

Fire arrows

“He utterly honored his sorrow, gave into it with such deep and boundless weeping that it seemed as I stood there that he was the bravest man I had ever known.”



In her short story ‘The Uncle’, written sometime in the 1970’s, Kathleen Collins depicts a man who devotes his life to the act of weeping in bed all day and night. The existence of his wife and his three children do not change his motivation - he does not quit crying for any sake; neither the call of duty or the responsibility to endure life. After his death his niece, who narrates the story, enters his room and contemplates the image of his large old-fashioned four-poster bed that appears to her a stately monument to his life.



In theatre or film, the viewer is brought to tears as a kind of catharsis, for the purpose of leading them to a reconnection to being human.



Between his crying and the turn of night to day I wonder whether the uncle had time to dream.

Or did the dreams fill his waking life with such terror and futility that he could only cry in his conscious hours?

Poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) remained actively critical of traditional styles of theatre that used conventions to create catharsis and identification with characters, arguing that it appeared rather than challenged viewers to think critically (they could go home and return to work without changing anything about their lives, or indeed go further and challenge social injustices or the status quo).

Did Brecht ever see someone cry hard enough onstage to break the fourth wall?

Obsession can be defined as an idea or thought that constantly preoccupies or intrudes on one’s mind, much like waking up at 4am with a strong heartbeat, gripped with a crushing anxiety of a returning thought from the day.



Rigour is different to obsession as it is defined as the quality of being extremely thorough and careful: rigour is taking control of a situation or concept by applying severity or strictness to oneself or one’s actions. But it can also be used to describe external conditions that are harsh and demanding - and intrusive - such as the weather.

Obsession does not necessarily go away with understanding, it is a state of agitation that can exist with or without internal or external resolution. Some obsessions are brief and some lifelong. They are disturbing and interfering and sometimes wonderful.

 Lara Chamas work 'PA4974071' is the passport number that the artist cuts into her arm on a video recording, which restages her experience of being an Arab Muslim person detained in Israel at the airport. The act of self-mutilation by cutting this specific sequence of identifying numbers references other numbers and the arbitrary systems of government classification that aim to categorise and hold people in states of detention. Chamas chose to restage this work rather than present a new work for this exhibition due to the surge in social media posting and media attention of the Palestinian crisis in May 2021.



In institutions rigour is enforced over obsession, with the aim of eventually controlling or replacing it. For example in art schools in Australia, the prevailing attitude is to deal with student's obsessions through the application of rigour (also known as 'artist's practice'). Through the enlightenment of 3 or 4 years of dedicated study of a medium or area of interest, an artist graduates to turn study into practice, to 'emerge' as an artist practitioner in the professional field.

Their recurring actions with materials or through performances can be initially deemed as somewhat banal and are criticised until they are reshaped from a cruder form into comprehension: the artist is able to now articulate what they do and why they do it (and the logic is, do it better).

This work references the mental health of people in the intermediate state of detention who use self-harm as protest. In this case the artist demonstrates the extent of the encroachment of outside structures onto themselves: the cutting of abstract symbols onto the skin makes a reality out of the essentialisation of a subject. The artist's action questions how deeply an imposed or arbitrary identity permeates, and then denies access to civic freedoms and self-hood.

Twenty years on from the "Tampa affair" that contrived the harsh detainment of asylum seekers offshore from Australia and continues to deny people their human rights, and at the inability of opportunity for so many Afghan citizens to seek refuge in the West from newly-reinstated Taliban rule, 'PA4974071' remains a sadly pertinent and necessary work in the world.

For many years Anita Cummins collected blister packs and cardboard boxes of their prescription medication. The ritual aspects of taking medication and going to therapy are associated with mental and chronic illness, subjects that must regulate their behaviour (alone) to keep up with everyone else. Cummins takes this seeming burden as an opportunity for connection and conversation, recording the daily intake of medication and then re-imagining this situation physically through the material collection and collation of impersonal objects, making this individual experience into something else. The artist overcomes the expectation of self-care and self-regulation (an expectation of emotional rigour) through obsessive collecting and reconfiguring.



In a later email, Cummins explains that their work is not obsessive, but that the act of collecting could be described as a gentle or even idle. An idle manner of collecting undermines that every artistic action is done with intent and calculation. The attempt to contain a number of varying practices into the binary of 'rigour' and 'obsession' is undermined when speaking and fact-checking with the artists in the exhibition.



The works in this exhibition make from the conditions of bureaucratic, medical and doctrinal rigour undermine the classification and compartmentalization of a subject through these systems. The actions of these artists plays out in the Bundoora Homestead. Built on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung people it is a former home, a convalescent farm for returned war veterans and then a mental repatriation hospital (decommissioned in 1993).

The artists' references to oppressive systems intersect with the building's former industries, to form a maze for the viewer to move through. This clash of contexts is made present with Kat Botten's work that obscures the building's windows with tracing paper and fabric neck ties. This mish-mash of outside history plays back onto the viewer in a building that cannot be looked out of easily but confronts its own structures and history lines.

🥁🥁📖 Nunzio Madden is another artist who demonstrates obsessive and methodical daily practices, in this exhibition through the display of a kind of sampler of wood finishing techniques (which originally evolved from a dedication to finishing personal percussion drum kits).

Madden has previously made thin sheets of small-sized paper through the collection, tearing and cutting of paper materials from the bible and from their conversion therapy journals. This loaded material is unrecognisable in its new form as blank sheets, but this is not to say the paper is uniform, as every page comprises different sections (different words) and has a unique texture. This texture can be read upon the surface although not read through written language: the work is opposite to its confessional, traumatic and doctrinal origins. Care is taken through acts of desecration and new entities are formed. These forms comprise the backgrounds on which the exhibition catalogue is now published onto.



The curator of 4am flaming arrows Jemi Gale spent time with each artist in the exhibition, encouraging them to contribute creatively in the way that they saw fit: by responding to the architecture of the Homestead, reconfiguring past work or supporting new work. She writes to me about the exhibition (June, 2021):

“In an ideal world Sarah (Brasier)’s work would be a performance of flaming arrows being shot from the balcony but this idea may be worked into something else for the show.”

The excitement and unwavering support for the imagination of the artists is evident in the consideration of this somewhat unrealistic act taking place.

The first flaming arrows were designed for the earliest use of weaponised gunpowder. Made in China in the 9th century, their name is huǒjiàn (火箭) translating literally to ‘fire arrow’, the first form of the modern firearm. Some athletes have spent the majority of their lives training for the current “2020” Olympics, where archery is one recognised form of sport. Unlike war and sport that fit into the logics of progress and domination in historic and contemporary society, an arrow shot off a balcony has a different purpose. In this case, the conventional aim of the archer to directly hit a target (athletic rigour) would be undermined by the random trajectory of fire, soaring through the air as it fell. The artists in this exhibition are committed to shooting flaming arrows into the air - acts that are just as valuable as they are unnecessary.