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I'm increasingly bemused by my responses to art these days. My attitude towards it can be highly ambivalent. Sometimes looking at art causes a sensation of physiological discomfort. However, this wasn't my response to the exhibition *Uneasy: Recent South Australian Art* curated by Timothy Morrell and shown at the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art in Adelaide. I thought it was well installed, satisfying, nuanced and subtle.

My responses to art are necessarily subjective, as is my response to *Uneasy*, but it's a subjective view informed by specialised relevant knowledge. I was asked to respond to the exhibition *Uneasy* because of my familiarity with the work of most of the artists in the show gained when I lived and worked in Adelaide, and because of my current status as an informed outsider. In the mid-1990s when I was in my late twenties, I remember thinking how enthusiasm and passion should overrule conservative attitudes about the role of art in society and how it was presented in art museums. Art was to be relevant if it challenged dominant cultural forms, took conceptual and material risks, and explored edgy and underground terrain. Traditional concepts of aesthetics were suspect, informed as they were by Western world views or class-based hierarchies. In the early to mid-1990s my peers and I found a context for our thinking in the subcultural artistic forms of abject and grunge art. This art that embraced the discarded, discordant and diseased was related to broader Western cultural phenomena of the time—Generation X's cynicism towards consumer culture, the grungy aesthetic of slacker culture and the Seattle grunge music scene exemplified by bands including Nirvana and Pearl Jam, and post-AIDS politicisation of the body and its liquid corporeality. Some also saw this grungy aesthetic as a reaction to the heated economy of the 1980s and its brand-obsessed fashion culture of conspicuous consumption, and the inflated art market that accompanied it. 1990s grunge art was often described at the time as a subcultural pose characterised by youthful rebelliousness—punk for the 1990s. I'm currently thinking about the historical moment of grunge for a writing project, and it's easier to see from the vantage of a decade out, how grunge art participated in social critiques of idealised and hermetic body-image (remember Herb Ritts' 1992 photos of Marky Mark for Calvin Klein's underwear ad campaign?), of contingencies of use-value in relation to commodity and waste, and how it engaged philosophical issues regarding relativities of subjectivity. My experience of participating in that moment continues to affect my expectations about contemporary art and its value, and it might help explain my response to *Uneasy*, which by the way, was not particularly grungy.

My response to *Uneasy* interests me. What issues or expectations did it confirm for me? In order to make a response I want to take in a broader picture. I think we can safely assume that our own interests, our individual accumulated knowledge, and the personal significance of images and objects in the world condition our reactions to art and art exhibitions. Most people would be familiar with the concept of nature and nurture, the genetic and social and cultural influences that determine our individual selfhood and our reactions to the world around us. At the beginning of his recent book about the role of synapses (the transmitting gaps between nerve cells), Joseph LeDoux of New York University's Centre for Neural Science suggests that we should transcend the "nature versus nurture" debate, because both factors ultimately function in similar fashion. "Genetic factors," LeDoux writes, "are in fact known to influence a variety of individual or personality characteristics, including how outgoing, fearful, or aggressive one is, as well as the likelihood that one will develop depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia".¹ A few pages later he quotes novelist Salman Rushdie who wrote in London's *The Independent* newspaper in 1990, "Life teaches us who we are." Learning and memory, plus our genetic inheritance create our sense of self. This might seem obvious, but in addition it is understood that the human brain has evolved with the required plasticity that enables it to learn and create memories in order to construct a sense of self-awareness. LeDoux's book is one that I have been reading very slowly, and even though I'm up to chapter five, I wouldn't venture to suggest much about the physiology of memory. However, I do wish to offer one more concept from the cognitive sciences. From the fairly new discipline of evolutionary psychology comes the proposition that humans possess an innate capacity for language (even at the level of broadly-based grammatical structuring), and further, that "humans have innate knowledge about numbers, physics, and even about how other human minds work".² To me this suggestion begs an interesting question regarding our understanding of visual art. If the human capacity for complex language as a means to interpret our world is an outcome of evolution, we might propose that art—an extension of language—is therefore also the product of entirely natural evolutionary factors. Might we now consider it differently in this light, or apply different evaluation criteria to it?

The combination of my genetic history and its influence on my personality traits combined with the particular learning experiences and memories I've had, plus the exigencies of the moment, will largely determine how I look at art and why I react the way I do. There would have to be an acknowledgement of a shared cultural experience at a local level that gives meaning to my opinion, with which you may agree or disagree. I think the point is for me at the moment, that the effect of these causal influences, as well as the probability that art is a natural and intrinsic capacity of humans is something that has consciously influenced my responses to art lately. And so, as the scale of my experience becomes more reductive and therefore more personal (from culturally understood artistic values, to subculturally-informed values, to academically informed values, to my own individual responses to art that may be highly subtle or fetishistic, for instance) my ambivalent attitude is more pronounced and hopefully, I'm less concerned or perplexed by this ambivalence, because I can rationalise it. To offer a critique of a particular exhibition is to do so with all of the above borne in mind. My response to *Uneasy* however, informed by relevant knowledge, becomes an opportunity to compare your response (if you've seen it) and therefore form a conclusion as to its efficacy; or (if you didn't see it—as will be the case for the majority of readers) to consider its value or otherwise, as argued here, in relation to your own interests and world views.

Coincidentally or not there is a psychological, if not neurological, subtext to some of the works in *Uneasy*. Most explicitly, the exhibition is branded by a production still from Sarah Crowest's video work *Caught in a Loop* (2007). This video presents a series of vignettes in which individuals confess their obsessive-compulsive behaviour, including a stand-in for the artist herself—someone who compulsively makes creatures (soft-toy-like objects that Crowest actually makes as an artist). The image used to brand the exhibition is a production-still detail showing the head of a man featured in the video,

his eyes making weird contact with our own. This monochromatic, slightly old-fashioned looking image strikes a chord of unease I guess, given the man's fixed gaze. From the video we learn that this character's particular tic involves compulsively colouring-in the enclosed spaces in letter-characters. Crowest's video is actually about compulsive behaviour, or at least repetition, perhaps as a metaphor for making art—casting it as an automatic activity wherein the power of art as agency is called into question.

John Barbour has also explored psychological intensity, and in the past he has made works that refer directly to the history of psychoanalysis. He was represented in the exhibition by a suite of fabric works from 2003 to 2007, delicately floating sheer sections of voile, stained and bearing half-legible text in embroidered or unpicked thread. In the exhibition these resonated with Annabelle Collett's fabric works installed on adjacent walls. Collett had made fleecy comfort clothes (pyjamas and lingerie) from camouflage-print fleece and chiffon and a trio of hybrid bondage/straitjacket suits in Guantanamo orange. While it might seem straight-forward to pair these works on the basis of their material facture, I think it was made more complex within the suggestive context of the other relationships between works that Morrell had set into play. This pairing, along with other more nuanced ones, assisted an overall sense of subtle and considered relationships between individual works in the exhibition. For example, I was particularly taken by the oblique connection from Daryl Austin's work to Michelle Nikou's. Austin's *Painting Fetish #2* (2003) and *Nail Palette* (2003), a wooden painting stretcher and painters' palette, each bristling with rusty nails, were described by Morrell in his catalogue essay as related to Congolese fetish objects. Likewise he related Nikou's lumpy bronze sculpture *Full* (2006) to Papua New Guinea's Chimbu masks. Nikou's roughly textured abstract sculptures are stuck here and there by rusted nails, and I found this formal coincidence between Austin's and Nikou's works effective in its discretion because the connection was based on a singular motif of imprecise symbolism. Nikou's work made different connections with other works installed adjacent to it—its rustic ambience and bronze-brown tonality reverberated with Yhonnie Scarce's *Oppression, Repression (Family Portrait)* (2004), a set of old-fashioned screw-top food jars containing black-and-white family photographs, each jar topped with a bush-tucker fruit made from opaque glass. Indigenous themes were also carried by Nici Cumpston's closeup photographs of leaf and bark litter blown against wire fencing. In the same room, Austin's realistic full-length portraits of nude men echoed Annette Bezor's gigantic airbrushed painting of a female nude that was installed downstairs. They were similar, but different. In the atrium entry space, there was a Pop Art feel courtesy of a big modular pink wooden skull by Ariel Hassan, Bezor's big painting, video and assemblage-sculpture by Matthew Bradley and bright paintings by Aldo Iacobelli.

The range of works in this room reflected the generational range of the artists included in the exhibition. There were established artists of the Adelaide scene—Hossein Valamanesh, Fiona Hall, Iacobelli, Barbour and Bezor; some of the young guns—Bradley and Crowest, and a few in-between. Although unstated, this had the effect of suggesting a continuing tradition in the recent story of South Australian art rather than a generational shift represented by the current crop of early-career artists and their prickly or edgy styles. There was also a subtext of inter-connectedness across the two storey gallery space courtesy of the ambient audio produced by works by Bradley and Tracey Cornish. A video by Bradley of a burning car tyre broadcast the whoosh of wind-shear over the microphone. Cornish's abstract video projections upstairs were accompanied by a sci-fi tonal white noise and the even aural tonality of both bled through the gallery space. While the exhibition embraced media art and site-specific installation, along with painting, sculpture, photography and textiles, this diversity seemed natural. However, it seemed to me that the traditional confines of art were largely firmly in place. Only Matthew Bradley's digital-video works and air cannon sculpture implied any actual operational relationship to the world outside the gallery walls. I could identify the internal, individual psychological dramas alluded to in some works, and global anxieties referenced in others but I'm not sure the exhibition was uneasy in the sense that Morrell had conceptualised it.

In his catalogue essay, Morrell established a context for the exhibited works based on locality: "Ecologically, socially, politically and culturally, South Australia is more self-conscious than other parts of the country."³ He suggests that South Australia is more susceptible to drought, recession

and settler-culture alienation, and lists a set of conservative-versus-progressive attitudes in South Australia's history to determine its "paradoxical character". Included here is the cliché of the creepy atmosphere of the city of Adelaide. To me this is where Morrell's exhibition slackened. As a concept, there's nothing wrong with "unease" and it was definitely manifest in several of the works in different ways, making for a complex, calm, even intellectual exhibition experience. It seemed to me that the recourse to the popular mythology of South Australia's and Adelaide's pathological subtext was a laboured and anachronistic theme. Any sense of unease manifested in the works seemed a function of concerns largely unrelated to locality in the sense Morrell suggested. The concept of locality also drove the commissioning of the exhibition. In her catalogue introduction Erica Green, Director of the Samstag Museum of Art, made a case for the marginal nature of South Australia's visual arts in terms of east-coast visibility. Morrell was invited to curate the exhibition as someone who had worked in Adelaide but brought a "national perspective". Green says "we sought the viewpoint of a person from outside of South Australia who could also bring a credible grasp of local issues".⁴ By focusing on South Australian artists the exhibition fits into a framework—other exhibitions have done the same in different contexts (including the Art Gallery of South Australia's 2000 survey *Chemistry*, the Experimental Art Foundation's 2006 exhibition *Snapshot* and the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia's ongoing series *Mentor Mentored*). The artist biographies in the exhibition catalogue clearly highlight national or international exhibition presence for almost all of the artists in the exhibition, so the claim for the increased visibility of South Australian artists seemed odd in this context. An argument could have equally been made for the increasing national reputation of these artists.

As it happened, a couple of weeks after visiting Adelaide to view the exhibition, I flew there again to drive from Adelaide to Canberra where I live. I lived in Adelaide for about six years, and I finally organised myself to collect some personal belongings that had been stored there since I left. In a rented Commodore wagon guided by GPS navigator, I exited Adelaide through its northern suburbs, passed by wineries and followed the Sturt Highway across strikingly beautiful expanses of open landscape. Passing through myriad towns I was beguiled by their cute rustic cottages and civic buildings. After an overnight stay in the town of Hay, I drove on to Canberra and tuned in to ABC Radio National a few hours before reaching home. I happened to come in on a science program about geoengineering (the large-scale manipulation of the planet's environment for human benefit). I learned that during the Vietnam War the USA had experimented with seeding clouds over enemy territory. A scientist spoke about the possibility of retrofitting US Navy guns to fire sulphur into the stratosphere to deflect sunlight and therefore counteract the greenhouse effect. The science of geoengineering is controversial because it is cheaper and easier than reducing carbon emissions by cutting fossil fuel consumption or developing green power alternatives. One scientist suggested that geoengineering should be considered a risk management strategy if carbon emission reduction proves insufficient. When the ABC interviewer asked if geoengineering was seriously being entertained by scientists, the response was "yes". We should expect discussion of geoengineering in newspaper editorials within a few years. What's this got to do with my commentary above? I'm not sure, but I was compelled to conclude with it. I am bemused by this compulsion too, because I don't fully understand it. Perhaps it represents a series of synaptic connections as basic as associated geographic and temporal vectors. Or should I have concluded with a pun?

Notes

¹ Joseph LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*, New York: Penguin Books, 2003: 3-4

² Ibid: 84

³ Timothy Morrell, 'Uneasy', *Uneasy: Recent South Australian Art*, Adelaide: Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2008: 13

⁴ Erica Green, 'Introduction', *Uneasy: Recent South Australian Art*, Adelaide: Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2008: 9