

Sentimental Education

Justin Trendall's distinctive body of work gives rise to speculation about the circulation of knowledge in the modern world. Printed on an array of fabrics and paper, his ornamental designs interweave the names of the historically prominent figures, family members, places and colleagues that constitute the warp and weft of his life. Trendall's subject is the "shape of certain ideas" and the manner in which the glitches and gaps in their dissemination from specialist field to popular understanding make possible changes for the better.

Many of his works have a luxurious and ceremonial quality which evokes historical and contemporary cultures other than our own. These are fictional and actual worlds in which textiles are esteemed for their ritualistic and economic as well as their utilitarian functions. At first glance, his imagery appears to deploy the flatness and cohesion of a chart or a tablet. On closer inspection, comparison with theatrical machinery seems more apt due to the interplay between the negative spaces in these floating façades and their dense strands of spidery lines. This spatial ambiguity invites conjecture about the linkages between historical overview and a more immediate sense of place. The tactility of the work which can appear like vellum or stone also offsets the 'headiness' of Trendall's project.

The graphics which order his day-to-day life as friend, father, partner and teacher at Sydney College of the Arts, however, are much more playful. At his exhibitions, the denizens of the Sydney art scene scan his work to check that they have not been left out and who they are positioned next to. Trendall's low tech 'spirograph-style' diagrams drawn using the Freehand program are known to be ongoing and reflective of the zeitgeist. His sense of mischief is also expressed through topsy turvy arrangements of legendary and quotidian individuals who populate the realms of both high and low culture.

Trendall's intellectual template owes much to the ordering and improving aspirations of the Enlightenment. Despite last century's war and genocide of unprecedented scale and the attendant philosophical shifts, he remains attuned to how the Enlightenment's methodologies underpin Western society. Trendall is content in his skin. He relishes the guise of middle aged, curious, male academic. The grandness sticks and the visionary projects keep coming. Although his exhibition CV is a relatively recent development, the dreams have been there from the beginning. As Trendall progressed through the art program at Applecross High School and then art school at WAIT, Western Australian Institute of Technology, later known as Curtin University, his impetus was a desire to travel and a thirst for ideas.

Initially trained in painting and printmaking, it was only when Trendall returned to Sydney College of the Arts in 1994 and incorporated architectural history into his prodigious reading that his unique style emerged. He was drawn to architectural history because he felt that its narratives were much more founded in experiences of locality and community than those of fine arts. As someone compelled to postulate about how the workings of society can be improved, he had a need for the groundedness as much as the flights of fancy that architectural history provided. At this time, Trendall's engagement with the discourses of printmaking can also be interpreted as a reaction to the commercialised, nationalistic readings that encroach on painting.

First captivated by modernist giants such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, Trendall has evolved a pantheon of heroes. They include Venetian architect and printmaker, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, concrete poet Bob Dylan, and literary exemplar Gustave Flaubert, author of *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869). Alongside his insistence on heroes and heroines, is a democratising impulse in his work. His work is not about flashy displays of cleverness. Joseph Beuys, Rosa Luxemburg, Tracey Emin and Coco Chanel must content themselves with the shores of Lucky Bay on the Swan River and then as young Justin grows up and gets a car, Leighton, Cottesloe and Scarborough Beaches. The Western Australian landscape and his remembrances sustain an ongoing quest for parallels between his architectural metaphors and the coastline of his youth. His investigation of an artist's formation in a city as isolated as Perth must take into account the swells and the sunsets of the Indian Ocean.

Globalisation has fuelled the question of how to negotiate the power relations between the centre and the periphery of the art world. Often framed in monumental and pessimistic terms, it is being played out in increasingly nuanced and specific ways. Trendall's work reminds us that to resist the forces of globalisation, we should be students of the past as well as predictors of the future. Modernism's dismissal of competing movements and systems comes into sharper focus when we appreciate it as a chapter in the long history of the global transmission of ideas. History teaches us that artists and other public intellectuals are deluding themselves if they imagine they stand apart from society and its institutions. For Trendall, their ideas will only gain traction, attaining a structural rather than a fleeting presence, if they are aesthetically charged, arise out of a thorough understanding of the particularities of one's cultural conditions, and are personally felt.

Wallal to Israelite Bay opens at the end of a year in which Trendall's son has headed overseas indefinitely. Although Julien and his parents will keep in touch via email, unlike Trendall and his family all those years ago, he recognises that his son's ties to the past are unraveling. In entitling this exhibition *Wallal to Israelite Bay*, a coastal section included in state-wide weather reports, Trendall is affirming, perhaps sentimentally, that the underlying patterns of weather, family and shared histories have never felt stronger.

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