



On Country Practice

BY GEOFF NEWTON

I'll admit there has been much discussion about the title of this exhibition – why choose something as loaded as Country Practice? It's like the Aussie version of All Creatures Great and Small or a rural Home And Away and each of these stereotypical series have their place in our collective idea of what popular culture makes of an out-of-town situation – the regular roles of city folk who've moved for unknown reasons, the cop, the cops son, popular girl, popular girls friends, their parents, divorcees etc etc.

It was not to play off of the memory of the program – really! Just to begin with two ideas in mind as tenets for an ongoing exploration and dialogue with regional cities. But by 'practice' I wanted to refer to the idea or term used to describe what an artist does. I guess a little like a doctor, an artist

has a 'practice' and keeps making 'work' to see both material and conceptual ideas come to fruition. And I think that the role of what an artist does in society is constantly challenged, reassessed and develops along with the evolution of cultures. And so yes it was difficult to assemble a group of artist who could be malleable in their practice, or to say, whose work or ideas could transform or translate into a regional setting without too many headaches. A continuity of sorts, based upon common strands in each artists' approach to their practice.

The notion of communication as we understand it to be – or how an artist communicates to an audience by sight, or say, any sensory cues – is a very basic parameter I've come back to. So the works in the exhibition have been largely based upon modes of communication. For example, in

my own work I like to think that I'm making a document of a view or landscape which has not been documented by painting – and by that I mean I'm referring to another time when an artist would have been sent out to make sketches of land, buildings, flora or fauna to provide a record which would be then used to measure the object, or at least to provide a document of it. Nowadays of course you might use Google to look up if there is enough parking at the restaurant you're headed to, if it's close to the beach, to the airport, etc. It's a forgettable image, as momentary as a detour.

I like the idea that perhaps one day if the Internet packs it in, there will only be paintings and drawings left as a document of the current times. But who would want to paint a picture of an iPhone? Ridiculous I know. The way in which we consume images, val-

idate images, generate and delete images in today's social media landscape is staggering – but perhaps it's also heartening to think that a fleeting glimpse is still just a fleeting glimpse, trashcan or loveheart. Also it's heartening to know that pigeons have a value outside of beautifying city buildings and feasting on the detritus of large crowds. I'm surprised that community noticeboards are still an effective ways of letting people know about something, like a real trading post.

In many ways the works in the exhibition have been based upon things in the everyday world of Horsham – photographs, buildings, community groups, institutions Outside a gallery situation none of these things would seem like art. They don't need to. Yet, as a collection of ideas, objects and practice, the works in the exhibition will offer another context for

the everyday. Why did someone design a Yoga bulletin board like that? I never knew the art gallery was across the road from Cheap as Chips. There is a long history of pigeon fanciers in Horsham? A renowned pianist provided the bulk of the art gallery collection? These are a few of the questions and statements we've generated as artists, providing the basis for works in the exhibition. Now it didn't really begin like this – but we really did have this conversation, however digressive.

Stewart Russell & Kate Daw

The Horsham Homing Club, the last surviving pigeon racing club in the Wimmera, is a living treasure. Established around 1917 by a group of well known Horsham families, Langlands, Waterfields, Wrights, Hoskings... the club is a rich source of community knowledge, people, stories and adventures. The club is the starting point for a new artwork by Stewart Russell & Kate Daw that takes the form of a map, a flag, a race and a collection of black & white photographs by Ern Sheparton, that record champion pigeons and the flyers who bred and raced them.

The relationship between man and pigeon probably goes back to the emergence of man made structures. As pigeons in nature often roost & nest on stepped rock formations much like architecture, it's probable the emergence of buildings would have brought pigeons into day to day relationship with humans. Records of sophisticated architecture, specifically designed for pigeons, are still found in modern day Iran. Designed to provide fertilizer for Persian farmers these handsome mud brick & stucco lofts describe a continuous & symbiotic relationship between man and pigeons dating back over 5000 years.

By the time the H.H.C was formed in 1917 homing pigeons were an integral resource for the Signal Corps and played a key role in communications during the first Worlds War and were still widely used in the Second.

Many Victorian clubs donated pigeons to the war effort and as a means of communication were still remarkably effective, saving large numbers of Australian lives. H.H.C member Jack Tydeman was in the Signals working with pigeons during the second world war when two pigeons donated from Victorian clubs received the Dickin Medal, the equivalent of the Victoria Cross for animals.

"This new work for Country Practice will throw a light on the last pigeon racing club in the Wimmera club as it approaches it's 100 year milestone. We're grateful for the opportunity to access a world we knew little of, and there's so much we still need to ask and understand, but we sense showing this work at the gallery will uncover a wave of stories, knowledge & reflection. This will be the register a beginning point for us, we envisage further projects and research."

"The map will chart past and present race points on the three race "lines" connecting Horsham to remote communities, villages and towns to the north, south and west. The early launch sites followed the railways, today the pigeons travel by road. Their journey back to Horsham describes a geography largely untraveled, over landscapes mostly imagined from maps and the races evocative starting points - Pimba, Goondiwindi, Taillem Bend, Morgan, Barrington, Ouyen, Wonthaggi, Marree, Birdsville, Tarcoola, Waikerie, Terowie..."

"The flag introduces a public component and will fly on the T&G building on Firebrace Street. The design utilizes a 1973 photograph found in the H.H.C collection of the winner of the South Derby, bred and raced by Vasil Filip. The final component of the work is in the form of an action, H.H.C. pigeons carrying messages from Melbourne back to Horsham. The event retraces the path taken by the artists participating in this exhibition, a response to a touring exhibition and the spirit of communication and dialogue."

We just found that Goondiwindi derives from an Aboriginal word meaning "the resting place of birds", that needs following up.

GEOFF NEWTON
June 27, Roberts Avenue Horsham 2015, 2015, Oil on linen, 60 x 90 cm, Courtesy the artist



Interview

Kate Daw: So tell me what you're doing?

Isabelle Sully: Well when we went to Horsham I went through the gallery's collection and picked out a number of paintings that I just gravitated toward. For some reason one of them was the most expensive one in the collection, and I'd had this idea where I'd wanted to show something somewhere else in town.

Geoff Newton: And this is the Mack Jost Collection?

IS: Yeah, which is the main collection of the gallery. It got donated a number of decades ago, and then over the years the gallery has collected works to add to it.

KD: So tell me what the painting is?

IS: It's a Rupert Bunny painting. And coincidentally Adam was talking about how it's also the most popular painting in the collection as well.

KD: And what is it of?

IS: It's called Susanna and the Elders. It's actually a biblical story and it's this tale of a woman who is married to a senior elder and she is bathing outside. Then these two other elders come along and through spying on her accrue desire and attempt to seduce her. But of course she isn't interested because she's married...

KD: Mmm

IS: And so through rejection they go and claim to the courts that it was the other way round: that Susanna, the married woman, actually tried to seduce them. And so she gets accused of adultery and sentenced to death.

KD: Wow!

IS: It's this biblical moral tale that is actually referenced all the time throughout the history of art because it is one of the more legitimizing stories that enabled artists to paint the nude back in the day.

KD: Right. That's interesting...

IS: But I wanted to show something not in the gallery and I was thinking about a bank as a place that has a similar kind of social currency, both in terms of security and, perhaps in my eyes, a kind of necessity too. So hopefully the original painting is going to be hung in the bank, and then I've designed this commemorative coin to the painting that is going to be installed in the gallery. So the coin is two sided like the more tale and also borrows the language of the bank through being alluding to money. But I also like the idea of the souvenir in relation to this show, which commemorative coins often come to be.

KD: It's funny, I was looking at Madame Bovary today online because I've always been really interested in that novel. And she is a woman who was kind of persecuted for having desire. I wonder if there is a relationship there?

IS: Yeah, right. Well this is funny because it was the first

time, well you know within the history that we're dealing with here anyway, where cross-examination happened. Because in the story, this child in the town said that they should try the two elders and get both sides of their story. There was something to do with a specific kind of tree in her garden, which they both got wrong when recounting what happened. And so she was freed. But yeah, I wonder.

KD: Because a lot of those novels do come from those kinds of origins.

IS: Yeah. It's just so interesting as well because this story that is essentially about a form of sexual exploitation, is the reason why everyone painted the nude for so many years. Like Jerome, Rembrandt, Gentileschi, everyone, painted Susanna as a nude. So it's kind of interesting that that gets forgotten for aesthetic pursuits and a different kind of objectification.

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KD: That's all great. And what about you Geoff?

GN: Well what about I show you the images of these paintings and then we can have a bit of a discussion.

KD: So are you somehow just finding time to paint all these?

GN: No I'm not. The thing about these is, I got them made in China...

KD: Oh my gosh, is that one of them? That's amazing.

GN: Pretty good hey?

IS: How big are they?

GN: So they're 90 x 60. They're little. But it's the same company that paints advertisements for Walmart. They're like a multi-national Chinese company. And I think, at the time I was like 'well you know if you got to get your car fixed you're not going to work out how to do it'. I kind of took that route trying to, not defend myself, but just to go look I don't have the technical aptitude to do this...

IS: But you also said a good thing to me a while ago about the history of patronage in landscape painting and about commissioning the view.

GN: Yeah, well I sort of took it from when you were looking at those etchings by Chevalier. When we went to the gallery Isabelle was interested in, well were they like Chevalier originals?

IS: Yeah, of all these banks. Which is why I started thinking about banks in the first place.

KD: So these are the view from the gallery?

GN: This is the view from the existing gallery, so with all the scaffolding. You can also see the little lens glare from the original photo.

KD: But you know what they talk to? Time. And passing time... obviously, in the view. But also time poor and the time painting. And I think that's really interesting.

GN: Well you know, I sort of come back to the Chevalier thing where it's like, you know, sending an artist out to document something. So I guess the other part of this is, I love the story from Tower Hill. Where Vonguad went out and painted Tower Hill in Warnambool and decades later they tried to repopulate the hill with the trees he put in there. Because you know, he's this German romantic painter.

IS: So he added to the landscape?

GN: Yeh, and then they planted all the trees. So that's become this kind of hallowed site where artists have gone to paint. But when thinking about the Chevalier it's something like the lord sending someone out to documenting the buildings in a way that a photograph might do.

KD: But also I don't think it has to be completely resolved as an idea. For me, the fact that it's opened something up is the interesting thing to think through. As well as the fact that you've got someone else to paint them.

IS: My Nana was telling me the other day about her travels in Europe in the 70s and she went to this city that's famous for being more beautiful in real life than in any postcard reproduction of itself. It's one of the only cities in the world...

KD: What city is this?

IS: I think it might have been somewhere in Scandinavia? But where any postcard just doesn't do it justice. Whereas you look at ones of Mel-

bourne and the lighting is perfect or whatever. But I think there is something about a postcard in these paintings too.

KD: Yeah there is something incredibly mundane as well. They're so interesting with all those car spaces and the parallel parks and their relationship to earlier Californian painting.

GN: Norman Rockwell!

IS: I think they're like a George Shaw painting, the one on the left.

GN: Oh yeah.

KD: The Rockwell thing is really interesting in terms of the idealized country town.

IS: That is what's interesting about this too! Which is that you've given this image to someone who's never seen Horsham and they've stylized it in their own way.

GN: Mmm. I like the bit, how the asphalt is so economic. What you do is you send them the image and they grade it out of ten according to the difficulty and then you pay them according to that. So two people painted both these ones.

KD: Have you got the originals yet?

GN: Yeah, they're in the cupboard if you wanna see them.

IS: So you think you're like Rembrandt with this workshop behind you.

KD: But also Geoff I was thinking, with Country Practice and city life it sort of ties into that thing of not having time to sit and paint. It's clichéd, and there is something clichéd about the views in the paintings. But they still raise all those questions.

GN: But I think it just wanted it to be so that the audience looks and goes, 'oh that's blah blah.'

KD: Yeah, so there is a recognition factor. They're just going to love these, and then they're going to look at them and think 'oh gosh, they're made in China'. Like everything we do is outsourced to China, even our art!

IS: Look at that Toyota Camry!

KD: Yeah, it's sooo Australian.

GN: Yeah, this really feels of the place to me.

KD: So are you going to have any text accompanying them?

GN: Just the title.

KD: And what about author?

GN: Just me

KD: So are you going to reveal that they were painting overseas?

GN: Well if people want to know, yeah. I'm not going to hide the fact that I didn't physically paint them.

IS: But that's not important to you as part of the work?

GN: To me that just opens up this whole other line of it being about something that it's not. It's kind of not meant to open up questions about economy and authorship. I got them outsourced, and this is what they are.

KD: There is this new technician at VCA and before he got this job he was a sky painter for, you know images of Hong Kong Harbor with the boats and the ferries and all those kinds of promotion things. He was on the clouds. His whole family did it, they all did skies. I thought how amazing, there is something very poetic about that.

IS: Why don't you want to open up questions about economy?

GN: Well I want this image to be the stand in for the photographic documentation of looking. And I think it

allows a distance between the maker and the work, which allows me to talk about it in a different way, to be subjective.

KD: Mmm.

IS: Did you want to talk a little bit about the pigeons too, Kate?

KD: Yes. Well when Stewart and I work together we tend to focus on either a political situation or a kind of civil rights situation, or often a history that is disappearing or endangered in some way. And the pigeons, as we've got to know a little bit more about it has really come into that last area of interest. As you know, pigeon racing is a dying kind of craft, and something that has incredible history that is looking like it hasn't got much of a future. And the kind of intricacies in the people that are still doing it, and that insider knowledge of what birds do, and the inherent mystery about how people don't actually know how pigeons find their way home.

IS: I remember when we first started talking about it in Horsham when Stewart discovered the pigeon club and he said, 'yeah we'll let them out in Melbourne and they'll come back home'. And I had no idea that that was a thing that happened.

KD: Something actually came out a couple of weeks ago, which is that they now think that birds that have a homing instinct do it by smell. Which is pretty interesting. But there have been a couple of theories of magnetic forces and them being attune to that. So all those things have kind come together and we're just learning about them I guess. But great stories and great communities, which seems perfect for a bit of a look at when it comes to country town activities too.

GN: I wonder when those pigeons stopped taking messages from place to place. Was there a definitive time? Like when they send them out, do they still attach things to the birds?

KD: The ones we're looking at are for racing. So they've all got these electronic platforms and the birds have got chips on their rings around their legs. But we've been into these clubs and seen these machines where the birds come in from their races and they pull the rubber band off their legs and drop it in this hole and the machine ticks over and prints out the time. And it's the only accurate way you can measure the time it's actually taken them to fly back to the loft.

IS: Wow!

KD: And these objects, they're amazing. And they're completely going to be obsolete because they're all becoming electronically tagged now. So we haven't been involved with messages, and I guess the really interesting history is of them in wartime and how they used them. Stewarts uncovered these amazing pictures of these wartime lofts from the Second World War with all these English officers, something like from Dad's Army. Old trucks that have been custom built to carry these pigeons around, and to send them off into frontlines or to meet the resistance. You know, amazing, amazing histories.

IS: When we were all in Horsham Stewart discovered that story of the pigeon that got the Order of Australia.

KD: Yeah, for its work on Manus Island during the war. It was incredible.

IS: So is the work organizing the pigeon flight and the flags?

KD: Raising consciousness around it. So yes, the flight coupled with the

flags flying around the town.

IS: And do you know what Fiona is doing Geoff?

GN: So Fiona's made these two community notice boards, which are basically facsimiles of actual notice boards from where she lives in LA.

KD: That sounds good!

GN: Yeah it's nice. You know, that displacement of a message from Melbourne comes to Horsham with the pigeons, the painting by Bunny which is based on such-and-such which is from the Greco-Roman reference in the bank, my paintings, you know.

KD: There is a lot of distance in this show. From China to here, and LA etc. I think that is all very interesting.

IS: I think so too. And especially when thinking about the next iterations of the show and this idea of travelling.

Country Practice is commissioned by NETS Victoria, curated by Geoff Newton. It runs from 31 July - 27 September 2015 at Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Jubilee Hall, 21 Roberts Avenue, Horsham.



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BLUE HEN H.H.C. 62 656.
FIRST YOUNG BIRD DERBY 1963 - MORGAN - 240 MILES.
BRED AND RACED BY M. CARTER & SONS.