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19th – 21st Century Fine Art

Six Degrees of Separation – Exhibition Essay

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Six Degrees of Separation groups a diverse assortment of paintings and drawings by artists who have previously had no direct relation to each other – their only commonality being the collective chains of thought that underpin their work. Artists include Valerie Bos, Jonathan Crayford, Grant Muir, Douglas Stichbury, Sydney Lough Thompson and Claire Zanelli.

In direct reference to John Guare's 1990 play of the same name, Six Degrees of Separation aims to question how social networks, societal structures and other forms of order function or malfunction in our contemporary lives. Guare's character Ouisa expounds that 'everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people ... The President of the United States, a gondolier in Venice, just fill in the names'. Due to the Internet enabling the vast, evolving connections between millions of people uninhibited by geography, it is now apparent that the degree to which one is separated from another is only limited to how many chat rooms you contribute to. Whether it be three or six degrees of separation, what is important to note is that such a hypothesis is but one of many interrelated theories that attempt to chart the complexity of social networks¹. However, the meaning of a connection between Barack Obama and a bus driver in Wellington is something that only the arts, philosophy and religion can truly give insight into. This is because a scientific approach can only reveal the order of such networks, whereas an artistic approach can allude to its possible meanings. Painting and drawing are apt mediums for such an investigation. As the artists in this exhibition demonstrate, painting and drawing allow concurrent access to both the diagrammatic nature of networks and the lived experience of being annexed within them.

Jonathan Crayford's gridded harmonies of coloured squares hold an interesting relation to the patterns and visual representation of network theories. When approaching the works with a fresh eye they appear to be sporadic constellations of

¹ Such network theories also branch into broader studies such as collective consciousness, emergence, chaos theory, and evolution. That in turn occupy the efforts of a number of disciplines including biology, anthropology, sociology, economics, development studies, mathematics, computer science and quantum physics to name a few.

repeated colour. After a considered glance the undulating configurations reveal a complex algorithm of sympathetic hues. While the works hold a strong synaesthetic quality of logic in waiting for translation, they also closely demonstrate theories of emergence². However, the captivating qualities of Crayford's abstract compositions provide more than merely an illustration of theory. Indeed, the implicit beauty of the paintings inspires awe rather than rational understanding - perhaps paying homage to a complex logic that will forever elude attempts to grasp it.

In contrast, the logic present in Grant Muir's work is coded in the murky realm of psychological and mystical symbolism. In one work, an outstretched palm holds a landscape in an act of gifting. In his second work, a landscape is propped up by a foot and leg, denoting a sturdy but mobile foundation. The peace, generosity and strength referenced in the gesture of the hand and foot within Muir's works are sympathetic towards the notions of an indigenous perspective of land, the body and societal structure³. Therefore, Muir's surrealist juxtapositions of the body and landscape are representative of how collective societal identity can be psychologically and spiritually intertwined in one's geographical place.

Claire Zanelli's work also deals with the psychological representation of the body. However, Zanelli's paintings of figures whose faces are engulfed in cigarette ash suggest a more ephemeral and dysfunctional social framework at play. By erasing what gives a person their individuality, the figures have been deprived of their being. In an odd reversal, Zanelli in effect cremates the figure's soul and preserves the body. This erasure of being suggests an underlying trauma, perhaps caused by malignant relationships or societal pressures. The metaphorical current veiled in these paintings indicates how social networks can also have adverse effects on identity and being.

The social networks referred to in Valerie Bos' work have a similar malignant nature. Her paintings depict enclaves of genteel female figures who dwell in a malaise-cloaked realm of muted tones and rudimentary buildings. In each painting Bos arranges quizzical situations in which the figures insinuate mistrust and suspicion. As some figures peek out of windows, others hide behind each other or cluster together in hushed conversation. Despite their harmless appearance, the figures' body language tells of passive-aggressive agendas and timorous back-handed gossip. The tides of unease that insidiously pervade the depicted society bring to mind the viral suspicion of eighteenth century witch trials. Bos' images, therefore, reveal unhealthy societal structures like those often found in religious cults that establish control of people by propagating fear and suspicion.

² Simply speaking emergence is the notion of an organism comprised of disparate individuals that create an amorphous whole - like the function of a city or an ant colony.

³ For example, in traditional Maori culture during a mihimihi one is expected to state their local mountain and river, thereby locating themselves geographically and spiritually. Furthermore, in both of Muir's works the landscape resembles mountain ranges. The mountain in Maori mythology is also often personified as a deity and as such the summit is respected as tapu. This is in direct contrast to the western paradigm where the mountain is often the subject of man's fear or conquest.

Sydney Lough Thompson's double sided self portrait offers a historical, psychological and sociological analysis. This portrait is dated 1917, a successful point in Thomson's career when he was living and exhibiting in Europe. Thompson has presented himself as a clean-cut, urbane bohemian with a ruminative gaze granting him the mystique of the artist as genius on the fringes of society⁴. On the reverse is a superb study of a dancer in movement – despite being only a quick sketch it demonstrates Thompson's grace of line and confident understanding of the human form. Taking an analytical view both the portrait and the sketch⁵ give us an understanding into Thompson's self-cast role as an artist in society and the actual reality of his artistic endeavour – displaying what Freud might explain as the distinction between the superego and ego.

Douglas Stichbury's ambiguous series of drawings questions the historical narratives and modes of thought that have helped shape the structure of western society. The drawings depict a range of historic people and subjects in an unusual manner. Included are a puppet-like representation of Macbeth, an oddly fallacious portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte, a cartoon parody of a memento mori and in contrived style a nineteenth century physician giving a lecture. Welding these threads of association together the drawings highlight fables, morals and knowledge that underpin the fabric of western society. However, the comedic and whimsical nature of these drawings seem to ridicule their subjects to the point where they are no longer taken seriously. In doing so Stichbury raises ironic suspicion of tradition and societal norms.

Rather than giving us a definitive answer on the meaning of social networks, art (as opposed to science) uses the imagination to lead us to our own discoveries of truth. As Guare's character Paul succinctly proclaimed, 'I believe that imagination is the passport that we create to take us into the real world'.

⁴ Thompson (1877- 1975) who trained at the Royal Academy in London was part of a group of influential artists (during the late 19th and early 20th century) who fled the culturally inhibited society of New Zealand and brought back the latest artistic developments from Europe. The notion of the artist genius on the fringes of society would have been an important identity to uphold give the parochial nature of New Zealand culture of his time. Therefore, viewed within the context of this exhibition grants Thompson's work a rear opportunity to examine his work within a contemporary context and consider the evolution of the artist as subject in New Zealand society.

⁵ Although drawing on both side of the paper is most probably due to practical use of materials this nevertheless provides a rich opportunity of psychoanalysis into what Thomson outwardly presented and inwardly considered.