

# NEW07 Interviewed

NEW07 is the fifth in the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's (ACCA) annual showcase of Australia's up-and-coming contemporary visual artists. Curated by ACCA's Artistic Director, Juliana Engberg, NEW07 features newly commissioned works by Damiano Bertoli, Christian Capurro, Nick Devlin, Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, Brendan Lee and Anastasia Klose. While NEW is not intended to be thematic, often common threads do emerge that indicate shared concerns in current contemporary art practice. In 2007, we see an emphasis on materiality, a return to the use of everyday objects and common technologies, quirky nostalgia and the aesthetics of the pathetic. Here, the artists in NEW07 pose, and then respond to questions most often asked of them by supporters and critics.

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Damiano Bertoli is a Melbourne-based artist working primarily in collage, sculpture and painting.

*Much of your recent work bears the title Continuous Moment. What is this a reference to, and what is its function in your practice? Does it define certain qualities in the actual work, or a way of thinking about your practice?*

Damiano Bertoli: This title has been used since 2001 when it was the title of a video work shown at Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography. I've used it more often since 2003, when I began to think of it more as a way of describing the methodology behind my practice, as well as talking about certain qualities that individual works might have. It is derived from *Continuous Monument*, the title of a project by the architectural group Superstudio, who worked mainly with collage and film in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In general terms, *Continuous Moment* describes the way art-making is motivated by a constant attempt, usually unsuccessful, to apprehend or characterise a moment and develop it. Inevitably, whether one fails or succeeds, the process begins again.

In Superstudio's projects, their attitude to the built environment and the way we engage with it is speculative and their work is always propositional, a suggestion or theorem. Often these works are ambivalent towards the idea of urbanity and social development. They are usually quite sarcastic and humorous, and always playful. Their 'landscapes' are intended for nomadic, liberated societies, but a rigid geometric environment defines the space they inhabit. Imagination and creativity are privileged over the rational, but at a cost.

Left: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *flatpack*, 2006  
Photo courtesy the artists and Gallery Barry Keldouls, Sydney

I like to think of Superstudio's practice as a metaphor for studio activity, which is understood as a utopian space where one engages in a kind of play, and everything seems to be in the process of becoming but seldom arrives; any sense of closure is deferred. In this kind of environment ideas like 'progress' and 'resolution' can become sort of redundant, or at least inaccurate in their capacity to describe what you're doing. This sense of play and fluidity exists between works, but also within them; individual components can share a context, or re-appear in other works.

*You often negotiate the past, or work with aesthetic conventions associated with previous periods in cultural history. How do you see this tendency functioning in your work?*

Revisiting certain moments, particular works, or periods in cultural time is a way that artists define or position themselves, and I'm interested in the way artists can construct a methodology, or way of operating through a continuous appraisal of what they choose to have around. These 'moments' I'm working with generally describe an ambivalent position, or a proposition, as in the work of Superstudio, which allows the reworking or recontextualisation on my behalf to continue the discourse, or construct some correspondence between them. The whole thing functions as a sort of mechanism, yet it allows intuition to motivate it. Usually it's manifested through collage, or according to the principles of collage, where moments either co-exist or merge, to form a new situation. Collage is effective because it represents consciousness as fragmented yet continuous, and it offers a context where ideas can exist simultaneously and interact. Somehow it feels as if time is being shaped or pushed around in a small way, and for me that's a reasonable representation of the way cultural material is processed and analysed.

Collage is concerned with speculation, it enables a question to take shape, yet it somehow feels impermanent or reversible. The device is usually apparent, but that's not enough to damage the illusion. The components share a space and a narrative, yet they can always be identified as autonomous.

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Christian Capurro's conceptual, installation and performance-based work explores the role of images and image-making. He is based in Melbourne.

*What's important?*

Christian Capurro: Forty laps back and forth at the Fitzroy swimming pool every other day to stem the headaches that come from the gut, the ones you can taste; clearing pages; the heat of the eraser; hard caressing of bodies into the page; their lambent glow; the alluring feel of classy magazine paper, crisp, while it lasts; a chemical whiteness covering things; the cast-off rubber and ink page-pile residue.

*Having heard you previously trying to describe to someone what these Compress drawings are, I'm still a little unsure about what it is that I'm looking at. And, more to the point, how they are formed. I get the sense that how they are constituted is important to you.*

As someone for whom the 'making' (that bit of resistance between me and some hopeful articulation) always matters, I'm not sure where one draws the line under talking about these things. I probably talk more about that aspect of the work than anything else because that's what I'm most sure about. There's a directness in that relationship which you forego once they've been realised—then it gets messier. Certain things about them aren't given-up all that readily; they have a reticence about them that matters.

*How then are they formed and why does that matter? What am I missing if I don't quite know what I'm looking at?*

The bringing-into-being of an image has, in different, and at times frustrated ways, preoccupied me since my earliest photography. Often I'll acknowledge, directly or less so, some aspect of this process of forming whichever way the work gets expressed. It could be through the material, the way that is handled, or in the overt dependency certain works have on the conditions of their reception, especially in the case of their illumination. There is something in their 'boundedness' that I can't easily escape. Perhaps that's also why when it gets to the naming part a fair number of the titles of my work speak of an action, or an act upon something. The *Compress* drawings I refer to as 'works-on-paper drawn under the pressure of erasing other images, then corrected'—stating it that way matters to how I understand what's going on with these pictures. What someone then sees standing in front of them is another matter entirely.

*So all this may set up where I might be looking as a viewer, somewhere that's not necessarily in the picture but elsewhere?*

Yes. It hints at the relationship of one image to another, or one zone of attention to another. Always there and elsewhere. So holding on or holding one's own isn't so straightforward. I tend to confuse the act and consequences of looking with a material manifestation—reducing and producing at the same time. Mixed up in there is both the desire and anxiety one experiences at the promise of possession and by turns, the possibility of renunciation.

*Possessing and renouncing what?*

Things, bodies, images and choices, maybe; others certainly. Oneself?

You also mentioned 'pressure'.

These are after all the offspring of lifestyle and porn magazines—one, desperately appealing to you to come and be part of it all, while the other for all its show seems too self absorbed to care whether you come or not!

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Nick Devlin lives and works in Melbourne. Although he has worked in a range of media, his current work uses low technologies and explores ideas of self and surveillance.

Your method of using CCTV and vertical stacks of old TV sets to reflect back to the viewer real-time sections of their own image has been described as a kind of 'visual sampling'. Can you explain how this process works?

Nick Devlin: It's a simple idea with a complicated process attached to it. Basically it is like a pun on the use of webcam, though instead of sending the captured image out to whomever, I direct the feedback through the monitor. I like to think of them as electronic mirrors.

It's rare for us to have direct access to CCTV images of ourselves, which are more commonly associated with surveillance than with a mirrored self-image. Equally, it's unusual for a visitor to be confronted with an image of her or himself within an art work, an image that is in fact integral to the success of that work. What is the motivation behind your integration of the viewer into your work?

I have always been interested in the viewer's position or stance. When I painted the results were usually optical and I was more interested in the space between the viewer and the object, as opposed to the internal dynamics of the picture. When it wasn't the physical it was the conceptual space that took precedence. The fact that this work relies on the viewer being the protagonist combines a lot of my ongoing ideas, while at the same time allowing the work to remain in a constant state of flux with a continuous succession of changes and relationships.

One of the works included in NEW07 was created during a recent trip to New York. The perspective changes in this piece from live feed and real-time reflection of the exhibition space to the windows of a New York apartment building and the everyday activities of its inhabitants. Just as the CCTV works complicate the potentially narcissistic gaze of the viewer before her/his own image, so the New York work confounds a voyeuristic tag in its subtle shifts between the scenes unfolding outside your own apartment, and the happenings within it. What were the circumstances that led to the creation of this work? And did it require you to interrogate the complexities inherent in your video practice?

I work quite intuitively so it's a complicated culmination of ideas, situations and opportunity that I sometimes arrive at to produce work. I had ruminated on this idea in the past and like all the other ideas it just gets filed and sorted in your head and reveals itself when the time is right. I had no particular intention of making this piece at the time, but when I arrived in the East Village it was obvious and I was prepared. A conscious decision was made to not edit any material and as the work evolved it soon became apparent that via window reflections and audio my own apartment was becoming a

part of the piece, thereby reverting the gaze back onto itself. In answer to the second part of your question I think that the subject matter is very loaded and socially relevant. There are snippets of the American version of 'Big Brother' within the audio as it goes in and out of sync that 'mash up' with the other internal and external elements. New relationships emerge and I am constantly confronted with having to interrogate fresh relationships and associations within the work.

Pieces like your New York video work are clearly influenced by cinema, films like *Rear Window* (1954), for example, spring to mind. Can you talk about these and other influences in your work?

Everything around me has an influence. From reality television to Hitchcock and Tarkovsky; writers such as Beckett, Kerouac and Burroughs; artists such as Edouard Vuillard, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham... *Rear Window* is of course a major influence and in what I am trying to achieve, video is the perfect medium. I didn't always succeed in achieving what I set out to with painting, but as with great painting and cinema it still informs everything that I do. In the past cinematic trailers were filmed separately from the feature; they didn't just extract a grab and some thumbnails, they produced an independent theatrical trailer in its own right. Thinking about the emphasis on this practice helped me to resolve the structure of my own work in concentrating on the details of the bigger picture. I feel that a rhetorical cinematic trailer without a feature would be something to aspire to.

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Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy explore the shifting contemporary notions of mobility, home, and waste in their large-scale sculptural installations. They are currently artists-in-residence at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien.

One of your most recent works, *flatpack* (2006), started with a found object—a discarded caravan, or camper. How did you come to 'own' your first house on wheels?

Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy: Berlin is a city where there have been so many people thinking about how they want to live, where there are many small alternative communities. Next to Künstlerhaus Bethanien there is an enclave of caravans where people have set up house, but they aren't going anywhere. It made us think more about our ongoing interest in the difference between temporary and permanent living—and a friend of ours found an ad in the paper for a caravan that someone wanted to sell.

A woman had lived in the caravan outside Berlin for forty years and had finally moved away. We never got to meet the owner of this little home, but we cut it apart, piece by piece, brought it back to Berlin and showed it stacked in four rectangular piles on Euro-palettes.

Why take the caravan apart? And why show it on Euro-palettes?

When you pull something apart it's like a complete analysis of the material. And stacking feels like a safe way to present it to an audience, because it is almost like silencing it. The object almost becomes a closed book again. When you compress something, how much of the original is left over? It's like having the matter minus the space. It's a sculptural way of dealing with something emotional.

In past works it is evident that you 'stack' objects to create a formal mass, however in your NEW07 work, *Past times* (2007), you have 'laid out' the pieces/fragments instead. Could you speak about why you have taken this approach?

The act of stacking is somewhat an act of silencing. Not all components of the mass can be analysed. Pieces lie beneath the facade. The act of displaying every part of the fabric is more of an act of analysis or investigation. In the past we have been interested in the entirety of the mass minus the space. Since we have been living abroad for the past three years, our understanding of accumulation has changed considerably. Things that are in a state of stasis remain compact for matters of convenience and economy. However, the act of unloading is similar to the act of moving house, unpacking to recreate a new living space, through the articulation of placing possessions or furniture. This unloading, staking out a new territory is different. Repiecing fragments together again as if a puzzle or clues to the past, is in a sense an act of reliving something, or being nostalgic for a past, unravelling to discover the course of events that must have happened.

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Brendan Lee is a Melbourne-based artist. His photographic and moving image works draw upon Australia's cinema history and explore, among other things, our emotional investment in actual and cinematic landscapes.

In *Victoria at the moment—Noble Park in particular*—there has been a lot of debate over the anti-hoon laws with a focus on the place of rev-head cultures within Australian identity. Do you agree with the laws and what is your opinion on the way the hooners have dealt with the enforcement?

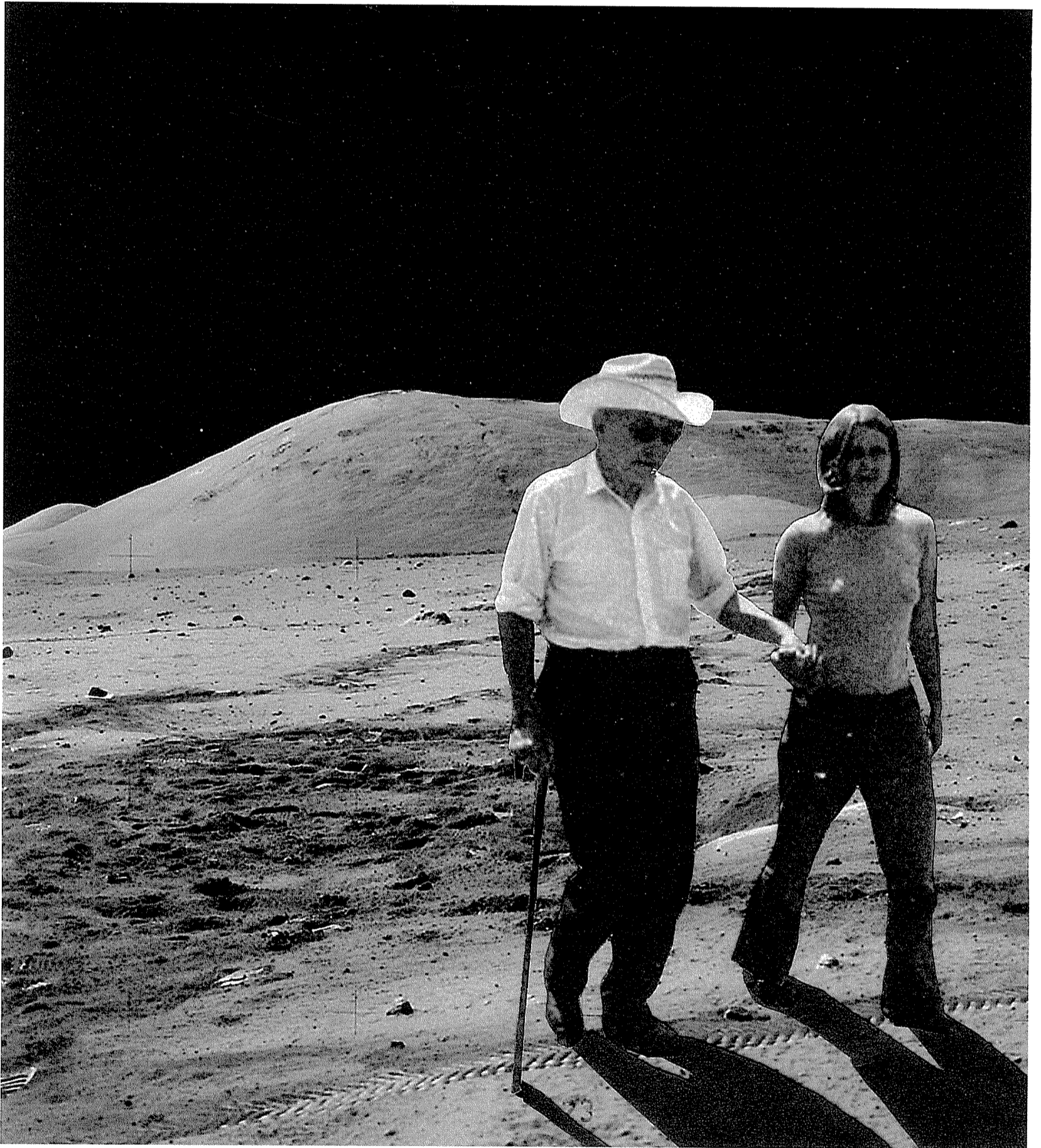
Brendan Lee: As I respond to this I can hear cars screeching to a halt outside my Footscray flat. There's what's called a 'double whammy' at my intersection—a speed camera joined with a red light camera. This adds the extra spice of catching people speeding to get through the red light. Every half hour or so someone tries to beat the red only to notice the speed camera and grind to a halt. Each day there's broken bits of car littered around the place so there must be quite a few rear-enders sent to the panel beaters on the corner. I use my local intersection as an example of how law enforcement-mad we have become. It seems quite obvious that there is going to be a backlash against it. The anti-hoon legislation appears to be aimed at defeating the Aussie larrikin in much the same way as SOS (Save Our Suburbs) attempts to kill the inner city music scene. The tough music and even tougher cars define what it is to be Australian.

When *Mad Max* (1979) was made they used genuine drag strips in Melbourne's west. They didn't ban the film because it depicted imitable scenes in notorious hoon country. *Metal Skin* (1994) wasn't derided over racing Chargers (a true muscle car) at the Docklands. People in Noble Park are just acting upon a natural masculine urge. Whether it's on horseback, motorbike or in a car, Aussie blokes just want to be able to show off. It isn't about money, it's just pride. This is why they took to the police. I guess most blokes are Ned Kellys at heart; it's just a shame that the Noble Park boys had to get caught on film. It's best to live as a myth and keep the spirit underground in this day and age.

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*How do you see the current state of the Australian film industry?*

I was just about to carve the date into its headstone when *Kenny* (2006) came out. Recently I've been amazed at what's been released and championed as 'great Australian film'. There have been too many poorly written films that follow a simple formula—set up a demographic, add half an hour of the main characters staring out at their landscape; main characters have a difference of opinion; return to looking at landscape, then resolve it by returning to the family unit. Too much money is spent on this kind of film I'd have to say.

But have a look at *The Magician* (1999) as an example of getting blood from a stone. It was shot with yesterday's technology and edited on the day before's and yet this has to be one of Australia's best films in recent years. It certainly isn't the production values or landscape that keeps me watching this film over again. It's the passion of its director/producer and star, Scott Ryan, that oozes from every scene. *The Magician* is guerrilla film making at its peak. As Stanley Kubrick said: "If you want to learn how to make a film, go and make one." Ryan did this successfully and *Kenny* has followed it in much the same way. Both films were made from the heart not from the (or for the) hip pocket.

It's films like *Kenny* and *The Magician* that inspire me to create video works. They are made without compromise. No one should tell you or dictate to you what you can and cannot do (within the law of course) with your art.

*Has growing up in the western suburbs of Melbourne played a role in your art practice?*

I grew up in an 'armpit' of a town in Melbourne's 'Wild West'. Even now I cringe at the thought of going back there and this isn't even a cultural cringe—it really is that bad. Like most skateboarders in the 1980s and '90s, I always thought of myself as being above the 'bogans' in my town.

The 'bogans' in Melton didn't understand individualism in music, sports or lifestyle. If you cared about culture they thought you considered yourself to be better than them; and they were right. I'd sooner die poor, happy and busy than mortgaged, commuted and bored. My art feeds from this part of my life.

It was hard to ignore the lives broadcast from VK Commodores parked on the nature strip (in various states of modification). Melton has the hardcore bikie drugs thing going on and the cousins of the bodyguards of the honoured Society living amongst them. There's a hit there every three months and most of the 88,000 inhabitants are oblivious to that kind of reality. I try to make art that they appreciate, or at least have some sort of connection to. Most artists don't ever mention their hometown, let alone if it's a shit-hole like Melton. It seems we all come from Fitzroy or Carlton and grew up drinking soy lattes as members of Save Our Suburbs (SOS). I feel comfortable these days mining their versions of Australian culture. In some respects, I've taken some of it on as part of my life; a little reminder of where I came from. But God help anyone who buries me there.

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Melbourne-based video artist Anastasia Klose draws upon painful and humorous moments in her own life to explore ideas about personal failure and humiliation.

*Why did you want to become an artist?*

Anastasia Klose: Initially, I saw being an artist as a lifestyle choice. I really wanted to go to art school and break away from my tired routines. I came to the idea of being an artist relatively late. I must have been around twenty-three. I was working in a shop and had dropped out of a course in Public Policy and Business Management at Melbourne University. I saw being an artist as an escape from that kind of banal life of work and sleep. My view of art as an escape might seem romantic, but my parents are artists and I had no illusions about money and fame. It was more the sense of freedom I was after. Art seemed a way to do anything I wanted. Now, making art has become a bit of a way of life and I can't imagine not doing it.

*You seem to regularly humiliate yourself in your films. Why?*

Well, I don't enjoy humiliating myself in public. I am always nervous and embarrassed, because I never know how people will react. I always force myself to do these performances for the sake of my videos, which sometimes demand the sacrifice of personal dignity. I often remind myself that as an artist, I should be prepared to take risks with my work and make myself do it because you never know what will happen. I have this compulsion to push myself, at the expense of psychological comfort. And yes, in a way, (as the cliché goes) I feel stronger when I make myself do these things. I think for people to see that sort of embarrassment or suffering is important, because it is so much a part of everyday life. At the same time, I don't want to appear a victim in my films. To do performance takes confidence and I like to think that spirit of triumph is in my films.

*Your work looks really easy to make, and the aesthetic is crappy. Why not make something beautiful and skilful?*

I've always been drawn to the crappy, because I am messy, and I relate to messy things. Also, I can't afford an expensive camera or assistants or anything like that. I don't have a studio—I use my bedroom. So yes, there are financial constraints that play a factor. But as any artist will tell you, limitations make you creative. The challenge is to work with what's around—how to transform everyday experiences such as boredom, feeling lonely, feeling love for someone who doesn't love you back, into something interesting. It makes sense that I'd use everyday materials, from popular songs to basic editing. My way of making art has become a sort of problem solving. How do I redeem some terrible footage from my shonky camera? The answer lies in my use of language. I play with words—a video work often rests on a sentence or phrase. Language is the 'hook' in my work, while other artists might hook viewers in with beauty. I use humour too. I think the crappiness of my videos can only be justified with absurd humour. And I suppose I like to make work that anyone could make, because in the end it is very difficult to do convincingly.

*Your art seems very nihilistic. Don't you believe anything good could happen in the world?*

Honestly, I do get depressed about the world, and this pessimism comes through in certain works. But I also make works about things I really care about. Living at home with my family is not ideal, but I love my family and my pets. These things are the reality of my life, and give my life meaning. People often try to get away from the reality of their lives, but I run headlong towards it.

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Curator: Juliana Engberg

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