

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

M a r i a n D r e w

T H I N G S P A S T

19 August – 2 October 1994



Things Retrieved

Through her art practice, Marian Drew addresses the increasing separation of the rational from the spiritual which has characterised contemporary life. This division, she feels, has created a sense of separation or lack within individuals themselves, a space which in eastern or earlier western cultures has been filled by the experience of individual creative expression and religious ritual.

Rather than produce work which reiterates this condition, Marian Drew looks to the physical activities in art making to re-discover an existence and practice which embraces ritual, mythology and spiritual experience. Her image making is a highly personal process of exploration of the self, together with research into the history of her local environment, the function of myth and the role of the irrational in thought processes. Primarily concerned with personal experience and universal symbol, she consciously strips away and simplifies her processes to ensure that interpretation is focussed on these specific concerns which inform her practice.

Notions of mythology and spirituality do not figure prominently within current western art discourse. Drew's pursuit of these marks an obvious shift from recent critical discourse with its theories on the death of meaning, the loss of the individual and of originality. Interestingly, however, Drew's practice does relate in a very real sense to the art of a number of cultures now being acknowledged and investigated by the west, that of Aboriginal, Asian and Pacific societies. It is their very philosophy of art as a central force within life experience and as a vehicle for ritually signifying relationships between individual and community which informs much art of these cultures and which is explored by Drew.

I've always seen art-making as serving to satisfy that non-rational aspect of ourselves. Historically, art-making and religion have gone hand in hand. They are connected in that they both tap into an intuitive way of thinking for their understanding and development. Explaining the world to ourselves in a rational way has meant that we no longer see the importance or the value of the spiritual, but we nevertheless feel an emptiness or hollowness in its absence.¹

Over the past few years, Marian Drew's practice has increasingly expanded beyond a primarily photographic one to embrace video projection and installation. This extension reflects a dissatisfaction with the material deprivation of the photographic object and its removal from the space of the viewer. Installation, incorporating video projection, collages of large drawings and surfaces such as wallpaper, photographic prints and lights provides Drew with the means of uniting the gallery space with the artwork, and of incorpo-

rating the viewer as one element of the whole. This layering and building up of imagery occurs within Drew's video imagery itself which is constructed from two, sometimes three scenes, filmed, projected and refilmed to create one composite, moving image. By means of including projections of her self engaged in a physical action, Drew becomes a living subject of her work as well as its producer.

The various surfaces, materials and processes which Drew builds upon cohere as a whole through the use of a number of recurring images or motifs. In particular, the image of the hole or the vessel appears (with all its associations of ritual, sustenance and the feminine), whether as drawn image, collage or as projection. As the eye of the video silently observes the artist engaging in a private performance of digging a hole with bare hands, a large colour photograph depicts the bulbous form of a taro plant and drawings record the forms of earthenware receptacles. All the while, in a corner of the room, a projected fire burns silently in a metal vessel, creating an unsettling feeling of heat transmitted through the blue light of the video projector, of timeless cultures through a most contemporary of vehicles.

Marian Drew creates a personal history through her investigations of the particular here and now in which she finds herself. Her work is consciously site-specific, her site being her own body, operating within her home studio environment and located in the bay and islands region south-east of Brisbane. In the past, Drew had travelled to Germany, to New York and elsewhere in search of new directions for her practice. Those experiences led her to discover that her destination was her own self, situated within her own immediate physical and historical environment. Like Thomas Mann's story of Tonio, who left his home town in search of inspiration from the bohemian literati of Munich, but found that their disdain of life reaffirmed his own home town's love of 'the human, the living and the ordinary', Drew chooses to draw her sources from that which is around her.²

Drew's exploration of her specific environment has led her to the history and pre-history of the area and to the life and culture of the original indigenous inhabitants. Drew's own sense of a spiritual connection with the land has instilled in her a particular desire to better understand Aboriginal art and culture. Drew first experienced Aboriginal culture as images of totems and burial poles following a period in her own practice in which she had explored different means of uniting her photographic images more closely with the natural environment. This had involved the projection of slides of her drawings and computer-generated

images onto tree trunks in a series of night landscapes. Drew's personal discovery of the visual similarity of these works to that of Aboriginal art and their shared sense of a deep respect for the land marked the beginning of her ongoing research and exploration of indigenous culture. This has not meant the appropriation of visual or stylistic aspects of Aboriginal art, but rather, a common sense of the relationship between visual expression, spiritual identity and place within one's culture.

My studies into Aboriginal history draw ideas and images for art making and attempts to understand the perspective gained through the close connection of physical and spiritual worlds. Their cyclic relationship to time, past and future, their physical connection to the earth... are synthesised into a personal vocabulary of symbol and metaphor, image and process.³

The trace of the hand and the significance of physical production in Drew's practice also consciously relate her work to that of other cultures. Drew attaches equal value to form and content, to thought and production, to mind and body, seeing them as aspects of one whole, rather than binary in nature. The work of writers such as Drew Hyland has been an important source for Drew in these respects.

The basic thesis of most phenomenologists who pursue this issue is that the dualism of soul/body, mind/body, or sometimes self/body, which is now standard in western thought through both the philosophical and religious traditions, is an intellectual abstraction which is simply not the way we experience ourselves...these phenomenologists argue that the way we actually experience ourselves – what they often call 'the lived body' – involves no such dualism but a unity, not, to be sure, a static unity but a flowing one, a continuum of experiences...⁴

Physical experimentation with materials and ideas allows for a more holistic 'thinking', for the subconscious aspects of this lived body to act, and enables the subliminal as well as the cognitive to produce. Hence the critical importance of play, an activity which in western society is valued only within childhood. Drew consciously retains the playful aspect of creative expression, allowing her work to (in some respects) produce itself. *Anyone writing a creative work knows that you open, you yield yourself, and the book talks*

to you and builds itself.⁵ By doing so, Drew encourages a like reaction in her viewers, a recognition of inner experiences and processes which generally remain within the subconscious.

In play, we experience ourselves as one, we are this immersion-in-activity...and in so far as this experience of the unity of mental and physical activity is a desideratum, play becomes something to be recommended as an experience of great value, offering in the highest or deepest sense the primordial, perhaps the truest, experience of ourselves...it is precisely in play, and especially in the most intense play experiences, that we find ourselves, that we become who we can be.⁶

It is through the performative aspects of her work that Drew incorporates play and experimentation. Previously achieved through spontaneous interaction with visual elements before the open shutter of the camera, Drew now makes use of the constant eye of the video to record sometimes whimsical, sometimes deeply symbolic actions and rituals. These performances take place in the privacy of the studio but the imagery which results and is shared with the viewer evokes the passion and humour expressed in these original actions.

Humour is by far the most significant behaviour of the human mind...Humour tells us more about how the brain works as mind, than does any other behaviour of the mind – including reason.⁷

Through theories such as this, Edward de Bono calls for a New Renaissance to replace the previous one which was based on the ancient Greek thinking habits of logic, reason, argument and truth. He claims that these processes have led to much progress in technical affairs but little in human affairs and need to be replaced with processes of perception. This notion of perception is primary to Drew's practice. *In poetry we add layer after layer of words, images, metaphors and other vehicles for perception. It all builds up into one holistic perception.⁸*

Marian Drew employs perception over rational processes through her development of subconscious play and enacted ritual. Such actions in turn create a form of personal mythology. Her own mythology is informed by her investigation of other cultures yet reflects her particular time and place.



'Myths are so intimately bound to the culture, time and place that unless the symbols, the metaphors, are kept alive by constant recreation through the arts, the life just slips away from them.'⁹ Through her use of technological processes such as photography and video projection, Drew successfully integrates 'primitive' notions of myth and ritual with contemporary experience. By so doing, she invites her viewers to explore their own inner realities without prescribing what form these might take.

Clare Williamson August 1994

Notes

- 1 Marian Drew, quoted in *Eyeline*, Autumn 1992, p. 27
- 2 Thomas Mann, *Tonio Kroger*, in Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, Doubleday, New York, 1988, p.4
- 3 Marian Drew, Artist's Statement, June 1994
- 4 Drew A. Hyland, *The Question of Play*, Uni Press of America Inc, Lanham, USA, 1984, p. 20
- 5 Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 71
- 6 Hyland, *op. cit.*, pp 21, 25
- 7 Edward de Bono, *I am Right and You are Wrong*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, U.K., 1991, p. 1
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 9
- 9 Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 72

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Marian Drew

Marian Drew was born in Bundaberg, Queensland, Australia in 1960. She initially studied Fine Art at the Queensland College of Art, Brisbane, then graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the Canberra School of Art in 1984. She completed Post-graduate studies in Kassel, Germany and holds a Diploma in Teaching (TAFE). Marian Drew has held solo exhibitions in Australia and Europe. She exhibited at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1990 and her most recent solo exhibition was at the Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney in 1992. She has shown drawings, photography and installations in group exhibitions since 1982, including *Seven Queensland Women Artists of Distinction*, Queensland College of Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1988; *Empty Land*, Camerawork, London, and UK tour, 1991; and *Twentieth Century Fops*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1992. In 1984, with scholarships from the Western German Government, the Goethe Institut and the Dyason Bequest, Marian Drew studied experimental photography and exhibited at the University of Kassel in Germany.

She worked in New York in 1989 after being awarded a studio and travel grant from the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council. In 1993, she was one of nine artists to represent Australia at the first *Asia-Pacific Triennial* at the Queensland Art Gallery. Marian Drew's work is represented in public and corporate collections in Brisbane including the Art Gallery of South Australia, Queensland Art Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art - Brisbane, Griffith University Art Collection and the Suncorp Collection. In 1993 Marian Drew was Artist-in-Residence at Sommerville House School, Brisbane and the Brisbane Institute of Art. She lectures in photography at the Queensland College of Art.

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Marian Drew: 'Things past'

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IMAGES

Front cover and above: 'Things Past'
1994, mixed media, installation views
Inside: 'Things Past', 1994, installation detail,
'Taro', type-C photographic print