

Heather B Swann, *Night's Tongue*, 2010, metal, plaster, resin, ink, boot polish; installation view, *Substation, Newport*, 2012; image courtesy the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne. All photos this article: Lucy Aulich

Strange Encounters at Substation, Newport

STELLA GRAY



Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea: Queer Urban Tales was an ambitious show. Seven artists, an exhibition and a performance, a multitude of disparate stories and visions, all coalescing around an inspiring space: the Substation, Newport. Part of Melbourne's 2012 Midsumma Festival, the show had all the obvious queer credentials: gay artists, homoerotic overtones, and references to gay identity. But this was not all it had, and parts of it had none of this at all. Curator Jessica Bridgfoot explains: 'some of the artists in this exhibition are queer, some are not, however the commonality is that the works themselves are queer ... they are curious narratives on sexuality, death, crime, ritual, and making the everyday strange.' 'Strange' is, after all, one of the earliest senses of the word 'queer'.

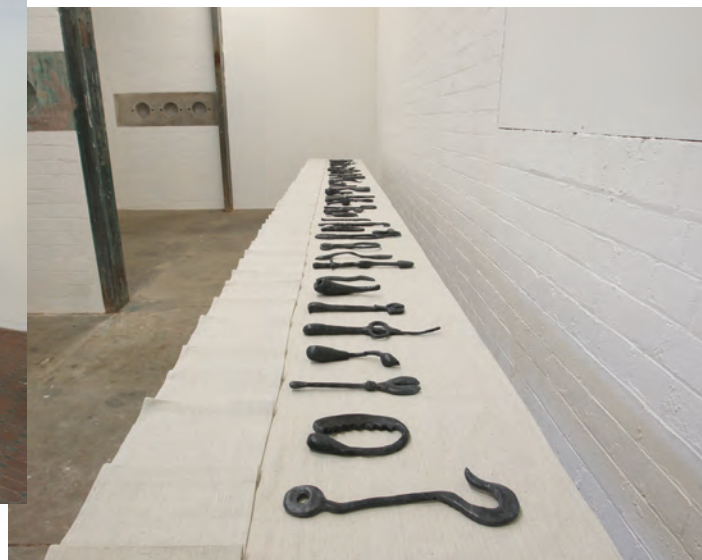
Opening up the notion of 'queer', Bridgfoot invokes the figure of the *flâneur*: the curious urban subject who walks the city, looking, wanting. Viewers were invited to adopt the mode of the *flâneur*, the queer connoisseur of the city, and to experience 'the city as a series of rooms each containing its own history or tales'. The artists were our guides, taking us to unfamiliar reaches of our city and ourselves: from the (post) industrial western side of the Yarra, to the outskirts of Newport, to the Substation itself; to real and imaginary places and pasts, to the mysterious and unsettling realms of the unconscious ... in a succession of strange encounters.

An unusual journey prepared you for the encounters at the Substation. It was a surprisingly strange journey down a seemingly familiar river. The city becomes a very different place from this perspective. Before long you are in another world, deep in *Deep Sea Chanties*, travelling through time, and across the high seas, transported by the haunting voice of musician and artist Martha McDonald, the soulful fiddle and concertina of her collaborator Craig Woodward, and the gentle growl

of the engine of the *HMS Blackbird*, circa 1920s. Back on dry land, McDonald's voice continued to resonate through the bunker-like rooms of the Substation's ground-floor gallery spaces (originally designed to reinforce the floor in order to support the heavy equipment that once powered Melbourne's first electric trains). Her song emanated from the old record player on the floor of one room, referencing the wind-up victrola that played the Enrico Caruso records that McDonald's father-in-law would sing along to, as a sailor in the American Merchant Marine during the 1940s and '50s. The only other objects in the room were exquisitely knotted and coiled ropes, which, like the chanties/shanties McDonald sings, allude to the hard work and the long idle hours and lonely days of life at sea, and the practical and artistic skills and pursuits essential for surviving them. The sea is a dangerous place. If not death (shipwreck, piracy, starvation and loneliness were all likely causes), discovery awaited you – that is, if you were a woman who snuck aboard disguised as man. Danger, drag, desire, deprivation; homoeroticism loves a sailor.

Perhaps this is why TV Moore appears to be dressed like a sailor in his video work *Old Love In Song, In Death*. Perhaps this is also why the work was included in the exhibition. It is a sort of requiem for the artist, an anguished return to childhood from the grave, through convulsions of song and nursery rhyme. Strange, disturbing, queer though it is, *Old Love In Song, In Death* is not so much a tale from the sea as a story of a haunted choir boy.

Heather B. Swann's creations, by contrast, could well have emerged from the sea. Part human, part bird, part fetish creatures, these erotic, otherworldly hybrids in two and three dimensions exude physical and symbolic power. They embody the mystery, danger, desire and sexuality associated as much with the sea as with the city. In the sculpture *Night's Tongue*, a thrusting androgynous



clockwise from top left: 1/ Heather B Swann, installation view, *Substation*, Newport, 2012; wall: left to right; *Bone Dance*, 2011, *Tosser*, *Drawing*, all 2010; floor: left to right; *Boy and Girls*, *Night's Tongue*, both 2010; image courtesy the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne

2/ Kate Just, *Unearthed*, 2011, modelling clay, wire, tape, cardboard, cotton, MDF, pine rope; installation view, *Substation*, Newport; image courtesy the artist and Daine Singer, Melbourne

3/ Martha McDonald and Craig Woodward (fiddle), *Deep Sea Chanties*, 2012, performance work on board the HMAS Blackbird, Melbourne

body becomes a mass of insatiable tongues. More ambiguous objects by Kate Just reference female body politics, merging forms suggestive of female anatomy with the instruments used to probe and penetrate it, from the gynecological to the cosmetic ... to the phallic. Just's black resin forms, laid out along the length of an oversized tool belt, are contradictory and uncanny: simultaneously soft and hard, intimate and invasive, beautiful and sinister. *Unearthed* makes a pointed commentary on the dialectic of desire and control that circumscribes the body in the city.

The title of Just's work, as well as emphasising 'unnaturalness', sets up an historical fiction; the instruments as quasi-archaeological relics. This plays to the notion of hidden stories, buried in the abandoned sites, the forgotten gaps and edges of the city, ambiguous spaces with no designated purpose, inside the geography of the city but outside its logic. The evocative nature of these spaces – fluctuating, indeterminate, vacant, free – is captured in the French term *terrain Vague*, coined by the Catalan architect and theoretician Ignasi de Sola Morales. Steeped in both danger and possibility, they are fertile, seductive, sexually charged ... queer spaces.

Such spaces come to the fore in the photographs of Andrew Browne. Mostly taken around the disused and

overgrown outskirts of Newport, *Sixteen Figments*, a series of black-and-white photographs, indirectly references the history of the Substation itself, once a part of the same deserted post-industrial landscape, particularly prevalent around Melbourne's west.

Like Just's *Unearthed*, Browne's *Sixteen Figments* supposes an imaginary engagement with history and place. The evocative nocturnal images allude to stories, things unseen, hidden in the shadows. Though they appear to capture chance moments or juxtapositions, actually they are fabrications, fictions, carefully composed traces, suggestive remains. Browne's photographs have an uncanny appeal: sometimes a strange familiarity; sometimes a deceptive interplay between natural and man-made elements, echoing the artist's subtle manipulation of his scenes. A concrete couch, or is it a garden seat? A dead branch, protruding from a garbage bag. From gothic romance to absurdist pathos, the photographs in *Sixteen Figments* are somehow so theatrical they look natural.

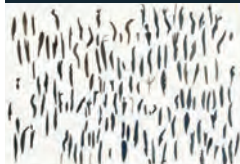
The tension between the spontaneous and the arranged that animates Browne's photographs was exemplified in *Queer Urban Tales* by the photographic installations of Patrick Pound, who makes serialised



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Left image: G W Bot *Paddock with leaves feather and crucifixion* Right image: G W Bot *Burial Glyph*



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Glyphmaker: G W Bot
A Tweed River Art Gallery initiative



1/ Lucas Grogan, *Recent Events*, 2012, site-specific wall mural, Substation, Newport; image courtesy the artist and Gallery Smith, Melbourne

2/ Drew Pettifer, *George St Billboard*, image courtesy the artist; Pettifer is one of four artists showing in Substation's 2013 Midsumma Festival exhibition; details below.

3/ Martha McDonald, *Deep Sea Chanties* 2012, mariner's rope, sail twine, cork board, mixed media, record player, 7-inch vinyl record; installation view, Substation, Newport; image courtesy the artist



assemblages out of found photographs. Lying in parks, in cars, on couches, slumped at desks, this series features *People who look dead but (probably) aren't*. The droll title gives nothing away yet it totally determines the viewer's response. The stories, the implied, imagined dramas fill the space outside the tidy photo corners framing each image, yet the real drama lies in the ambiguity, the uncanny verisimilitude between the appearance of the sleeping and the dead, which transforms the viewer's curiosity into compulsive, morbid fascination.

The drama in this work is an especially urban drama because it blurs the boundaries between public and private. Who are the people in the photographs and what are they doing? Why do I want to know? Why am I looking? What of the artist who collected the prints and the photographers who captured the images? Are they too *flâneurs*? When does the *flâneur* become the voyeur? Ambiguous on the one hand, the photographs are strictly ordered and clearly classified, on the other. The typological arrangement alludes to the city (not to mention the medium of photography) as an instrument for controlling bodies; an instrument, not dissimilar from those comprising Just's macabre toolkit.

If the city is an instrument of control, it is also an object and a vector of desire, the medium par excellence of modern subjectivity. Street art speaks to this tension. It is, in principle at least, subversive and about asserting agency, making demands, taking a stand. Lucas Grogan is known for his *Movida* mural, his commissioned contribution to Melbourne's most famous laneway Hosier Lane. With murals, Grogan is in his element as a painter (he also works in many other media). Of his works in this exhibition, it is the mural that is the most effective, talking to the historical

graffiti that has been retained on the Substation walls.

Recent Events combines Grogan's signature elements of irreverent social critique, brazen homoeroticism, controversial Aboriginal-inspired visual language, and a fondness for blue and white. The quasi-rock art scene features the figure of the artist mounted on the spirit of the GFC as it plummets to the ground. Transgressive? Yes. Queer? Absolutely.

Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea: Queer Urban Tales, curated by Jessica Bridgfoot, showed at the Substation, Newport, 14 January to 26 February 2012, as part of the 2012 Midsumma Festival. It featured the work of Andrew Browne, Lucas Grogan, Kate Just, Martha McDonald, TV Moore, Patrick Pound, and Heather B. Swann. Martha McDonald performed *Deep Sea Chanties* on the 19-21 and 27-28 January 2012. For Melbourne's 2013 Midsumma Festival, the Substation will show another Jessica Bridgfoot-curated exhibition, *Blue and Pink Phenomenon*, which focuses on the body and is billed as a 'Queer frisson in a heterogeneous world'; includes work by Drew Pettifer (VIC), Deborah Paauwe (SA), Liam Benson (NSW), and Deborah Kelly (NSW), and runs 17 January to 24 February 2013: www.thesubstation.org.au

Stella Gray works at Melbourne's Grainger Museum, where strange encounters are a daily occurrence.

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