

Solidarity in Print

Dja Dja Wurrung Country, Lot 19

June 27, 2021

This exhibition came about because of failure. The artists involved in Solidarity in Print, all entered a print prize and none of them were shortlisted for the exhibition. This is surprising as much as anything given their professional experience and skill level. But prizes are fickle businesses: judges have likes and dislikes; work is in the zeitgeist or not; some prizes need to be entered numerous times before an artist is even considered.

But failure is interesting isn't it? I mean let's take a moment and see how you feel when I mention the word failure. *beat*. I don't know about you but for me it's mostly dark emotions: shame, disappointment, regret. But it's not black and white is it because if you can stand with failure those emotions can shift: humiliation shifts to humility, shame shifts to foolishness or irreverence or defiance. Failure starts to take on different patterns and hues. Failure can be clarifying, nothing like a failure for culling the deadwood of habitual thought. Failure can be the catalyst for a great up-yours to the orthodoxy. Failure can be galvanizing, just witness this extraordinary chutzpah in the exhibition behind us.

So here we are at Lot 19 to LAND (as opposed to Launch) an exhibition made manifest because of failure. And hats off to the artists because it's a huge success. And I reckon that because artists are great at failure! In all sorts of ways! Not only are they brilliant at questioning societal norms about success and failure but they make all sorts of decisions, that, by conventional wisdom are bound to fail! For example they prioritise art over financial security, they fall in love with colour and line, they give over their lives to experience the alchemy of the elements. Really, artists are experts at failure. They risk failing each time they begin a new work, because no matter the years of experience, no matter the skill level, no matter even the love, it might not work. Further, artists know that often it's in the failure that something completely unexpected happens. Something that couldn't have been foreseen – a kind of strange miracle – a new colour, an entirely different perspective, an unintended form.

So when I look at this exhibition, is not failure I see, but a space teeming with life. Just look at the sheer exuberance of Jackie Goring's work, or the devotional outpouring in Trace by Diana Orinda Burns, or the fire of protest behind Kim Barter's business men. Let's take a step back and look at this extraordinarily show.

What strikes me when I enter the gallery is the strength of each artist's vision. Each artist has an individual, nuanced aesthetic, that works together with a distinct intent. Within the spaciousness of the Lot 19 gallery the image that comes to mind for me is that each artist's vision is like a rafter, that the rafters work together to hold up a vaulted ceiling. (Now that's an appalling cliché but for me it somehow works.) There is clarity and purpose in the work, with not one artist jostling for more space than the other. And the vaulted ceiling becomes the common theme of the show. The artists tell me there was no set theme for the show, but one has emerged. I would call it, *concern for the world*. 6 of the 7 artists either directly or indirectly refer to climate change. 2 works refer to social justice issues, 1 work – perhaps the rafter that stops the ceiling from falling in, brings our attention to the delights of ordinary moments that can present themselves no matter the bigger picture.

This brings me back to my original theme. Because among all their other brilliant attributes, artists have the courage to stand with the failings of the world. But not only stand with them: artists actively participate in how the world can be altered. In her talk to the for the Cremlana Alumni Speaker Program, (which you can hear on ABC RN's Big Ideas thanks Paul) the writer Sarah Sentilles argued that art can save the world. She began her argument by saying that artists remind her of the constructed status of the world. They know, she says, that our politics, social systems, laws and beliefs are all constructed and "as people involved in the act of creating, artists know that the world is made, can be unmade and remade". They know therefore that if Donald Trump can be made president, he can also be unmade president, and that the presidential role can be remade. Artists invite us into that process of what can be made, unmade and remade. Just as failure can shift, transmute, leaven into something else, so too, artists engage in the fluidity of the world. As Kim Barter would say, nothing is static. You can see this fluidity plays out in all the work, both in the material alchemy of print making itself, and in relation to the images and themes the artists present. As I have absolutely no expertise in the technicalities of print making, I'm going to spend some time focusing on how I see this fluidity play out in the finished work.

In Coast Series, Jane Marriott bears witness to the erosion of the mighty cliffs and shrinking beaches at her beloved Anglesea. These are simple, elegant, monoprints, the muted colours expressing something of the ancient, enduring nature of the land. In her artist's statement Jane writes that the thick black lines in the work refer to veins of coal and our human greed for resources that is driving climate change. But they're also the outlines of the geological shapes within the cliffs, whose simplicity and completed forms bring a kind of peace. The geographical forms suggest something monumental that reach beyond the span of a human life. So there is a play here between what will be ripped from the earth and the earth as an enduring peaceful presence. There is sadness in this work, but for me it is as though the very love and concern Jane has for the landscape has poured out

into the prints, making rough lines smooth, the smoothness and rounded shapes resonating with this care. Jane has created a landscape to abide within: a landscape that is both beautiful and diminishing.

With Robin Gibson's work we are present with fragments of coral she collected on the Indonesian island of Gili Meno in 2016. During her visit Robin was struck by the bleached and broken coral around the island, the result of warming oceans. There is a detached air to Robin's work, as though she is asking us to look at the reality of these corals without sentimentality, just see them as they are. But the more I look the more I am captivated by their specificity, each with idiosyncratic bumps and turns – and I begin to delight in them. Then there is a shift again and with a thud, the unadorned placement of the coral on the paper and the scientific reality that soon they will be destroyed. For her second work Robyn tears up this detached code and re-makes the print into something entirely different. A giant fossil-like creation towers over us, and the tables are turned – we who were once big are now small. Suddenly our perspective shifts and the coral has become mighty, mighty like our ecosystem, the force of which will destroy us if we continue to abuse it. Or perhaps the artist is asking us if the coral needs to be this big before we will heed the call to reduce our impact on the earth?

In Kir Larwill's work 'show up as you are' we are presented with the same face, repeated, with variations. The face is scratchy, lop-sided, unpolished, incomplete, perhaps a more honest rendering of the self than a perfect Instagram post. From each face there is a direct outward gaze that holds my attention, but when I step back from the work I want to laugh! The hilarity of it all; all the many selves; and the discombobulation of life! But then my mood shifts again, I quieten, I take in the daily presence of the work, and it makes me want to weep. This is a ferocious courage, this courage to keep showing up each day. The face may be wobbly, may be distant, may be grinning, but it is *there*, no matter the ills of the world. This is a deeply moral work, but it is held lightly in the hands of the artist.

Let's look at Kym Barter's *Enough*, where she takes the outrage of sexual assault and throws it onto the paper with rough strokes, unfinished edges and unconstrained scrawl. In page after page of the book we hear the raw cries of women who have had enough. This outrage, pain and invisibility have been made (unmade, remade) into a book that comes a testimony, a reference and a treasury, held in the two hands of whoever reads it.

With her unique pack of card Jan Palethorpe invites us to do more than look, but to see. On the front of each card is an intimate, detailed etching of an endangered species, on the back the image of the small, but ecologically vital, native blue-band bee. Jan asks us to play the memory game Concentration with the cards, so you cannot just pass by these creatures, but you must hold them in your mind, repeatedly, returning them to your memory as you try to place them with a pair. The artist is constantly reiterating their vulnerability, for if we don't keep them in mind they may disappear altogether. Because of the stakes at hand and the anguish we feel because of their impending loss, it is as though each time a card is flipped over the image is tattooed on our hearts. Perhaps this needle point of provocation will cause us to act? In the end it doesn't matter if we do or not, we are marked by playing this game, by the loss of these animals and plants. We play the game and the creatures are held in our mind, and imprinted on our hearts. We suffer because we are repeatedly reminded that they are suffering, and as we come to *know* their suffering through this action of Concentration, we love them all the more.

There are all sort of subtle movement and transformations in Diana Orinda Burns' work. The artist has rubbed 30 previous plates to gather images, textures and tone that she has remade into a bold new work. There is reference in Trace to land, sea, turtles, towers, gravestones and fleur de lys. The work was made in the wake of her parents' death, and it is an act of devotion. It is an outpouring of love for the past, present and future. It is a scared work, held in the frame of the mandorla as subtle and strange happenings dance across the surface of the paper. For some reason it reminded me of the nature of insight, that comes from we don't know where, and is triggered by too many numerous things to be counted. But when it does come, it is clear and light, like a gift from the heavens.

I have already made a couple of references to Jackie's work – its sheer exuberance, its delight in the unexpected magic of the ordinary. I only want to add here that I imagine Jackie is so imbedded in this flow of made, unmade and remade, that it makes me want to sit at her feet, and revel. And go hunting with ferrets.

In this talk I began with failure and the idea it is more than a blackened concrete bunker, that if we allow it, it will shift and change. Then I looked at the creative process and how art is the living example of the world being made and unmade and remade. But before I conclude I would like to

add one more ingredient to the matrix of possibility I am presenting today. It is us. The audience. Because art only truly comes alive when someone engages with it.

Today we are being invited into the process of being made, unmade and remade. We are being invited to stand in front of the work and be changed. To ask ourselves, how does this work make me feel? Why does it make me feel that way? What does it make me want to do? And in asking those questions we are being invited to notice the subtle shifts of our being and let ourselves be unmade. Perhaps being unmade will make you want to cry or scream or lie down. Perhaps you will be moved to take someone's hand because you understand how incomplete the world is, and you are incomplete within it. Perhaps being unmade will make you jump about ecstatically. Perhaps you will do something unexpected! Pool your money and collectively buy a Business Man! Write that letter for Amnesty that you've been putting off for two years. Follow a crow home. Give Marie Edwards a kiss because her government has committed to net zero emissions. Put your cheek to the earth and thank this Jarra country for giving you a home. Or commit your cash to an artwork for no logical reason at all but it makes you swoon.

This invitation is no mere whimsy. We are invited to step into this creative process to practice it. We need to practice it because we are failing the world. We need to know in our bones what it is to be made and unmade and remade. We need to know what it is to stand with failure – however we wake in the morning. We have to find the courage to stand with uncertainty and from within that uncertainty continue to reimagine the world.

This exhibition is a celebration. Of the galvanizing impetus of failure, of collective action and the possibility to reshape the world. So let's jump in! Let's risk ourselves! Let's know what it is to be fully alive.

Samantha Bews

theatre artist