

Michael Bullock - Artist Statement

The installation was first presented in Hanoi, Vietnam where I undertook an Asialink residency

During the period of my residency, I developed the idea of making a school of fish from recycled car, bicycle and truck inner tubes. These fish were then inflated, and then suspended from the ceiling, to give the illusion of floating and moving through space. The installation was a direct response to some of my key experiences whilst in Hanoi. The city of Hanoi is abuzz with activity on the roads, with the older and slower bicycles and new Honda Dream motorbikes competing for any open spaces within the traffic. This is stark contrast to Australia's well ordered, car friendly, and evenly paced roads. It is a difference that many visitors to Hanoi immediately notice and are perhaps both amused by and terrified of. I recognised the similarity of this motion of traffic to being underwater, while schools of fish glide past, adjusting and changing in form organically and holistically to the physical obstacles that lie ahead. Fish have symbolic and practical value in every culture, in the Vietnamese culture, also of luck and fertility.

The imagery of the inflatable fish was also necessitated by chance encounters. This was the spectacle of people walking the streets selling clusters of inflatable toys, carried on poles. The toys would bob ponderously because of the air, reflecting also the rhythm of walking. These toys were mostly animals, dogs, fish and birds. They became cheap, plastic counterparts to the just as ubiquitous real thing.

The choice of rubber, and particularly, inner tubes as a material was well founded. On most street corners in Hanoi, simple arrangements of hand and foot pumps and shallow basins of water can be found. These are the tools of trade in repairing punctures for these bicycles and motorbikes, as well as supplying air for their tyres. It is not a lucrative business, as one would imagine for a trade in air, although there is always demand for the service. The people of Vietnam, for social and economic reasons have famously developed a dedicated culture of recycling and repair. There is nothing of the culture of waste that comes easily for Australians and other Western countries. Rubber is a material, which illustrates this philosophy perfectly, in it's recycled state, rubber has many diverse purposes, used for the soles of shoes, buckets, washers and bags or as a substitute for rope. Rubber becomes a material, which is in one's sight constantly, especially when living close to a street that solely specialises in the resale of this commodity.

Vietnam has a very hands-on culture, where the necessity of small scale manufacturing of diverse endeavours can be seen everywhere in close proximity. A shoe-maker may live next to a book-binder, next to a carpenter etc. This is very different to Australia, where the artist can sometimes feel as though an engagement with the making of objects and handiwork is lost from daily experience. Objects and their manufacture remain mysterious. Manufacturing is done overseas for low costs, or in isolated industrial zones, far away from our homes.

The installation reflects one process of artistic investigation. It is one very simply done at street level, without access to language, where observations are made of different lives.

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