossible debt for the artist—one of the lowest paid categories of worker in this current system. Law 'enforcement' resulted in the artist being further entrenched within the cycle of profound poverty. This is not a story of hardship told by a victim, but is instead a revelation of the seams that define injustice within our society. It is only through shedding light on these discrepancies that the true structure and bias of a system can be revealed.

There is no system more unequal than one determined by luck. And it is luck that much of Australia's mythic colonial identity is constructed upon: the prospector searching for gold, the surveyor seeking the most fertile plains, and most of all the luck of birth. Despite this inequality, luck is the bedrock of identity in this 'lucky country' and it is the contentions within this idea that are the subject of Aliça Bryson-Haynes and Lizzy Sampson's project for *Under Construction*.

Bundoora Homestead is situated on Prospect Hill, a name that conjures both the privilege and inequity of luck. To prospect is both to 'survey' and 'to have something presented to the eye', and it is the searching for oil or ore. One's 'prospects' are also determined through the luck of birth and the lottery of wealth and race it entails, and yet it is our prospects that often determine our societal and self worth. Bryson-Haynes and Sampson's collaboration centres on a tapestry work they made during a residency at The Australian Tapestry Workshop. The work features the words IN and OUT and speaks of the artists' interest in investigating issues of permission and exclusion in relation to Australian identity.

On one side of the room a large banner embroidered in gold thread reads "Welcome Stranger"—a curious phrase that references the name given to the largest gold nugget ever discovered in Victoria. Whilst the nugget may have been a welcome stranger to the gold hungry prospectors, the banner can also be read as a comment on Australia's inhumane treatment of asylum seekers. Stacked in the fireplace are a pile of wooden pencils—the wood ready to be burnt for warmth and the lead alluding to the alchemists reputed ability to transform lead to gold. A pile of gold nuggets is positioned within the triangulated cordon of a surveyors marking. Each object belies a network of contradictions that stem from the exclusionary nature of prospecting that the artists see as fundamental in the construction of Australian identity.

Whilst Bryson-Haynes and Sampson's project reveals the role that luck and privilege play in the construction of Australian identity, Dominic Kavanagh's work explores the role that privilege plays in the construction of taste and worth. The objects in Kavanagh's monumental installation seem to be remnants of a system that has already collapsed and is slowly reanimating itself according to its own wilful volition. Rubble and furniture, sourced from the local tip, are threaded with lights, and destroyed pianos are garlanded with water that trickles musically through its splintered form. His work reflects the bias of taste, which dictates an object's worth, and with immense sympathy for these neglected objects, which are elevated at times and maligned at others, Kavanagh upcycles them. By literally removing them from the cycle of worthlessness and ruin, Kavanagh introduces the possibility of viewing everyday elements anew. If we are able to see the beauty and grandeur of the destroyed and discarded object, so too might we peer beneath the seamless façade of our broader systems and construct new ways of approaching objects.

Claire McArdle is another artist seeking to revive the lost architectural flourishes of a long gone age. During a residency at the Bundoora Homestead that she undertook as part of *Under Construction*, McArdle became fascinated with the architectural details of the house. Why were some wallpaper details and pyrographic panels rubbed away, whilst others remained almost untouched? What long forgotten bodily habit or agitating gesture led to their erasure? These decorative absences became clues to the movement of the house's many and varied inhabitants. Embedded within the house are layers of folklore, which ascribe narrative to each curlicue and egg and tongue groove of the ornate plaster ceiling. For McArdle's project she explored the tale of a builder, whose hammer fell through the ornate stained-glass cupola, erasing forever the image of a parrot. In its place today is a burning red circle that forever occludes the image of the parrot—its detail lost forever, but its fiction forever in construction.

The way that we attach meaning to objects is a long and winding study. From folklore to straight semiotics, the attribution of meaning reassures us because it resonates with our natural urge to own and territorialise. It is comforting to our left-brained logic to imagine that everything has its place, that objects are anchored within concrete semantic structures, where discrepancies are cordoned into connotative containers. Nothing is left to chance; there is no seepage from these structures, but instead a collection of neatly connected chains of significance.

However, Louise Paramor proves what we already know somewhere in the chaos of consciousness, that these structures are mere constructions. The object, as Paramor proves, is easily freed from the semiotic certainty of commodity fetishism or narrative evidence. It is through the simplicity of recontextualisation--the mere repositioning of this over here—that meaning can be loosened and the object is freed to mean what it likes. Splendid in colour and smooth to touch Paramor towers her domestic objects. They are joined and connected, fit together through form not function. The eye is stripped of the need to make meaning from these objects and is instead free to see just their shape and curve, denying the endless march of commodity usefulness or an object's overlaid ontology.

The loosening of semiotic structures in Paramor's work is Derridean. Her repurposing of these domestic objects is akin to the flipping inside out of a patchwork. Here in the seams and stitches the truth of the construction is laid bare. The fault lines of meaning are centre stage, and the fluidity of all that we seek to build and mould and hold through our constructions is what remains. With this exhibition, in the slowing of the process of construction we realise how entangled we are in systems of privilege and exclusion. And yet construction is not just a noun with its certain concrete endpoint, but also a verb with infinite action and agency, and it is in the perpetuity of the verb that change can occur, always constructed and yet always under construction.