

## Examining Aesthetic Subjectivity in Embodied Environments

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Conference May 2017

In 2011 Ross Gibson addressed the ACUADs conference here at the School of Art. He described advice he gave to his Post Grads puzzled as to how they might relate the enormity of their research via their exegesis; all they need do, he assured them, was not relay its every detail but instead simply track a path through it.<sup>1</sup> With that advice in mind I present my paper today, a single linear track through the vast and intriguing terrain that I have explored.

My research has investigated the relationship between the body and the environment through examining the role of aesthetic language within creative practice. I undertook this research to find ways to articulate the body's interconnectedness with its environment. I felt that examining the aesthetic connection of body and environment may provide ways to understand and imagine what otherwise appears to be an immaterial connection between self and world.

I sought to answer the following questions:

Can the aesthetic enable us to imagine continuity between our body and the environment?

What is the nature of this aesthetic continuity?

How does creative practice interact with this aesthetic dimension? What is the role of image making, space making, materials and aesthetic language in generating relationships between subject and environment?

And, finally, what does this mean for how we understand our position in the world?

My research borrowed ideas from installation art, participatory practice and relational aesthetics, it drew on feminist, Foucauldian, ecological, and neuroscientific ideas about embodied subjectivity, and was most influenced by pragmatist and everyday aesthetics.

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<sup>1</sup> Gibson, Ross. 2011. "Keynote address: Fields of knowledge & lines of argument." *Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools- Brain - Mind - Body*. Canberra: Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools.

My research took the form of a situated inquiry. Estelle Barrett argues that a situated inquiry enables a continuity between problem, investigation, and solution.<sup>2</sup> I centred my practice led research in the tension felt between my body and the world. This allowed me to critique my culture's relationship to its world; in particular I sought to critique the traditional Western assumption that posits separation between nature and culture; that divides body and environment.

Installation practice was my primary methodology. I had previously worked across painting, drawing, video, sculpture, sound, and participatory art and had a keen desire to combine these approaches through making life scale aesthetic spaces. My pull to this mode of working was intuitive: I wanted to create spatial works because I am interested in the idea of the world as a meaningful space.

The key environments I examined were the landscape and my domestic home. I contextualised my practice led research by looking at selected artworks and cultural sites by others such as Chiharu Shiota, Pipilotti Rist, James Turrell, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Locating the parameters for this research took time. I began by examining a deeply felt sense of tension between my body and the terrain of my childhood: North East Victorian Valleys near Albury Wodonga. I recognised that much of this tension grew from my heritage as a descendant of Celtic colonial immigrants whose labour transformed the Indigenous Australian's country into an agricultural landscape.

This initial research generated critical insight into the relationship between my body and environment, in particular the interplay between worldview and space making. Unfortunately, it yielded little progress in my studio research. At the end of my first year I redesigned my project and instead directed my inquiry to the smaller territory of my domestic home.

Creative practice led research is not, however, a linear or purely logical process. Whilst my ancestral terrain receded from the core of my inquiry, my critical interaction with it gave context to the rest of my research. It unsettled the way I perceived the contemporary Australian landscape, and on numerous occasions it breeched the interior world of my

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<sup>2</sup> Barrett, Estelle. 2007. "Experiential learning in practice as research: context, method, knowledge." *Journal of Visual Art Practice*.

domestic observations. For this reason, I begin by sharing a narrative that underpins the whole story of my practice led research.

The family farm that I grew up on sits in a valley that has been occupied by both sides of my family since the late nineteenth century. In 1936 the valley was partially consumed by the damming of the Murray and Mitta Mitta Rivers.<sup>3</sup> This created the Hume Weir. My parent's farm is tied most closely to my father's family line. The Hume Weir lies before it. Feeding into this reservoir from the South is the Sandy Creek. It flows from my mother's father's land. Although its edges have been almost erased by the weir's artificial flooding the course it traces through the silt floor becomes visible when the weir's capacity drops. Ahead and to the east of their property the Mitta Mitta courses beneath the weir's surface and is faintly visible as a corridor between the long flooded, dead river red gums. It flows from the valley of my maternal grandmother's family.



Sandy Creek Arm of the Weir  
The Hume Weir, Huon Victoria



Looking toward Albury- Wodonga,  
(Mitta Arm of the Weir out of frame to the right)

Photographic Studies, 2012

Anne Whiston Spirn argues that landscapes have a language. Competing ideologies often determine how landscapes are formed, these tensions linger in the terrain and can be read by our bodies.<sup>4</sup> There is a polemical dialogue in the terrain of my childhood: the picturesque vista edged by farmland leading to the expansive lake where only the drowned trees indicate the land's pre-Colonial life; the ever shifting capacity of the water reflecting climate extremes

<sup>3</sup> Goulburn-Murray Water. 1997-2016. *Goulburn-Murray Water: Hume Dam*. Accessed November 23, 2016. <http://www.g-mwater.com.au/water-resources/catchments/storages/murray/humedam>.

<sup>4</sup> Whiston Spirn, Anne. 1998. *The Language of Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press: 244

as well as the contentious debates over irrigation and environmental flows within the Murray-Darling River system. On a more immediately personal plane the submerged water courses metaphor the spatial and ancestral histories hidden within my embodied subjectivity. Whilst my direct dialogue with this landscape ceased after my first year of research, the meaning and tension contained within it has lingered in my body and exerted itself on my studio inquiry much like the much like the submerged water courses that surge beneath the surface of that manmade lake.

Today I will share an account that tracks the key insights of my practice led research. I begin by discussing the period of practice in which I focused on my domestic space in order to understand the enfolding of body and environment. Looking closely at this space led me to generate specific questions about space making which I addressed through field research to America and Japan in 2014. The contribution this field research made to my understanding of the role of the aesthetic in space making was vast, today, however, I will limit my discussion to only those sites that sit most closely to my practice led research. Following my field research I began a body of work that enabled me to develop ideas that had emerged through my research. This body of research combines objects and aesthetic language linked to the domestic space with imagery and symbols that signify the landscape. Marrying these forms together has enabled me to find a way to articulate the complex intertwining of body and world that I have observed.

### The Domestic:

Examining my relationship to the landscape had led me to consider a vast territory which included the history of colonisation, the function of ecosystems, processes of urbanisation, the effects of weather and so on. I could not locate a succinct way forward in this vast terrain. Shifting my research to my domestic space was an attempt to focus it more narrowly on the relationship between body and environment. To further commit to this new domain I focused primarily on the home's interior.

I share my three bedroom home with my husband and our three children. It is located in the South West Victorian Seaside city of Warrnambool. We have been tenants in this house since 2004.





within it. I was unsure how to articulate this subjective intertwining through artworks. Gaston Bachelard touches on this problem in the *Poetics of Space*:

These virtues of shelter are so simple, so deeply rooted in our unconscious that they may be recaptured through mere mention, rather than through minute description... All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively.<sup>5</sup>

The work of Pipilotti Rist and Chiharu Shiota helped me to imagine a solution. Both artists create externalised accounts of interior worlds. They immerse their viewers in materials and media that simulate sensory experiences congruent with the artist's internalised concerns. John Dewey argues that artists impart knowledge drawn from everyday living into artworks.<sup>6</sup> According to Estelle Barrett, this knowledge is experiential in origin and is invested into the artwork through the handling of materials.<sup>7</sup> Continuity between the material's qualities and the artist's concerns enable this externalisation of knowledge. The shared spectrum of embodied human experience enables these aesthetic objects and spaces to evoke similar feelings in others.



Pipilotti, Rist, Himalaya's Sister's Living Room (2000)



Shiota, Chiharu, After the Dream 2011

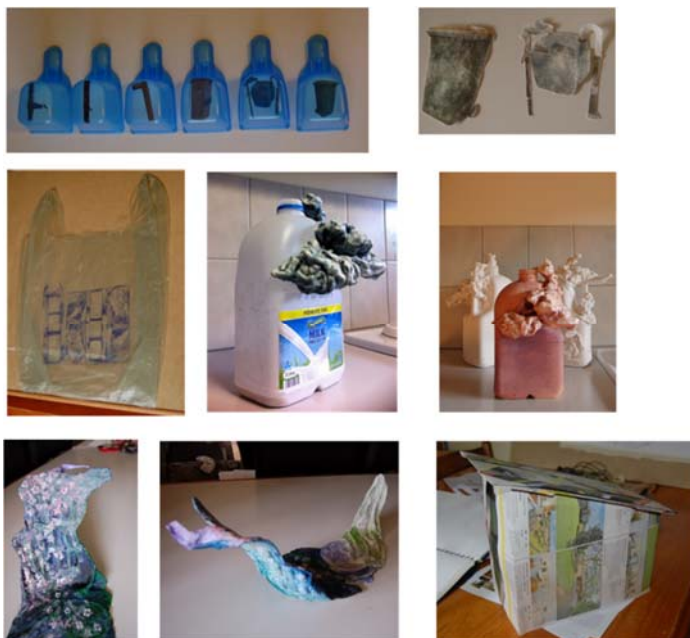
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<sup>5</sup> Bachelard, G. (1994, (First English edition 1964)). *The Poetics of Space*. (M. Jolas, Trans.) Boston: Beacon Press: 12-13

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, E. (2007). Experiential learning in practice as research: context, method, knowledge. *Journal of Visual Practice*, 6(2), 115-124.

<sup>7</sup> Barrett, E. (2007). Experiential learning in practice as research: context, method, knowledge. *Journal of Visual Practice*, 6(2), 115-124.

I needed an aesthetic language specific to my intersection with environment that was also socially meaningful. I found that objects that I had covered with patterned fabric and flesh painted canvas conveyed the way the body maps familial space into itself. Surfaces covered in decorative patterns communicated the way we absorb intergenerational sensibilities. These aesthetic textures gave me a way to express the inter-subjective interiority of the home. Along with this, my photographic approach evolved to present a way to capture the body's blurring with its space. The home itself, and the objects within it, were also beginning to signify ideas about the relationship between body and space; gradually the medium of water would take on significance too.



Material Studies, mixed media 2013



*Memory Flesh 1, 2 & 3*, plaster and acrylic, 2013

## Constructed Space

The private world of the home appears to be the antithesis of public space or even the landscape more generally. The built structure of the house encloses the body and protects it from weather and other creatures. The solid walls obscure the outside world and shield one from public scrutiny. Through this practice led research, however, I came to see the domestic home as analogous for the individual body as it exists contingent on a field of social and physical relations. The home, like the body, is a porous structure in constant communion with the outside world. In this way my home became the perfect terrain through which to question the intertwining of subject and environment. Ultimately the aesthetic disconnect apparent between the interior world of my home and the landscape would become metaphoric of the perceived division between subject and environment I'd sought to critique.

After a walk through my neighbourhood one afternoon I noticed the various points that connected my home to the infrastructure ecosystem. This was a starting point for a series of drawings on discarded town planning maps. I gave the works titles such as "*Warm Safe Home*" and "*Bathe*". Without offering a resolution these drawings seemed to reflect the disjuncture felt between the world and I: I could recognise my body in the aesthetic of the homes interior but could not find its reflection in these industrial objects.



Making Spaces #1: Warm Safe Home (2013)



Making Spaces #2: Bathe (2013)





Making Spaces #3: Whiter Whites (2013)



Making Spaces #4: At Ease (2013)



Making Spaces #5: Sense of Self (2013)



Making Spaces #6: Clean Clear Kitchen (2013)

The stroll through my neighbourhood and the town planning maps themselves would linger in my thinking. The urban language of concrete footpaths and gutters, of right angled structures and power lines communicated a terrain that had been mathematically processed and rationalised; it communicated a permanence in which no other landscape seemed possible; my previous year's interrogation of the landscape, however, had taught me that this really was just one constructed world view.

On the one hand a map is an image, it is a representation and is distinct from the territory it charts. Yet, on the other it is a mediator extending between our bodies, our society, and the physical world. Barbara Bolt argues that images have a productive performativity: they record and prescribe, actively shaping the world and those that engage with them.<sup>8</sup> The town planning maps gave me a way to think about the materiality of such images- these were regulatory devices instrumental to a system of collective space making. Later in my research I would paint the maps in the colours of flesh was a way to articulate this communion between our bodies and the social constructions through which we adhere them to the world.



*Town planning map studies (2014-17).*

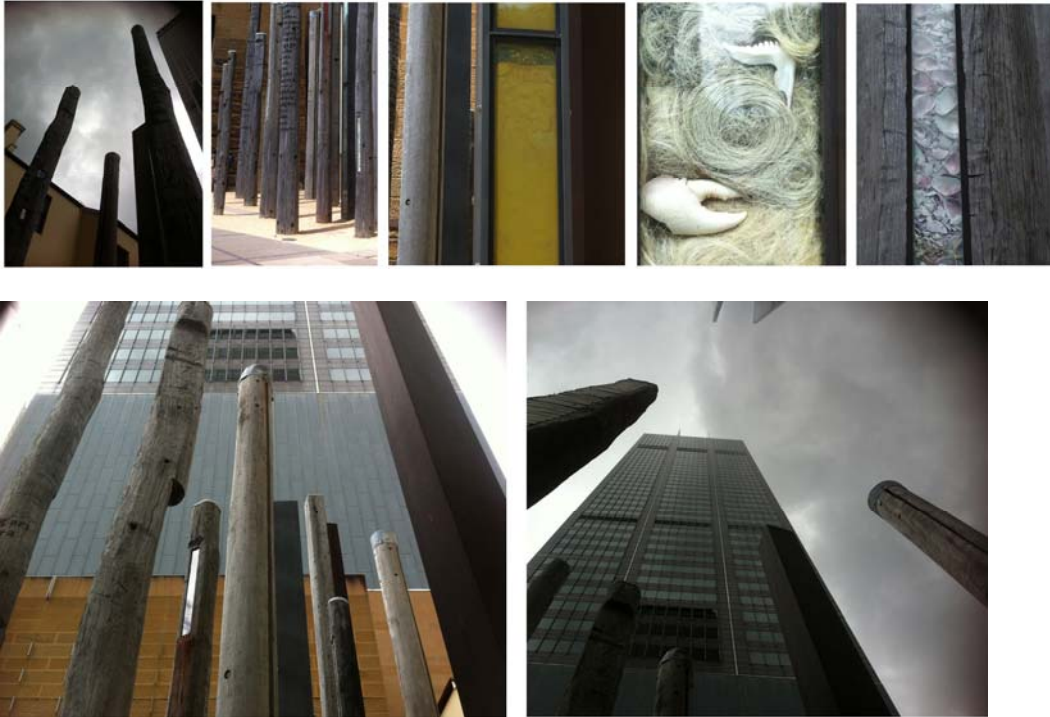
I became interested in this space through which the landscape could be seen to have a language; in which images could be seen to be material; I felt that it was the aesthetic dimension that created this continuity. Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence's *Edge of the Trees* (1994) was instrumental in my thinking around this time: their artwork uses site specific materials to map the memory of their Sydney site.<sup>9</sup> The work is a three dimensional image, a meaningful map that actively exists within the landscape it represents. *Edge of the Trees* draws our attention to the meaning that exists in the landscape. It provokes us to think about the way we organise and attribute value to different spaces. I recognised how my home ultimately existed along this same terrain. Despite its ordinariness the home is a meaningful

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<sup>8</sup> Bolt, Barbara. 2004. *Art Beyond Representation, The Performative Power of the Image*. London: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd.

<sup>9</sup> Foley, Fiona, Laurence, Janet. 1995. *Edge of the Trees*. Museum of Sydney, Sydney.

structure that maps particular human activity onto the landscape. Like a map, it mediates between our private bodies and the outside world. It acts as a filter through which we take in resources from the environment. Furthermore the homes design is socially encoded, it prescribes particular activities and modes of interacting that effectively map and condition our bodies.



Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence, *Edge of the Trees*, Museum of Sydney Forecourt (1994)

### Emergence of Water

The symbolic form of water emerged spontaneously, and somewhat cryptically in my practice led research during my domestic observations. It initially formed out of the gestural movement of my hands in response to an artwork. I had created a partial cast of my washing basket and felt the urge to extend its base with a breaking wave form. Several months later I would alter one of my map drawings in a similar way- the sense that this wave was rising up from my body was strong; it was an urging desire that pushed out through my hands.



*Ocean Basket*, plaster and acrylic, 2013



*Making Spaces #7: Hand Basin (2013)*

I noticed the meaning contained by different types of water- the water shown by the wave was more elemental and seemingly more philosophically significant than the clear domesticated water running from the tap. A quote from artist Marily Cintra would transform my thinking. Talking in response to her own artistic engagement with Rivers local to Canberra, she asks ‘do we realise that when we open a tap in Canberra we are diverting the river into our homes?’<sup>10</sup> Imagining the water filling my washing machine as a literal river deepened the connection I saw between my home and the landscape.



*One day we'll all be Water (2013) Ocean Pot (2013)*

<sup>10</sup> Cintra, Marly in Craft ACT. 2013. "Marily Cintra." *arts-in-residence 2013 Talking Water*. Craft ACT: Craft + Design Centre Gallery: 21



I used paper, plaster and acrylic paint to embellish broken domestic items with miniaturised ocean waves; in doing this I considered the way the shore line ebbs and flows, how all water has deep ecological roots in the big bang's creation of hydrogen, how water is intrinsically linked to processes of entropy and renewal; As I continued my domestic observations I found a sharp metaphorical contrast between the built space of the home and the powerful surging waves of the nearby sea. I was increasingly aware of the time I spent cleaning and tidying, how this constant movement was needed to create the perception of the homes stability. I looked closely at the role of water in cleaning, and even diarised my own shower taking a month.

### Hand Basin Sound Space

After more than a year of domestic observations a leg surgery forced me into bed rest. I read Katherine Ashenburg's *The Dirt on Clean* during this time. It explained a cultural revolution in the early twentieth century in which Western countries combined moral conventions with new hygiene habits.<sup>11</sup> The domestic shower became a fixture in most Western homes only after WW2, the ritual of daily showering was utterly recent, yet it seemed so convincingly natural. At this stage I had not showered for three days. I grew acutely aware of my own "uncleanliness". Reflecting on this revealed the complexity of an essentially aesthetic sensibility: cultural norms and dead skin written into my body as a meaningful sensuousness. Once healed I began a new work using a discarded bathroom basin, mirror, and swirling water formations made from plaster. Embedded in it and the installation space were a series of speakers playing sounds of teeth brushing, hand washing and running water interspersed by the large sound of a crashing wave. It embodies the intertwining of water in the transformative, socially in scripted ritual of self-cleaning.



<sup>11</sup> Ashenburg, Katherine. 2007. *The Dirt on Clean*. New York: North Point Press.



### *Hand Basin Sound Space (2014)*

#### Formulating my Field Research

John Dewey argued that the privileging of fine art above everyday life was part of a systematic disavowal of the increasingly exploited material world.<sup>12</sup> Richard Shusterman contends, however, that the motives for segregating art were not entirely sinister. Shusterman explains that ‘the hope was to both protect some realm of human spirituality from crassly calculative means-end rationality’ and to preserve art from the materialistic disenchantment produced through the extensive influence of the industrial and scientific age.<sup>13</sup> Examining my relationship to the landscape and to my home drew my attention to the way we allocate value to different spaces, and the way this value influences the experiences that we have within them. I identified my shower as a space in which these different values were played out.



Extract from Visual Diary, 2013

I was interested by the transformative nature of the shower- not only did it purify one's body but it so often clarified one's mind too. It was a secular shrine for self-renewal. I was fascinated by the way it organised space- it demarcated clean areas from filthy, public from private; it was the most interior of the homes interior; a space that shrunk one's awareness to

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, John. 1980. *Art as Experience*. New York: Penguin.

<sup>13</sup> Shusterman, Richard. 2000. *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Lanham, Maryland USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 8

the aesthetic immediacy of skin; yet, this pronounced segregation was permeated by spaces invisible to it: the river diverted into the home, the supply chain of detergents, electricity, and so on. Contemplating these ideas while I sought to develop my own installation practice led to specific research questions which I addressed through field research.

I wanted to know how particular spaces enabled certain experiences. How were different materials, symbols, and design approaches used to do this? How did these spaces tie into the field of social relations and what kind of a relationship did they posit between self and world? Although my field research included numerous sites today I restrict my discussion to just three: Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater* (1934), Piploitti Rists *You Renew You* (2004), and Shinro Ohtakes *Naoshima Bath* (2009). Each of these sites marry formal artistic and aesthetic practice with spaces of the everyday world: a home, a toilet, and a bathhouse. Each space is contingent on the role of water. In our ordinary western lives water is relegated as a utility; as it runs down the drain we rarely offer it the reverence that we might a waterfall. Contemplating its mutability provides a means to think about the way we organise spaces and the aesthetic values we award to them.

Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater* was commissioned by the Kaufman family. Wright convinced the wealthy Pennsylvanian family that they should build directly a top Bear Run Waterfall so as to literally live with it. Four main materials are used: concrete, steel, stone, and glass. *Fallingwater* was the first stop on my itinerary, I arrived there anxious and fragile after 23 hours of traveling, a night in a breaking bad themed motel, and the confusion of driving on the opposite side of the road. I took three tours of the homes interior and wandered the grounds over two days.



*Fallingwater*, 1934, Frank Lloyd Wright



The long cantilevered balconies echo the natural rocky terraces and create deep shadows that anchor the building; large windows mirror and reflect the surrounding forest. Inside the house is a spatial dynamic of compression and release: entrances and hallways are small, narrow, dark, and generally stone lined; this cavern like enclosure embraces while also pushing one out into the open plan living room or toward big light filled windows. The sound of water radiates up from beneath the home and can be heard at different intensities through the whole house.

*Fallingwater* is an idealised space, a custom built retreat for a wealthy adult family. Edgar Kaufman Jr. believed its relationship to the waterfall awoke ‘dormant sensibilities’, it imbued the home with the language of the changing seasons, of fluidity and renewal.<sup>14</sup> For him it was a place to retreat from busy city life and renew a connection with the natural world. Its location was protected from traffic noise and the view of other buildings. It was a mirage in which one could imagine that the urbanized world did not exist. The building’s architecture combined with the sites attributes to create a relationship between subject and world in which nature was peaceful and restorative. Continuous repairs due to water damage along with an account of 1960s flash flood indicated a less visible destructive dimension to this relationship with nature.<sup>15</sup>

Walking the house and the grounds I felt as though I began to mimic its language. As the homes windows and balconies opened to the forest I felt myself connect to this lush, live space too. As the dark corridors and deep shadows anchored the home to the ground, I too felt grounded by their weight. The constant white noise of the waterfall further absorbed my senses in the site. I was critical of the homes exclusivity from the urban landscape I’d driven through, as well as its idealisation of nature. It was clear, however, that this was a conscious demarcation of space that sought separation from the public, and the industrial, world. This separation, it seemed, enabled my own immersion in the space, allowing me to surrender the tension and anxiety I had arrived there with.

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<sup>14</sup> Kaufmann, Edgar Jr. 1986. *Fallingwater, A Frank Lloyd Wright Country House*. New York: Cross River Press: 54

<sup>15</sup> Kaufmann, Edgar Jr. 1986. *Fallingwater, A Frank Lloyd Wright Country House*. New York: Cross River Press.

I travelled to the Western edge of Japan for Pipilotti Rist's *You Renew You* at Kanazawa's Museum of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Art. The work is one of a pair installed in both the male and female toilets. Music and the sound of Pipilotti singing with birds filled the bathroom. Recessed into the wall opposite the toilet was an altar. Three clear quartz crystals at the front, a mirror against the wall; in-between a thick acrylic circle showing a hyper colour video with human stools, close-ups of cells, and Japanese and English words giving thanks to "hair, slime, skin scales" and so on. *You Renew You* celebrates how our organism replenishes itself- it connects our conversion of food to cells, our excretion of waste, and our cleansing rituals with the bathroom space.



Pipilotti Rist, *You Renew You* (2004)

I was attracted because it augmented the profanity of the bathroom with a sacred dimension. Since the nineteenth century Cholera outbreak in London and the germ theory that followed, the West has created increasingly sophisticated boundaries between sanitary and unsanitary spaces.<sup>16</sup> Adhered to these spaces are belief systems about purity and contamination, moral

<sup>16</sup> Ashenbury, Katherine. 2007. *The Dirt on Clean*. New York: North Point Press.

Selket, Kyro. 2007. "Bring Home the Dead: Purity and Filth in Contemporary Funeral Homes." In *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination*, by Ben, Cox, Rosie Campkin, 49-59. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd.

and social dignity. The West traditionally relegates the sacred to churches, the furore raised by Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* demonstrated the disjuncture between our cultural ideas of the most revered and the gross materiality of our brute bodies. Whereas for traditional Australian aboriginal culture the whole landscape had spiritual significance, our modern technologically advanced cultures, argues Edward Relph, 'possess space by building and organise it mainly in terms of material objects and functions'.<sup>17</sup> Clean water is a functional material supplied into our bathroom spaces to enable hygiene. *You Renew You* challenges traditional hierarchical binaries by making sacred both the clean and dirty dimensions of our purification through water. In doing so Rist re-enchants the most profane of spaces and reimagines the way we allocate value to different places.



Shinro Ohtake, *Naoshima Bath* (2009)

*Naoshima Bath* embodied my reading of John Dewey by combining functional ritual with an aesthetic space. It is made in Shinro Ohtake's scrapbook style in which he creates multi-textual surfaces by collaging found materials, pop culture images, and abstract painting. Inside is a clear bright space combining images of beautiful women, ancient scrolls and pop art. An elephant statue at the top of a high wall divides the gendered bathing halls, each abutted by a garden of lush plants. For five days I exchanged my private western hygiene regime for a public one. Here cleaning the body was separated from the aesthetic pleasure of bathing. Conscious of other bathers I scrubbed my entire body before entering the large bath.

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Sternberg, Esther. 2009. *Healing Spaces*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Relph, Edward. 1976. *Place and Placelessness*. Pion Limited: 15



Although the language barrier prevented me from the bathhouse's social dimension I savored the experience of soaking my clean body in the clear hot water. Upon leaving the bathhouse I felt an amplified mindfulness of my own body this time brought about by communal, rather than solitary, attention to my own hygiene. For me, the *Naoshima Bath* indicated a way in which our ordinary landscapes may be enhanced by the inclusion of aesthetic spaces that seek to engage us closely in the dance of entropy and renewal.



Shinro Ohtake, *Naoshima Bath* (2009)

Olafur Ellasion argues that it is not hard to garner our participation: we participate in ordinary activities like shopping and making meals every day.<sup>18</sup> What we require, he argues, is the prompt to evaluate this participation: to ask what it means for our place in the world. I do not believe that marrying art with the everyday should attempt to dissolve what is sacred about our communion with creative energy or the meanings that we produce through reflexivity. Rather it should prompt us to look at how we award meaning and value in all aspects of our lives.

Upon my return from field research I began developing artworks that synthesised ideas and aesthetic language that had emerged through my earlier research. The first was an installation named *Inside Out*.

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<sup>18</sup> Eliasson, Olafur, Obrist, Hans Ulrich. 2008. *Olafur Eliasson*. Cologne: Köln : Walther König.

It reinterpreted work made in a cross over with an Artist in Schools project. Eugene von Guerard's painting of the South West Victorian volcanic crater *Towerhill* (1855) was the starting point for our project.



*Tower Hill*, 1855, Eugene von Guerard, oil paint on canvas

While the participatory aspect was separate from my PhD inquiry, the context and concepts were shared. Guerard's precise portrayal of Towerhill records the Australian landscape prior to its settler led degradation. It constructs a picturesque, European account of the landscape that also captures the sites ecological unity. Sumanthis Ramaswamy's argues that we should engage in empire's images as 'objects of knowledge in and of themselves, as world making and world disclosing.'<sup>19</sup> While I have explored post-colonial critiques of Australian landscape painting, it is this productivity of image making, its role in allocating value to landscapes, and its utility in our formation of relationships with our environment that is of most interest to my research.

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<sup>19</sup> Ramaswamy, Sumathi. 2014. "The Work of Vision in the Age of European Empires." In *Empires of Vision: A reader*, by Martin, Ramaswamy, Sumathi Jay, 1-21. Durham: Duke University Press: 12

To capture our own account of the Western Victorian landscape we launched a go-pro camera attached to a helium filled weather balloon. With some deftly planning our attempt succeeded. I retrieved the camera. It had recorded to an altitude of about 65,000ft. In observing my domestic space and critiquing the use of materials in my own studio inquiry I had been cognisant of, yet unable to envision the effects of my own space making on the world outside my home. The video shows a landscape construed primarily for agricultural use with small sections partitioned for state parks and townships. It also shows the edge of the earth's boundary as it meets space, a scene which for me invokes an awe at our planetary unity similar to the one captured in Guerard's sublime *Tower Hill*.



*Gaia is Symbiosis as seen from Space*, documentary photographs of launch, 2013





*Gaia is Symbiosis as seen from Space, 2013*

Stills from video

I presented the video alongside a domestic setting of my clothes horse and ironing board. Hanging across these were plaster forms representing water. I combined a soundtrack of my washing machine with the video. I saw this space as a record of my relationship to the environment, a three dimensional map that brought together the mundane world of my domestic space, the visual reality of the Anthropocene, and our broader reality as beings entwined in a planetary ecosystem.



*Inside Out, 2014, Scope Galleries, Warrnambool*

Making Spaces



In attempting to synthesise the knowledge I had garnered through my research, I was drawn to the contrast between the fluidity of water and the fixed structures of the domestic home. I experimented with a number of ways to create water in my practice led research. Although I was frustrated with its opacity, I found a combination of paper and plaster was the most practical for making three dimensional fluid forms. I experimented with a number of different approaches to painting these surfaces. Introducing sound to my work also enabled me to describe water in my practice. I used the contrast between the more surreal, ocean like water forms of my sculptures and recorded sounds of domestic water such as my washing machine to think about the way we organise spaces.



*Standing in this River on its way out to the Sea*, (2015)

*Standing in the River on Its way out to the Sea* was embedded with a speaker playing the sound of me showering merging into a crashing wave. Although the aesthetic of our everyday may be dominated by our immediate sensory experiences, such as the shower's running water against our skin, our awareness and prior experience colours the perception that processes that sensory input. This work was an attempt to visualise the ecological dependence of the domestic space and argue for its inclusion in our ordinary perception.



*Communion*, 2015-17 Mixed media



*Communion* began as a response to a series of dinner plates. I created interrelated water forms to signify the exchanges that occur through domestic interactions: the way we incorporate the world into our bodies through consuming food and drink, but also how we play out relationships and absorb and model values, beliefs, behavioural and emotional patterning. While painting the water forms I began to imagine the plate's floral patterning as sea foam. This captured the meaning invested in water and the many functions it serves in the domestic home. It conveyed the aesthetic sensibility that has been passed down my maternal line, the one that binds ideas of cleanliness to personal and social standards. I investigated a number of ways of presenting the dinner plates before collaging a table in flesh painted town planning maps of my neighbourhood. My old rickety dining chairs completed the work- I stitched pink flannelette and painted fleshy sections onto the chairs. Combining this aesthetic language with these domestic artefacts enabled me to visualise the interiority of intersubjective family life; of the sometimes brutal processes of socialisation that map and contort the body to the confines of its environment.



*Communion studies*, 2015-17, mixed media

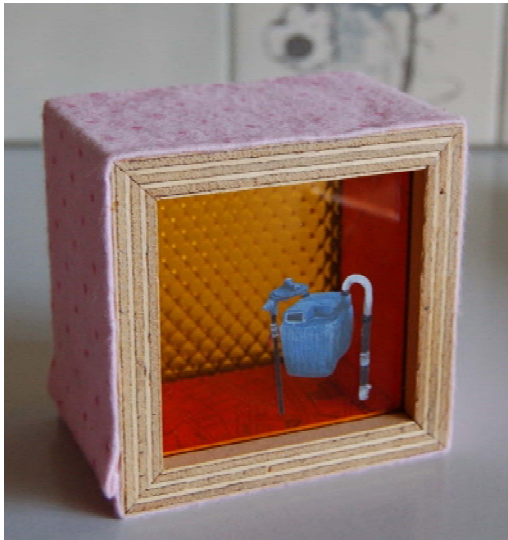
Examining my visual diary revealed links across my photographs and my observations of my domestic space. In particular a page filled with photographs of a sunrise evoked a sense of awe, warmth, and connection. I found that other photographs in which I had captured a similar light from my homes interior evoked the same feelings.



I intuited a link between these qualities and the fabric and flesh like materials I had experimented with earlier in my research. I brought these materials together by making a series of photo boxes.



Eventually I replaced the photographs with orange Perspex and made the boxes from more solid timber.



I saw these boxes as little interior domestic worlds. According to Kereen Reiger, many of our ideas about modern family life emerge from eighteenth century middle class ideals.<sup>20</sup> The gendered division of labour during this time located women within the domestic sphere where they were deemed responsible for both the physical and emotional care of the children, and the creation of a private sanctuary for their husbands. Movements such as the social welfare and maternal and child health education saw these ideals set a norm for lower middle and working class households during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Enshrined in this was newly formed home hygiene practices born through germ theory and improvements in urban sanitation.

I considered how these small boxes represented the creation of the homes interior space. Home making that mapped social beliefs into bodies. Home making that required the constant consumption of materials to keep its interior comfortable and healthy in the dance of entropy and renewal. I pondered the relationship I had intuited with the photographs of the beautiful sunrise. What relationship did this epic sight really have to my home? In critiquing John Dewey's emphasis on special aesthetic experiences such as grand landscapes, Yuriko Saito

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<sup>20</sup> Reiger, Kerreen. 1985. *The disenchantment of the home: modernizing Australian domestic life*.

draws our attention to the aesthetics of the everyday world.<sup>21</sup> She argues that the emphasis on special aesthetic experiences that yield a sublime response leads us to overlook the aesthetics of our everyday world. In particular, her critique of the aesthetics of landscapes in which epic wildernesses are protected in order to preserve their natural beauty while less epic territories such as planes and wetlands are deemed less valuable, if not ugly, and therefore ripe to be developed for human use. In reading Saito's argument a new way to imagine my work pushed up through my body and out into my mind: I thought of the dammed water courses from my ancestral terrain, how their conversion to domesticated water was congruent with the urbanisation of Australia. I could imagine a series of my little home boxes suspended in the formation of a river moving through a domestic setting comprised of the works I had already made.

I experimented with a number of approaches for presenting my work. I found that the combination of video, coloured light, and sound seemed to activate my work, bringing the dynamism of a living home. Through the intense reflection on my work through the writing of my exegesis I came to see the whole project as a kind of water source.



I began to imagine my whole body of work presented as a river with the sounds of domesticated water- the washing machine, the shower, and so on- animating the space. I recognised the links between my maternal inheritance, the aesthetic sensibilities that inform

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<sup>21</sup> Saito, Yuriko. 2007. *Everyday Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.

the way I manage my home and care for my children, and the two submerged water courses I describe at the beginning of this paper. Through this three dimensional image I have found a way to articulate the body intertwining with its environment, how it absorbs not only its physical resources, but the beliefs and sensibilities that inhabit the collective spaces that we share. Through our homes we absorb the world and create from it our interior lives.

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