

VCE ART: The Contemporary Framework with Andrew Atchison

Siobhan: Hi, I'm Siobhan, Gallery Coordinator at Gertrude Contemporary. I'm here today with Gertrude Studio Artist Andrew Atchison and we are going to take a look at his practice, particularly the body of work *Figure in the Round*, in relation to the VCE Art Contemporary Framework.

The Contemporary Framework can be used to interpret an artwork, irrespective of when it was created, by looking at it from current viewpoints. Artists have explored common ideas, concepts, questions and practices to examine their own context, and to describe their personal world and imagine their future through the artworks they make and view. The Contemporary Framework is used to examine art ideas and issues originating in the late twentieth century onwards and apply these ideas to artworks in a range of periods of time and cultures. Contemporary art and ideas can relate to the use of new media and technologies, and to diverse and alternative approaches to making and presenting art.

Andrew, can you please tell me about you and your practice?

Andrew Atchison: I have been practicing as an artist for about fifteen years and I have finished Honours. I am based in Melbourne and I also work out of Gertrude Contemporary studios. I studied at Monash and RMIT universities and at the moment I work in drawing, sculpture and photography. I also occasionally curate exhibitions and do some writing as well.

I am quite interested in working in public space. I think it is quite a dynamic context to work in because there are a lot of pre-existing conditions that are not in the gallery, which is generally designed to be a more or less blank space. I am particularly interested in outdoor public spaces, the spaces where a lot of people feel like they have ownership and that are supposed to be reflective of the publics that use them, and who those people are. I am particularly interested in statues, because they seem to make quite strong statements about their society that they're produced by.

S: There are two works in particular in your series of works, all titled *Figure in the Round* that I believe are particularly relevant to the Contemporary Framework. These works are *Figure in the Round (Statue)* from 2017 and *Figure in the Round (Redaction)* from 2019. Both of these works involve the temporary installation of armatures around public sculptures. The first features armatures that hold colourful acrylic discs and the second aluminium discs.

Let's start talking about *Statue (2017)* first which was installed around an existing sculpture of Charles La Trobe, the first Governor of Victoria, and sculpted by Melbourne artist Peter Corlett. Can you tell me why you were drawn to this sculpture, what you believe was the sculptor's original intent when creating the piece, and what messages and ideas your sculptural intervention is trying to convey?

A: Sure can. So, this work came about as part of a program that was run by the City of Melbourne called 'Test Sites', which gave some funding to temporary experimental public works. Originally, I wanted to use a different statue, but it wasn't within the section of the city that this program was hosting on. So, I looked around for alternatives and found this statue of

Charles LaTrobe out the front of the State Library of Victoria. There were a few different reasons that I was interested in it, and some of them are that it looks very traditional, (it looks like it could be quite old but it's actually only from 2010) so it's a bit of an anomaly. Also, the context that it is in, in front of the State Library of Victoria, is a really dynamic space. It's the space where a lot of rallies happen, where people gather socially, also - I don't know if this still happens - but on Sundays there used to be literal soap box sessions where people would get up and preach their ideas. So, it's quite loaded with different meanings for different people. What I wanted to do with this project for Test Sites was work with the very traditional form of statuary, the form of statuary that is really focused on realism and often is trying to create a heroic image of someone.

As an artist, I am really interested in visual language and how artworks communicate specific values or concepts through the choices that an artist has made, either formally or technically or materially. With statues in public spaces, the way I approach them is as texts. It's like you can read them like you read a written text. The visual language of the statue tells you a lot about the intent of the artist and also what that artist wants you to think about the subject of the statue, the person it's portraying. I did some reading up about it, and the statue came about through a commission by a group of people who are dedicated to the legacy of Charles LaTrobe, who is Victoria's first Governor. The sculptor who made it, Peter Corlett, is known for his realist portrait sculptures, so he was commissioned to make this work. I think the intent that he had - well, he was commissioned - so his intent was to fulfil the desires of the commissioners, so they wanted a representation of Charles Latrobe that placed him in a positive light. I think the artist must have been invested in that to a degree as well, because it takes quite a long time to create one of these statues, and if you weren't interested, I think it would be really difficult to do a good job of it. If you look at the posture of the statue, he is very upright, the costume is in his military costume, and he is also holding a small book like he is giving an address. I was really interested in how regimented this representation was. Military is all about order, standing and giving an address, and it also conjures up an audience, so I was quite interested in the way the statue has a point of view that seems to dictate where an audience would stand. I was interested in how that kind of object shapes public space, really, and then in intervening with that. So, what I did was I used sea stands, which are usually used in photography to hold lighting props and things like that, and instead I got these large acrylic discs cut of transparent different colours and I placed them around [the statue].

There were a few different ideas in the mix. I like to use a lot of colour in my work generally, I think it's because I like the way colour looks in general, but I'm also interested in it as a communication of things coming apart. With white light, when it's fed through a prism it kind of comes apart and becomes less solid, or when you see petrol in a puddle in the street you see that iridescence that is also doing a different kind of de-fraction. Symbolically in visual language, it's kind of like a breakdown of things using multi colours. I place them in different positions around the statue, and because they're round, they suggest lenses in a way, and so that idea of different or alternate perspectives to the frontal perspective that the statue has. So I'm working against it but also remaining quite abstract. Their interventions don't tell you exactly what they're trying to do, so it is still quite open to interpretation, and they're completely temporary so they don't affect the site or the statue at all. At the end of the one day that they're up I took them away and it was like nothing had ever happened. In terms of visual and sculptural language, it's kind of at the opposite end of the spectrum to the statues itself where the statue is bronze and stone and it's heavy and is aiming for permanence. These [Andrew's] artworks are modular, adjustable, and can be installed and removed with zero impact. I am quite interested in ephemeral vs permanent because they have different kinds of intentions or aspirations. Did that cover what you were thinking about, Siobhan?

S: Yes, and then the other thing I thought of is that the different coloured lenses could reflect different individuals and their perspective on the world, and how we often use colour to represent a particular idea. I know you and I spoke a bit before about 'seeing the world through rose coloured glasses' and what that means as well. So, yes!

The second artwork is *Redaction* (2019), and this is a similar sculptural intervention around *Courage* by William Eicholtz which stands outside the Fitzroy Town Hall. Why did this public sculpture appeal to you? What symbols or metaphors has the artist used? What is his original intent for the piece, and what ideas and messages are you trying to convey with your work around this?

A: I was interested in this sculpture because it's in a part of the city that I am generally around a lot and is part of a space that I was moving through regularly. I also applied for a residency that was in the same building as the Town Hall and I took that opportunity to think, 'well, maybe I can work with that sculpture', and that was part of my proposal for that residency - that I would develop work over six months, and the outcome of that residency would be some kind of work around that statue. The other thing that was interesting is that it is traditional, in a way, because it's made out of bronze and it is figural, and it is a realistic representation (the statue is what I'm talking about). On the other hand, it is a fictional character, so the statue is a young muscular man coming out of a lion costume. The symbolism is related to the cowardly lion from the Wizard of Oz, having courage and pride in your own identity.

The statue itself was put up in memory, or in dedication, to Ralph McLean who was Australia's first openly gay elected official, who was elected to the City of Fitzroy in 1982. He lived from 1957–2010. There is very few public markers or memorials to openly gay or queer people in public space, so I was quite interested in that as well. This statue is made by William Eicholtz and the symbols and metaphors that he used are drawn from fiction - I'm talking about the Wizard of Oz, and there are two reasons why he's chosen them. One is that in the story the cowardly lion gains the courage to be himself, and so that's related to the idea of being oneself and open about one's sexuality. If it's not accepted by a lot of people, even if it could be, like when Ralph McLean was alive, could have put him in danger and there would have been people aggressive about that, so there was bravery there. But also, the Wizard of Oz has a symbolism for gay men of a certain generation, because Judy Garland, who played Dorothy, and she was quite a gay icon. So, to a certain generation of gay men it's quite rich in symbolism and metaphor.

I was interested in a few different things. In one sense this was a representation of gay identity. It was put out there as quite a general representation, but actually it was quite specific. In the other sense, even though it was dedicated to one man, in the plaque for the statue it says that it represents the whole LGBTQIA+ community, which is a whole lot of diversity being represented, again, beneath a very specific set of symbols. I thought it was interesting that all that is being crammed in there because I don't see a lot of those identities reflected in the visual language and the metaphorical language. In this sense, so going back again to looking at the statue as a text - something that you can read messages from - I saw there was a text about a very specific subset of community, which is gay men of a certain generation and probably from a specific background as well. If you thought about the earlier discs as being coloured annotations around the statue, which is the text, this is more like creating space through blankness in the text. In my visual language I was thinking about a document that's been released and certain sensitive information will be blocked out and redacted so that it can't be read. I'm interested in how curious this makes us to know what is underneath all that black in the text. What they

become is visual silencers, so I was thinking 'How can I create those visual silencers within this 3-dimensional text. The aluminium is opaque rather than transparent, so rather than tinting something and presenting a point of view, they're blank. Rather than thinking about those blanknesses as nothing, I'm thinking about them as room for imagining what might be behind them, so then it's quite a liberating kind of idea. The statue is a very specifically articulated text, and this is creating space in that specificity by introducing blankness for the viewer to then imagine their own content.

S: Aluminium has this reflective quality as well, so I'm imagining people coming and viewing your intervention and being able to see themselves in your work very literally. That for me speaks quite nicely to creating more diversity in the people that the work is representing, rather than as you say, with Eicholtz' work, just one figure being represented.

A: Yeah, it's interesting, so with the aluminium it is reflective, but the way I treated it wasn't actually that high sheen. What you would have seen is almost a frosted mirror effect, so there would have been vague reflections of the people standing near them, but it wasn't mirror like. But I do think that vagueness is still interesting because again it's not a really sharp reflection that is definition, and it's a still vague thing, and then that's interesting to think about; looking at yourself but with your boundaries a little bit blurred out to leave a little bit more space for thinking or interpretation.

S: As we've spoken about, both of these works you've interacted with are in the public domain and they are public sculpture. How do you think the placement or location of these works impact on its meaning and value? I know we've touched on this a bit already but maybe we can flesh it out a bit more. In what ways do your interventions contemporise these works?

A: I think public space is really attractive to me because it's almost like a high-tension type of space. The idea of public space is that everyone owns it, and everyone has a stake in it, so that means that any choice of an artwork that goes into a public space has a huge number of stakeholders in terms of what it represents and what it supposedly communicates. I think the first question it throws up that's really interesting is '*What is the public and how is it defined?*'. I've read about public sculptures as being representations of what a society wants to see reflected back of itself. The selection of personage to be turned into these statues is quite significant because it represents the values of a society, what it thinks it is, or maybe what it aspires to be. But, in Melbourne for instance, most of the statues are colonial era statues and colonial figures, so that represents a very particular portion of what the public might be here, and also very particular politics and point of view of who should be represented. It's quite loaded, and I'm not really going into those specific issues so much, but I am really interested in the form of the statues - not so much the individuals portrayed, but how they're being portrayed in this medium.

The public space is interesting because it is where, I think, artists will get the most scrutiny of their work, and so it's quite challenging but also quite satisfying. You get people engaging with something you've done who otherwise might not go into galleries that often. Also, people feel like they want to come up and say something to you while you're doing something. With both these works, because they're temporary, I put them up and then stayed with them, so I would be sitting nearby. People would often come up and have a chat and be interested, and it's good to

interact with people who are not "art people" so to speak. In terms of these statues, the forms of the ones that I have interacted with are very traditional, like bronze - it's a technique that goes back thousands of years - and interestingly it's also a material that projects forward thousands of years. A bronze statue can last 2,000 years pretty easily. It's taking an image of our society now potentially 2,000 years into the future, so it's a really powerful statement.

Like we touched on earlier, working around them in a very ephemeral way is markedly contemporary and in contrast to that traditional way of having an ambition to make your artwork permanent or somehow like it has conquered nature and that it will be the no matter what happens. Whereas, doing something temporary is a gesture in the opposite direction. Not to say permanence isn't good, but I think that statues have a particular position and particular communication the way they've been made, and that gives me something to work against by using temporary forms around them or alongside them.

S: There's definitely interesting aspects to the way that contemporary artists are working in ephemeral ways, as you touched on, but the other thing that might be relevant here is the ways in which contemporary artists are working in the expanded fields, and relevant to your work as well. I'm thinking of the ways in which artists might activate car parks, parklands, their houses, unused buildings; spaces that traditionally are not reserved for the presentation of art (so the gallery space or the museum). What are your thoughts on the ways in which artists work in these ways and why are you personally drawn to it?

A: I think it's a really good point. In contemporary times there's a lot more awareness of the effect of the context on the reception of the artwork and how that builds into the meaning of the artwork. The way something is presented and where it is presented becomes part of the meaning and reception of that work, and so artists have started thinking 'Well, the gallery is a very specific kind of context'. Almost like working with a different set of ideas or a different set of materials, a different context is like another element or set of conditions that you can bring into your work. Like you say, activating unused, or otherwise used, spaces like a carpark or an abandoned building, can create a very different kind of art experience. For me, I am interested in the outdoor space because it has inherent challenges that I find interesting, that the gallery doesn't have or aims not to have. The gallery might aim to be a blank space whereas outdoor public spaces are quite rich and layered spaces, and there's different histories and different types of expressions, architecture or people that I am really interested in because it makes the artwork have to work a bit harder or makes the experience a bit more complex in a positive way.

S: You mentioned earlier that your works *Figure in the Round (Statue)* (2017) and *Figure in the Round (Redaction)* (2019) are both temporary installations. For you, what is the importance of documentation and being able to capture and share these works with both current and future audiences?

A: Sure. Documentation is really important because these works come and go quite quickly, they are only up for four or five hours at a time, so quite a limited audience of people will see them. Documentation allows me to continue to have conversations with people about the ideas in the work, but also to use those images to get further opportunities to make more in that series of works. I'll use images of previous iterations to propose doing iterations around other sculptures which is something that I want to do. There is an interesting catch-22 with

documenting sculptural works. The way the pieces are made is intended to involve moving around, and like you say, that idea of different points of view relative to where your body is in relation to the sculpture is quite important. I talked about the LaTrobe statue dictating a kind of point-of-view, and then the photographic lens dictates its own points of view which it then reframes into a flat still thing. So, there's a little bit of a conflict there, but you can also end up with really beautiful images of the works which down the track might end up becoming artworks in themselves or something along those lines.

Thank you so much for sharing all your thoughts and insights for this resource, Andrew.

A: You're welcome. Thank you for your questions, it's been nice to talk about.

Andrew Atchison is a current Gertrude Contemporary Studio Artist (2019-2023)
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