

Beyond the Temples: The way of idiosyncrasy

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beyond the temples

the way of idiosyncrasy



Pat Hoffie caught up with Kevin Wilson recently in Brisbane to talk about the way of idiosyncrasy, a preoccupation which they share as people and cherished individuals working within organisational systems, in Queensland and elsewhere, quietly subverting and extending them.

Even the most mildly acerbic observer might note a current trend where high-profile curator/impresarios manage and direct their own careers using who and what they work with as fodder for the more important game of generating self-perpetuating hype. It's not a trend that Kevin Wilson's curatorial practice seems to fit in with.

Wilson's a phlegmatic and self-deprecating kind of character. Even his quietly spoken rhythm of speech suggests someone perpetually on the point of unpicking any assumptions he might harbour. It's like a kind of inbuilt self-criticality. And it could be partly because of this that he doesn't *present* himself as a pre-set package. Rather, there's a sense of unfolding, rather than presenting, about him and the projects with which he has been involved.

Although his name might not immediately jump to mind as among the best-known curators in the country, he has been

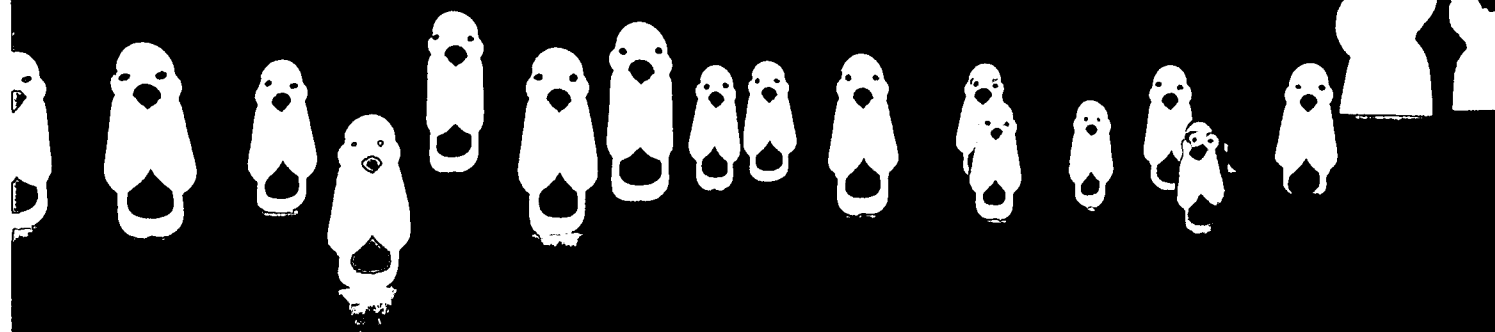
pat hoffie

associated with a range of innovative projects that have taken place in an assortment of scattered places – projects that have had their own in-built idiosyncrasies that have made them memorable. Projects like the inspired, lyrical and critically engaged *Floating Land*, that involved international, national and local artists working on sites in the hinterlands of Noosa Shire in Queensland. Or at Linden Gallery (Melbourne), where he worked relentlessly to re-establish the existing spaces to include the gallery, dance studios, studio spaces that could be rented out to writers and composers as well as artists, and incorporated *Experimenta*, *Women in Film and TV*, and even a children's sculpture studio down the side.

In fact, an informal survey of his 'career' suggests a kind of meandering mooching about in search of possibilities for developing interesting ideas in perplexing places. And there seems to be less and less mooching about any more in Australia, where straight lines drawn directly from hot-pressed idea to cool production seem to more often be placed within a staid understanding of what comprises 'professionalism.' So Wilson's kind of curating is unusual in that it seems driven by enquiry, by risk and by hunches that new things might still emerge from within this highly mediated territory of fine arts professionalism.

His ability to blithely ignore the divisiveness of categories may, in part, come from his education and his early experiences

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LEFT AND ABOVE: ENESS QV *Arctic Sanctuary* 2007 (July), an exhibit of skewed illumination and interactive art – project technology layered with playful elements. ENESS will be one of the featured groups developing an installation for Lucid 09 – part of Artworkers Alliance's ARC Biennial.

as an artist. He'd enrolled in Phillip Institute (now RMIT) as a mature age student who already had a degree in literature, a passion, to which he is still in thrall. He reads things other than art theory. Widely. Often. And during his time as a student he was surrounded by a range of people that encouraged any personal potential he might have had for experimental drives. He says:

I'd done photography and film and worked in that kind of area, but there was also a kind of underlying expectation that you'd be equipped to come out and make shows. I showed at George Paton Gallery when I first came out of college, when Juliana Engberg was Director and it was a major contemporary art space. That was my first show, effectively.

Betty Churcher had been the head of the art school, and Philip Brophy was there teaching – it was a fairly experimental place... we were drawing sound and concepts rather than life drawing per se... it was a methodology that placed a lot of emphasis on artists' diaries. Betty gave us the money to design our own course (in performance) and we – the students – chose and brought the tutors in that we wanted.

So even from that beginning I guess I was an artist who was also an organiser – I was always putting together small shows. I showed at Linden for instance – where I later

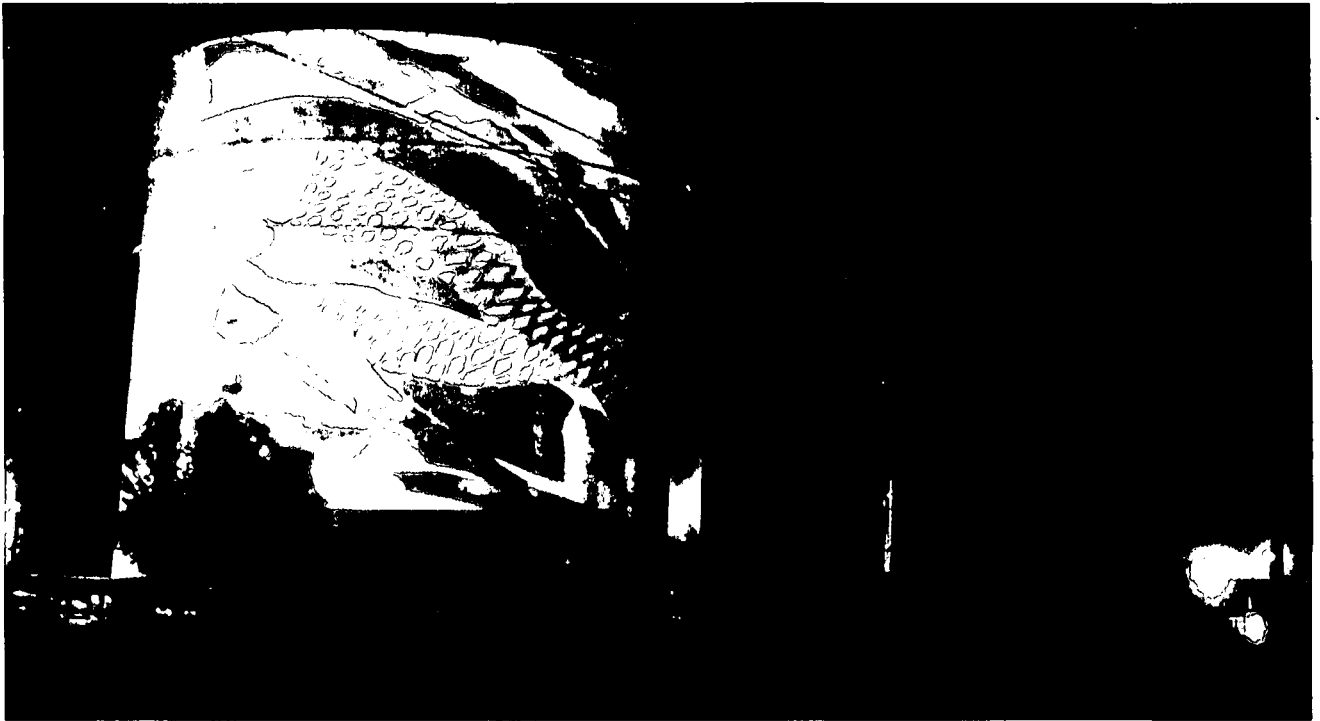
ended up being the Director – but even from then it was always that mix of making and organising.

I'd done a range of performances with Aleks Danko. We got some Australia Council funding and with the core players artist John Barbour and dancer Jude Walton and a couple of others – about 10 all up – we produced two big performances.

Some of us were later offered a group exhibition called *Excursions into the Postmodern* curated by Isabel Crombie at the National Gallery of Victoria – it all happened very quickly – all these shows – and I fitted it in with having a young child.

If Wilson's early dreams were to succeed as an artist, it seemed worth asking about how this might fit in with his present role. But he's not quite comfortable with being described as a curator, either. He describes his early years in Linden:

While I was at Linden I didn't end up doing that much curating per se, I mean I'd started the *Postcard Show* that's still going – an open entry show where artists were invited to make images of St Kilda – we'd choose six images to be made into postcards each year, and they're now a history of the place that's been running for 17 years. But I guess I did do quite a bit of innovate curating with local kids where we had some kid curators living in the



gallery for a while. One part of the space of the gallery became their lounge room where they could do what they wanted all day and night, so that's where they had their slides and collections and a smoke machine and the audience would actually have to walk through this lounge room before they were able to see the actual work. That was pretty wild – one guy made this entire armour for himself with kitchen utensils...

...Thinking back I guess my role was more about attracting things – getting ideas together or negotiating with different organisations or people... it was a fairly political kind of role ... it had to be – all kinds of people would walk in – arty types – even Bob Dylan walked in one day, and it was great being in that kind of environment right in the heart of St Kilda ... there would be 500 people every opening and no one would expect any speeches but eventually I just made this decision to go up to Noosa .

The career jump from Melbourne to regional Queensland comes as a surprise – and even now, Wilson muses that the decision came more from a kind of intuitive whim than a strategy as such. In his version of the story, he just decided it might be nice to travel north and find a place to surf. The fact that he'd never surfed in his life before doesn't seem to have been a problem. It was the dream that drew him there. Not the practicalities.

And the openings in Noosa were a long way from the kinds of openings he'd hosted at Linden in more ways than one. He recalls,

Sometimes you were sitting there in the gallery all weekend and only three people would walk in and at every opening you might get 30 or 40 people there and they'd all expect speeches. So the problem up there was a completely different one – the problem up there was how do you get people into this regional space? For the residency program I would bring in all these artists from interstate and so on as much to break my own boredom as to attract the public in.... And *Floating Land* as well – that was another way of getting local people to see and to engage with contemporary art in their own place.

The artists we had on the residency program all came with their own kind of stories attached – lots of them had to do with the place, and their engagement with the environment, but others attacked it from completely different directions ...like photographer Peter Milne whose work had been focussed on rock bands ... he'd done a lot of touring shows and he managed to find out that Gary Glitter had spent some time in Noosa when he was fossicking through an old bookshop there. So he started digging up the facts and the clues, and that was what his work ended up being about. A local story of another kind.

And there were also all the artists who were connected to the environmental movement and others who had connections with natural sciences in the area.

Artists would be residents in the gallery space, and people would react to it in the best possible way when they would see some of the outputs unfolding – there was a sense of a response to the work that 'this is our place' and they would be so proud... And the stuff would go out from there too back to other places... I brought Rekha Rodwitiya and Surendran Nair out from Baroda to do a 5-week residency and they made a whole body of work that then toured Australia and went back to India....

I ask him whether he might have any curatorial heroes, and he responds,

Not really – I always feel somewhat disappointed with the curators – even at Documenta and Venice last time – I like artists like Ann Hamilton or Bill Viola who use a space and take it over and transform it in their own way I'm still working out what it is about curating – for some curators it's about curating artists – I don't have much time for that – a lot of times in Australia the curatorial themes aren't challenged enough – they're a bit too simple... apart from some of the groundbreaking shows in the earlier days – Paul Taylor or Peter Tyndall's *Art Projects* – stimulating spaces that challenge ideas. Artist Run Initiatives nowadays don't seem to be really that alternative. Store 5 and others were pushing new

methodologies and new ideas – they are among my memories of the more interesting curatorial practices in this country.

And finally, a question about what he believes we might need most in Australia in curatorial practice?

One of the things that's really lacking here is that real potential to work around a vision by an artist that doesn't fit the standard practice. One of the problems is money – the arts don't get given enough money – right down to the fundamentals of art education we can see the effects of not having enough money invested in art.

We still haven't learned the value of art – we still try to justify it in economic terms. Its success is measured in terms of crowd-pull rather than the experimental nature of ideas

If the money keeps drying up it might shrink back into that backyard practice kind of thing and that might not be an entirely bad thing, but we need to reward new projects that are actually experimenting with new ideas.

I don't think we have a really good ideas culture in Australia – in the arts it's too stratified – you either have the theorists that are so focussed on a small clientele or the galleries that have an equally limited clique of respondents, but there hasn't been that impetus to work across those divisions with ideas that transcend those cliques and divisions. I believe that there is a role for art in the communities that is not necessarily community art... it's more a role where the artists live in the community and work in the community and the community can start to understand ways of seeing the world through the artists' eyes.

One of the major problems is that so much is invested in the temples of art where a lot of those people out there would not venture... And if we segregate things to the point where we break off the lines of communication between the artist and the community then there's a lot lost.

Kevin Wilson has just moved north again – this time to Brisbane to work with Queensland Artworkers Alliance as Program Director. One of his key projects is the forthcoming *ARC Biennial* in October 2009. Many of the ideas for this project focus on outdoor public space – city sites, industrial spaces and public transport. Light and visibility are key themes. Other projects revolve around audience development and engagement and the key role artists play in art education. Working in an artist-focused organisation has generated a new range of possibilities and projects that a display/facility focused organisation always had as add-ons. For Wilson there's no telling where all this might lead and that's a big part of the excitement he seems to keep generating in that quiet way of his. ☺

Pat HOFFIE is an artist and Professor at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. Her exhibition *Madame Illuminata Crack's Phantasmagorical Armchair Exhibit for Ecologically Sustainable Recreation* was at the University of Queensland Art Museum from October - November 2008.



OPPOSITE: ENESS *Headlights (WA) – Silo project* 2007 (November). ENESS were invited by BP to deliver a concept that would see an otherwise rustic oil tank in regional Western Australia become a digital canvas for local senior high school students. Utilising the benefits of ENESS' unique projection software, young people from Port Hedland were provided the opportunity to express themselves through their art while simultaneously gaining a sense of ownership of their town. The images could be seen on a nightly basis, from the BP Port Hedland site until November 2008. ABOVE: Irene Hoppenberg *Blue Wave* 2005. BELOW: Bonggi Park *Breathing* 2005. Both from *Floating Land* 2005, Noosa Regional Gallery. Photos: David Waugh.

