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The places in between what we think

Written by Sam Rhodes, to accompany Marian Tubbs' exhibition, *resort work*

Humour pre-occupies my thoughts as Marian enters them – humour often centred around language. In conversation, the way she titles shows, sends Instagram messages and talks about her work, she seems acutely aware that language is both a tool and a toy. I have often accused artists (perhaps unfairly) of co-opting it as only the latter; using verbose diction to enchant, to shroud in semantic convolution otherwise simple or unremarkable ideas, disregarding the beauty of a concise economy of phrase. I once thought this to be true of Marian, but she recently revealed me to be the one trying to inject drama into a passage when the potency of a single word would have sufficed.

Having recently crossed the foyer of the NGV, just faux-baptised by the grand fountain-wall entrance, I took three hesitant steps in two different directions (did a full-rotation), then asked the woman sitting inside the circular information centre what shows were on. She handed me a map and ran me through the Chanel *Fashion Manifesto* show installed on ground floor and what parts of the permanent collection were where. Having comprehended little, I walked on. Near the entrance of a mostly empty room, I saw three teenagers crowded around a piece with their phones out. It became clear, quickly, that they were not taking photos of the piece itself but were instead utilising a small mirror inset into what looked like a bizarre ancient hat to take photos of themselves. They were having such fun placing tiny aliases of themselves just outside an empty space where by-gone minds had once resided. The artwork was showing them parts of themselves. In (on) it they could see themselves. Minutes later, in the hallway, I passed a duo of Chanel devotees taking selfies with a small handbag on a plinth and was reminded for the second time of this vague notion of self-reflexivity in art; an artwork revealing something of its viewer to themselves, and the agency of humour to reduce this grandiose notion to literalism. I texted Marian, 'What's the art theory terminology for seeing something of oneself in an artwork?' She replied, 'Narcissism', and sent this essay in a different direction.

Evasive as she is, Marian as a *subject*, like her work, seems to resist a linear telling. Each of Marian's works seem to represent a mass of thought, visualised and assembled: sites of depository with intentions of dispersal. Not to explode or break-up in any physical sense but to emanate something of their semiotic origins. Her assemblage works read as intermediaries rather than end-points in and of themselves.

Would it be naive of me to now integrate a subjective analysis of the maker into a discussion of her work? With Marian it feels impossible to resist. In an earlier draft I wrote, 'I could never be an art critic because I am too interested in writing about people to focus solely on what they make.' But, as far as this piece has become concerned, this is a redundant statement. What has become of interest is not just Marian the human subject, or her work, but the links between the two. The way her work is reflective of her idiosyncratic tendencies: reverting to humour as a mode of self-preservation, a combination of both overt and obtuse language-play, a desire to make sense of absurdity and, perhaps most importantly, an almost pathological research habit. At

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one point, in the thick of the COVID outbreak, we were discussing vaccination rates in the Northern Rivers. A few minutes later she sent me a document containing the Federal Government 'vax-stats' for the region, and every other region in the country. For every topic that emerges while talking to Marian she has a piece of correlating data, an image, a video, an internet link. This investigative way of being – a mode of perpetual data prosecution to collate into a form – seems to be the only way I can approach a discussion of her work. A few months ago I sent her a message, 'that new work of yours looks like it's been excavated from a cavern of broken hard drives'. For which she thanked me. Later, in response to a passage I sent from *The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson concerning the limitations and possibilities of languageⁱ, she immediately replied with a phrase from Belgium Philosopher Isabelle Stengers, quoted by Nelson in *On Freedom*, "technologically sophisticated ruins of our dreams"ⁱⁱ – basically sums up my work'.

sr: Sorry to interrupt you, when you say, 'they', what are you referring to, specifically?

mt: The connections between ideas or images in my work. People might not necessarily get that I went into this trying to understand bio-mimicry engineering to help me make this work. It's not like I'm producing scientific essays with that level of research into these topics. I just get really excited about certain technologies and their utopian ideas or dystopian possibilities, and then use these ideas to make works that feel like they have something like a sense of freedom because I know that I've gathered a certain amount of information that I can talk to people about if they want to know. Otherwise, they can just be like 'cool that's an interesting looking piece'. I can only make works after a period of long research and investing in ideas, or being really bowled over by something, like seasteading.

sr: Seasteading?

mt: Basically Crypto-Bros who are motivated by offshore accounts, becoming billionaires, living without law, and basically colonising the sea in the ways they want to – thinking that they can build places to live on the sea beyond national rule. The visualisation of these seasteading communities was really interesting to me. How would they look? I'll go down a research hole and feel I'll need to visualise the content in some way, so I can make sense of it.

Marian's work as representative of a pragmatic grappling with events perplexing our immediate existential moment asserted itself with poignancy in the very naming of the show to which this essay pertains. This exhibition, *resort work*, was, before the Northern Rivers and parts of Queensland were subsumed by the highest flood in recorded history, titled *lazy river*. On 2 March, following the deluge and its devastation, Marian texted me, 'the exhibition will no longer be called *lazy river*'. Although some of the work in this show is abstract, it is clearly not abstracted *from* tangible, present reality. You might say that anyone with a shard of sense and empathy would remove reference to a large body of water from the title of a show assembled in a

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town that has just been flooded, and, to my mind, you would be right. But that does not detract from the fact that this is just one of many demonstrations of the directness of correlation between events as they unfold – be them bio-mimicry engineering breakthroughs, the formation of seasteading communities, or catastrophic flooding – and these augmentations Marian presents. Corrupted and digital, slimy and metallic, decomposing compositions that point towards a future that recedes into decay: these works are like the completion of a piece in the beginning its own process. Image in the service of a dialogue that will transcend its content. Art as a mode of comprehending. Reaching back into the absurdity of the world and returning with its morphed particles. If the work is abstract, it is only because the world itself is so. Each piece is like an alien extension of language, made to facilitate where words would otherwise not go.

You may be wary of my fractured composition, frustrated, even, by the way this essay has scattered itself across disparate ideas and assertions, and failed to follow a central logic compounding as it rises to its final unifying statement – as I was throughout its writing. It is as though the fragmentary, delineated, assembled nature of Marian’s work exerted a force over what could be written about it. So, the final state of this essay has come to reflect something of its subject. Sentences collated after corruptions and shifting reformations. Copied and pasted. Only tentatively connected. Perhaps this speaks to a kind of integrity? That the work refuses to be discussed by anything other than a method representative of its own form. That what is written about it adheres to its principles. That the placement of words finds some *union* with what is contained within the artist’s frames.

ⁱ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015, p. 1.

ⁱⁱ Isabelle Stengers, ‘Gaia, the Urgency to Think (and Feel)’, *The Thousand Names of Gaia*, last modified 1 September 2014, <https://thethousandnamesofgaia.wordpress.com/the-conferences-texts>, pg. 9. Quoted in Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom*, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2021.