

Surge... 1... 2...3...It's

Glen Barkley

Exhibition Catalogue Essay 1997

SURGE...1...2...3...IT'S... Glenn Barkely

The act of train travel can sometimes turn whole communities into both a contextual and aesthetic abstraction. In the Illawarra there is a tendency to compartmentalise areas to fit certain cultural stereotypes. Wollongong acts as a central point and the surrounding areas signify different social strata. Port Kembla becomes a working class, blue collar utopia, Berry a quaint yuppified B&B day trippers paradise and the end of the line Nowra signifies exactly that, the end of the line. Train travel, by creating these demarcations, conveniently ignores the complexities and realities of every stop on the way.

The artists in *Surge* invoke the essence of time and movement and the movement from one cultural zone to another. They are reflective of an arts community that is creating work on its own terms not those placed on it by other larger metropolitan areas. They reflect a diversity in practice, educational background, experience and ideas. Their placement as artists in different sections of the physical environment denies the crisp compartments as that are offered in the train journey.

Traditionally, the Illawarra has been a place of artists in transit, a place that was visited from early in the nineteenth century but not lived in, only recently has there been an arts community and a localised arts history. Because of this there is a need for regional artists to closely analyse where their work is to be placed within their region. Outside the centre, within a regional space, the need to explain and understand becomes more critical. This need has traditionally manifested itself in work that pays attention to it's geographical position through representations of the landscape in either representational or abstract terms. Only recently have artists and art writers begun to turn their gaze inward, to the political, social and cultural landscape.

The most prevalent and visible Illawarra artists, most commonly painters and sculptors working in a quasi-modernist idiom, have had time to set ground rules about acceptable practice for artists in the Illawarra and it

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appears that the great experiment may have failed. Now is not the time for big gestures and closed minds, now is not the time for historical convention. Now is the time for people to be confused, and talk about that confusion, not suppress it through the timidity of modernism a condition long dead. The artists in *Surge* offer a glimpse of something that they don't understand themselves. The visual arts needs to catch up with the energy and passion of the local music scene, artists need to adapt their energy and DIY aesthetic.

The work in *Surge* shows us the tension of a place in flux. This true reflection of the post-modern condition is due to a melange effect that is starting to sweep the town with people from outside the region moving in and locals moving outward and starting to ask stupid questions that are making a lot of sense, or should have been asked long ago. Are we being let down? Why doesn't anyone like us? Should we really care? Will I be able to get a job? Where is the cheapest place to buy beer? Why isn't anyone taking notice of what we're trying to say and do? Is this place totally fucked? Patrick Hobbs, Gabrielle Bates, Tania Mastroianni and Pedro Altuna as contemporary artists and members of the Illawarra community are trying to give us answers to these questions. Although they may fall short and the ambiguities of the work may leave some scratching their heads in wonderment, and perhaps even anger, *Surge* reflects a town going through a steep growth period. They are showing us that there is no true representation visually of the Illawarra, and multiplicity of viewpoints, media and ideas is reflective of the diversity of the community.

1...

Pedro Altuna is on a train. He is not looking at the landscape he is looking at the place where the rail line cuts through it. He is looking at the point where the wheel hits the track, he is looking at the junction boxes, he is avoiding the glances of his fellow travellers, he is reaching the city, he is going to the mall, the public space where the suburbs touch the outside world, he is going to turn the world on its head, he is giving you his lounge room, he is discovering possibilities, he is exploiting the old as much as he can, He is digital, analog and all stations between. Things are being constructed the work is reflecting the forgotten, the refuse, the underbelly and fear of contemporary meeting places. He is disorientated. He cannot get a grip, things are moving too fast, people are looking at him. His head is in a bitter way. He is sceptical. There will be no buying into the market. He is moving. He is disorientated. He is inaudible.

2...

Patrick Hobbs and Gabrielle Bates chop the landscape into bits. They make a film, they box it in, they build a cylinder. They don't really love the landscape they just protect what's theirs. They impose their rules on

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something that they will never contain. It's a portrait of displacement where they are aliens, debauched techno Von Guerard's and tongue in cheek, and perhaps unintentionally, they give an ironic wink back to their colonial counter parts. It is taking tourism's selling point, our regional lifeline, nature, and turning it into a place of dread and anxiety were your merely impose, not merge. This is no great eco-statement, just telling it how it is.

People are chopping down trees to maintain their views. Introduced species walk over the land ensuring that this will be a landscape that will always be tainted, never whole again. Man kind encroaches on this landscape like lantana rapidly making it's way down the coast. Now is not the time for a pretty picture, a postcard available from your local Wilderness shop. The landscape isn't pretty. It's scary. It's a place were people get lost, where people disappear, its were young junkies from town take their stolen cars and burn them or throw them over cliffs. Hobbs and Bates are giving us the new picturesque and it's both disturbed and disturbing.

3...

Tania is dancing around. She is shimmying in the light. She is letting us partake in the pleasures of vice, the risque, the burlesque. Tania is peering up the skirt of a town obsessed with sex, it's in the paper again. Its a poor kid molested by our former Lord Mayor. Sexual ambiguity is mixed with tension. We don't know who to trust, we just didn't know, we heard but surely not? How could we have been so foolish?

Using means that people will find confronting, she is upsetting the people that may have liked her paintings better. She is placing herself at the centre of our vision. She is forcing us to look at her, she is making us turn away, she is making us look again. She is the multicultural woman. She is sultry. She is scared, and showing us sex in the everyday.

IT'S...

The artist is dizzy with trying to come to grips with new technologies and old concerns and old technologies and new concerns. They are anxious and display their work to a regional audience keen for the stench of painting. They are worried about what will happen to them. They are trying to place their work in a continuum of practice and a history they find hard to understand. They are worried about what they will do next. They are wondering if their physical location is really that important to the work itself.

Their town is derided, its "Worse than Wollongong". It's Norman Gunston, it's Auntie Jack, it's Frank Arkell saying the word 'wonderful' 72 times in two minutes, it's Stuart Littlemore lambasting the local press, it's the local press lambasting Stuart Littlemore, it's "Greetings from Wollongong" still unseen in the place where it was made, it's about not knowing your worth,

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it's about cultural economics. It's Tony Bevan taking homeless kids in the Shark Patrol plane, it's the new boss that's the same as the old boss, it's about being parochial, it's about personal politics on an internal combustion scale, it's being smug, it's...

...it's going to see Fugg, it's someone who is like a spectre who brings good cheer when you see them, it's having a tiny bit of sway, it's putting your friends on the door, it's Glenn Humphries, it's disco dancing with an actor, a singer and a painter drinking homebrew waiting for the dawn at North beach, it's a city of diversity. It's people coming and going, leaving and returning, it's knowing if you go to Frenchies there will always be someone there you can talk to, it's discovering the most unexpected things about people, it's sparkies, chippies, miners and the working class, it's the water catchment area, it's hang gliders and old poets, it's the ex-biker that runs the rehearsal rooms, it's...

...it's artist's starting to come to grips with the complexities of a community that is , like all communities, impossible to define with any version of house style. Surge revels in confusion while accepting the good and the bad. It's moving and changing styles to suit the aim. Surge is giving viewers a version of regional aesthetics that they'll find difficult. It's educating people to what's out there. It's...

...it's Pedro opening a window and propping it open with a pool cue as we listen to punk rock and talk about our town.