

Contemporary Art Tasmania

Constellations: Absolute Piston Gauges

(26 June – 27 July 2024)

The *Constellations: Absolute Piston Gauges* (APG) project was programmed to ‘take the temperature’ of art now. What ideas are artists exploring and what does the art of our current social and political climate look and sound like? The project focused on many of the artists who are part of Tasmania’s ever-changing experimental art scene and provided them with the space to test, present, share and discuss their work.

The APG project originally had two artists’ events. APG was postponed in light of the Tasmanian Palestinian Advocacy Network (TPAN) petition against CAT and public events were reshaped into one artists’ event and a symposium (scheduled for 26/07/24) to more directly explore the role of art as a way to engage with the political and social climate. Unfortunately, two symposium speakers withdrew and it could not progress. These notes were compiled at the artists’ event which occurred before the symposium was cancelled.

Notes from the *Absolute Piston Gauges* Artists’ Event

(19 July 2024)

Presenters: Harrison Bowe, Emma Bugg, Nicole O’Loughlin x Matthew Stolp, PIPELINE, Reprillion Culture Club, Soup Collective.

PIPELINE: The electronic sound performance commenced as the audience took their seats. PIPELINE (Richie + Jet Cyngler) played in front of the *GG Small Artist Collider* presentation that was included in the exhibition (featuring Abbie Whitton + Chloe Catto, Bobby K + Colin Langridge, Alicia King + Philip Sulidae. Compiled by Robert O’Connor). Synthetic sounds mixed live — *punderwave remix snack size audio exploration*.

Welcome: Kylie Johnson welcomed the audience to CAT and acknowledged that the event was taking place on the land of the Muwinina people. She spoke of the project being recalibrated to be responsive to the current political climate. *“The issues are many, environmental, genocide, colonisation, housing and countless other socially significant topics — art can promote important debate and introduce diverse perspectives and positions. The artists’ event includes creative explorations of political issues through practice while ideas on issues of crisis will be explored through presentations at the symposium next week”*.

Jewellery designer and artist **Emma Bugg** addressed the audience, standing before her exhibited work, *Study for Thylacine Locket: A Moment to Reflect*, 2024. She

acknowledged her colleagues from State of Flux Workshop, in Salamanca, Hobart — Gabbee Stolp, Anna Weber and Jane Hodgetts, briefly describing the workshop as a creative and retail space for contemporary jewellery and objects. Emma spoke about her education at the Art School, University of Tasmania where she focussed on sculpture and learnt how to talk about the concepts in her work. Later she enrolled in a silversmithing and jewellery design course at TAS Tafe. The emphasis was on hands-on learning such as *“learning to solder, it was elemental. [It felt] dangerous getting to use these tool...”* On using metal *“I felt like I found what I wanted to do”*. She described the trajectory of her career, from Handmark Gallery, Hobart to featuring in the New York Times and her crown in the Mona collection. She then introduced the Thylacine de-extinction project. She applied to a call-out for *Not Natural* at the Science Gallery, Melbourne who posed the question — just because we can, should we? She referred to the exhibited locket with hair, indicating that the follicle attached has thylacine DNA and serves as a memorial to a lost species. Emma was approached to be on the Colossal Laboratories Thylacine Advisory Panel along with First Nation’s people, scientists and community leaders. Emma speculated if the thylacine was brought back from extinction would it be a ‘copy’ of the original or if another animal was used to assist with the process would that animal’s characteristics transfer to the ‘thylacine’? Perhaps the most *“common concern is around Jurassic Park scenarios and what impact the thylacine could have on current ecosystems.”* Emma invited the audience to speak with her about the project, contribute viewpoints on the potential de-extinction of the thylacine via the online survey and take a closer look at her intriguing thylacine pouch models.

Harrison Bowe is an early-career artist with a practice encompassing painting, photography and performance. *“G’day everyone”*. Harrison commenced his presentation with images of the Tasmanian wilderness landscapes he regularly walks in. *“This talk is about walking and how it influences my practice. ...I really like to go walking. I find it a beautiful way to understand place, or — a deeper way to understand a place. This starts by going out into the landscape, sometimes on track but I [also] don’t mind going off-track. I pay attention to the texture of the ground, and the smell of strange little plants. If I’m scrambling across rocks my safety depends on paying attention.”* He referenced walks in the Southwest of Tasmania, Frenchman’s Cap and Federation Peak, emphasising the emotional qualities of these places and their influence on his perspective of time, deep time - *“I’m dumbfounded by my insignificance, human insignificance. We are here for a blink of it.”* Harrison regularly returns to the same wild environments. He spoke about the care he takes when walking and being aware of the impact his presence has on the landscapes — the prints his feet make in the moss that *“might not grow back in my lifetime.”* And the effect the wilderness has on him — *“My spikey bloodied knees...Sometimes I walk by myself or with my old man. Reflection is better in smaller groups or on my own...Sound is best heard in silence.”*

For Harrison, walking has meditative qualities but he also feels an element of disconnect from the environments he is in. The, at times, slow pace and calm tone

of his presentation alluded to the tempo of his walks. Harrison enjoys the repetitive motion of walking or paddling down a river. Referring to his painting process, he suggested that there are many overlaps between walking and painting. *“I get completely lost in it. I’m so present, I’m not there”*. During the Q&A Robert O’Connor commented that within his work Harrison seems to be mapping out place *“...from a high vantage point - streams connect to a tarn — it’s like an interactive map of this landscape. Not a frame composed — they’re very real.”*

Nicole O’Loughlin x Matthew Stolp — Within her practice, Nicole explores societal and political issues, pop culture and women’s narratives. She works across textiles, painting, drawing and printmaking. Matthew is an artist, actor, performer, educator and screenwriter. Nicole was channelled by Matthew. ‘Nicole’ walked through the audience to stand in front of her exhibited work, *Threads in a Cave, 2024*, a mind map featuring the textile work, *The American Dream, 2021* - unfinished. ‘Nicole’ is wearing glasses, a striped shirt, a green embroidered cardigan and often flicks her straight bob (wig) to the side when she gestures. An audience member commented that — *“The resemblance is uncanny.”* ‘Nicole’ spoke to the mind map indicating that artist names will continue to be added in future iterations but presently it — *“no longer gives good vibrations... I’ll stand away from the map so that you can see.”* She proceeded to read a written statement describing the work that, as she progressed sounded more and more like it was based on Madonna’s iconic 1990s song *Vogue*. *“What are you looking at? ... Sew, sew, sew - look around - life that you know... know a place - a weaving loom. Hands move with the rhythm... Trained or not, a girl or a boy — groove to the pattern sew, sew, sew, ... Move now, hey, hey, hey...Come on sew...”* Gesturing to the artist names in the mind map — *“They had style, they had grace...”* The audience seemed to be enjoying the performative work description immensely with much laughter occurring throughout the presentation. ‘Nicole’ concluded by asking the audience if they had any questions — *“How do you do it?”* came from the crowd. There was a collective inhale of breath as Nicole answered, *“With a sharpie.”* And walked off.

Kylie announced there would be a short break in the program and invited everyone to the foyer where soup was being served by the next presenters, the Soup Collective.

After the break five of the **Soup Collective**’s six core members (Sandi Mackintosh, Jenny Masters, Lynn Lee, Victoria Vyvyan and Vickie Webb) came together near the collective’s exhibited work, *Painting ourselves into the landscape, 2023–24*, comprising 56 painting panels. Victoria Vyvyan described the collective, noting that it is comprised of older lesbians with the average age being 70. Fabric artist Jennifer Line, who could not be at the event, is the oldest core member at 91 years. Many Soup Collective members were in the audience. Since 2017 the women have shared and developed ideas, enjoyed soup and worked collectively with around 50 older lesbians to create and make art works/projects, in this, they are all members of the Soup Collective. Victoria suggested that it is difficult to make art when you’re older and also emerging as an artist — *“the voices of older women and lesbians are not being*

heard. It is not just about age, sexuality and gender but also how we respond to those things and the issues that come up...Process is central to what we do and so is humour, and lightheartedness. [We have] a light touch rather than a slap. Many members have been activists, and are activists still. Much of our work talks to the activism that we do... Some people believe they are not artists, that they can't paint, can't contribute to art or make things. They need gentle cajoling to become involved." Vickie Webb spoke of the making process — *"Nobody knows what the end result is going to be and then we get there."*

Painting ourselves into the landscape was discussed, observing that older lesbians are absent from depictions of the landscape. The work is made up of 56 panels, cut into triangles rather than squares that were painted in workshops in the North West of Tasmania and Hobart. Women came together not as individuals, but through conversation, as a collective to make the work. Some members have Dementia or are losing their sight or hearing. *"A community of people coming together and working together."* The collective paid their entry fee and submitted the painting to the Glover Prize. Careful attention was given to studying Glover's paintings — the characters, the colours, the figures — putting lesbians in those landscapes. Victoria, an eternal optimist, considered that the judges — *"couldn't walk past it."* They received a submission confirmation letter but that was all they heard. The collective then paid another \$50 entry fee for the Hadley's Art Prize, still optimistic. *"At least we received a rejection email that time"*. Victoria spoke of the Soup Collective's ideas for a future project on refusal and rejection. Who rejects who and what is rejected? How to live with rejection? Do you get depressed or move on?

During the Q&A an audience member asked — *"How does soup tie into your work?"* The answer — *"The group is older. We have all lost our teeth. [laughter] We eat a lot of soup... We first came together, meeting over soup and major decisions are often made over kitchen tables."*

Kylie invites the audience to grab some more soup, collect some earplugs and enjoy Reprillion Culture Club's performance.

Reprillion Culture Club took up their positions throughout the CAT building to present a special spatialised deconstructed version of the group. Seriously loud sounds reverberated through CAT and the audience was encouraged to wander amongst the ruckus. Alf Jackson, with his back turned to the audience was on drums in the Project Space. Julius Schwing, was on guitar upstairs in a studio. Jon Smeathers was on CDJS in the courtyard. Playing together but physically apart, members responded to each other's sounds that vibrated through the building. Frenetic and energetic, Reprillion Culture Club played to a dedicated audience.

[PROGRAM END]

Notes compiled by Jade Irvine and Kylie Johnson