

# STUART ELLIOTT

FREMANTLE 1988



CITY OF FREMANTLE ART COLLECTION GALLERY

FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE | 27 JULY – 14 SEPTEMBER 2019

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Fakeology requires a theory, at least a working description, of its relationship to the community. A 'fake' object may, nonetheless, be an 'authentic' archeological representation of elements in culture and communal memory, as they reappear in everyday experience.<sup>1</sup>

This exhibition assembles a group of artworks produced in the 1980s by senior WA artist Stuart Elliott. They collectively attest to the artist's oeuvre and unique making strategy dubbed 'fakeology', which applies to making museological hybrids; a blend of historical references and personal psychohistory coupled with an imaginative investigation of Western Australian material culture. Fabricating his own cultural shrines and totems, Elliott fulfills what he might see as a counterpoint to a state of 'amnesic dissidence' in WA. Elliott's contrived artefacts are set within museum-like containments, vitrines, cabinets and tables, presented as 'real' artefacts, intricately constructed, richly painted, upbeat, playful and brimful of analogous associations that smolder with a 'dark energy'.

Selected in this exhibition is *Fremantle 1988*, a centerpiece of Elliott's early career and the largest of his works in the form of a religious icon, which is set alongside works from his *Red Boat* exhibition.<sup>2</sup> The work is an imposing multi-levelled departmentalized cabinet of sinister 'residues' of a hierarchy of sanitised cultural 'trophy' and memorabilia. A lower section marks the arrival of the 'invasion fleet' set upon a future white suburban sea, a statement of Fremantle's colonial foundations of possession and exploitation.<sup>3</sup> From the upper department an aircraft carrier launches a threatening aircraft from its flight deck, while a freighter prepares to disgorge its containerised cargo. A nuclear submarine and a fishing boat from a bygone age accompany a passenger liner berthing its tourist trade, the economic lifeblood of a port city and a vessel supporting the live animal trade all have presence in the gothic tableaux. More insidious might be the presence of colonial mementoes in the form of pioneer portraits paired with gentrified holiday villas on Rottneest and a lofty masonic lodge set within a menacing landscape of saw-tooth factory roofs.

This weight of evidence above ground is underpinned by hidden truth in the shadows of the subfloor of the cabinet. The basement conceals the existence of

debased convicts, salt effected forests and eroded landscapes, wrecked cars and the maligned figure of Punch, a reference to Elliott himself and his puppet theatre days. Of particular significance and hidden within the centre of the cabinet, are totems of conquest and resistance; the axe, musket and spear thrower (Woomera). The axe carries the mark of the Union Jack and the Woomera is readied for war, embellished with distinctive WWI German lozenge camouflage, suggesting technological comparisons and reference to future, wider conflicts for Aboriginal people. This geometric patterning is also applied prominently to the flight decks of *Red Boat* and *Wheeled Red Boat*, linking the ways of war with child's play. Placed on a shelf in the exhibition are samples of Elliott's beached 'Submarina' of obsolete Nukes and Dreadnoughts from long forgotten shipyards set ironically against painted souvenirs of the new oceans menace of 'plastic bergs'. Occupying the table space in the exhibition is an open chest of votive 'peace' offerings of duplicate Red Boats, a material parable, redolent of the 'death star' politics of the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson that regularly berthed at Fremantle in the 1980s.

Elliott's practice is remarkable for its economy of making do, using repurposed materials to make objects, primarily of wood, cotton, steel and cardboard. Art is primarily a liberating material practice about making, an ethos influenced by Elliott's time at Claremont Art School and working life at Spare Parts Puppet Theatre, where he was involved in set production and puppet making. Elliott was profoundly impressed by the artifice and cunning diligence of theatre craft. His artistic development in the early days was strongly affected by the dystopian futures pictured in science fiction literature of Isaac Asimov and Philip K. Dick, an influence present in all his work and would fully be played out decades later in his studio photography and animated video collaboration *Underpass Motel*.<sup>4</sup> Primarily for Elliott, witnessing the assemblages of Eduardo Paolozzi, particularly *Lost Kingdom of Mankind*, at the Museum of Mankind in London and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century toy manufacture at Pollock's Toy Museum, had a pivotal and lasting impact on his making.<sup>5</sup>

**Curated by André Lipscombe**

- 1 Dr. David Bromfield, *Fakeology – The Work of Stuart Elliott 1964 - 2004*, Brown Art Consultants, Perth, 2004, p 74
- 2 The *Red Boat* exhibition of objects and images by Stuart Elliott was exhibited at The Nolan Room, Undercroft Gallery UWA, 12 May – 9 June, 1988.
- 3 The work was originally commissioned by Spare Parts Puppet Theatre to mark 200 years of Australian settlement in 1988 and subsequently donated to the City of Fremantle Art Collection in 2018.
- 4 Philip K. Dick Sci-Fi author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, 1968 was remade by Ridley Scott as a movie, *Blade Runner* in 1982. *Underpass Motel* was a major installation of objects, painting and animated narratives by Stuart Elliott, Peter Dailey, Amanda Williams, Graham Taylor, Patrizia Tonello, Ben Jones, Si Hummerston and Richard Heath at Turner Galleries, Perth in 2009
- 5 Paolozzi composed interpretive vitrines of disparate things including his own work – a sensibility to disgorge and digest a range of anthropological cultural items at the same time.

# ON CABINETS

The name for an archived specimen against which others are classified is a Holotype. Upon bagging a female *Dorcopsis beccarii* in Port Moresby, New Guinea in 1875, Macleay expeditioners realised that the condemned marsupial had so far escaped zoological notice. She transcended to become M383—the *Dorcopsis beccarii* holotype, offed, stuffed, mounted, stored in the dark, with one foot and 40% of her fur missing—the essence of her kind<sup>1</sup>. If we nurse an instinct to view the natural world as unshaped by reason, tangled and blind, the enterprise of naming and archiving it becomes a likely and useful reply. Historically, we have been enthusiastic to fill our cabinets: to arrest, arrange, preserve, label and modishly display curiosities which are destined to off-gas and concern restorers into perpetuity.

The appeal of boxing and labelling things belies the common intuition that humanity is still surfing the frontier of discovery; that the world is yet primal and raw; that it is early and not late. In 1979, Dylan bleated that *man gave names to all the animals in the beginning*. To continue enshrining curiosities is to protract the writing of our creation myth, though the hour is late, as we learn from the shadowy, stratified narratives of Stuart Elliott's *ersatzkammeren*.

Objects are placed in cabinets to tell stories. Placing and grouping are acts of authorship, generating history, which is to say, truth for humans. This is possible whether the specimens are uncontaminated, humidity-controlled artefacts or Styrofoam reproductions. In the Museo Civico di Storia Naturale of Milan, there is a terrarium depicting an Arctic idyll. Seabirds hover over a raft of fabulously turquoise pack ice, upon which a doe-eyed taxidermied walrus regards a duel between narwhals. The diorama's plausibility matters little. Its tale of awe, beauty and wilderness resounds.

What's more, the cabinet beguiles us to enhance its contents. Imagine a desiccated bullfrog on a velvet pedestal, glazed in a sarcophagus of bright enamel paint, which when first applied matched the hue of its hide, and now persists in its brilliance despite the browning beneath. In old Bologna, the naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi installed his thorny blowfish and crocodiles into a fleet of vitrines. Knowing they would deteriorate, he recorded their fresh colours in woodcut prints, which today rest beside each specimen, equally warped and faded. Cabineted narratives are not constituted by the purity or authenticity of the objects inside, but by the fact of their enclosure. Though we are “untroubled by the yawning gap between word and thing”<sup>2</sup> the ideas that play out in cabinets are of unparalleled authority and consequence to our cultural and natural histories.

**Dr. Sheridan Hart, artist and writer**



Image: Stuart Elliott in his studio with USS Bludgeon

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This exhibition would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of Stuart Elliott who provided conservation assistance, generous and timely advice in respect to research and help in selection and preparation of loans. Thank you to Dr. Sheridan Hart for her accompanying floor sheet essay, *On Cabinets*, Steven Alyian for audio engineering and especially Tony Jones OAM for kindly opening the exhibition. Stuart Elliott is represented by Turner Galleries.

- <sup>1</sup> Stanbury, P. J. “Type Specimens in the Macleay Museum.” *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* 93, no. 416 (1968): 462-463.
- <sup>2</sup> Daston, Lorraine. “Type Specimens and Scientific Memory.” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (2004): 153-82.

# STUART ELLIOTT BIOGRAPHY

Stuart Elliott was born the youngest of four children in Midland Junction in 1953. His family settled briefly in Fremantle before moving permanently to a rural property in Gooseberry Hill in 1959. The move from the port town was primarily undertaken to assist in Elliott's recuperation from polio and recurring asthma. Elliott's childhood years in Gooseberry Hill were spent freely exploring abandoned quarries and the natural play spaces in the bush. Having missed periods of schooling through illness and not drawn to academia, Elliott left Kalamunda High School at fifteen and embarked on an adolescence defined by the 'wild car' behavior of the era. He had a number of jobs after high school before completing an apprenticeship in Electrical Fitting and worked in a range of industrial settings in the Pilbara and Northern Territory. It was at this time that the newly elected Whitlam Labor Government ended conscription to Vietnam and abolished tertiary education fees, policy decisions which would ultimately alter Elliott's life path.

Other than an experience working with artist Nola Farman in 1972, Elliott had no formal art education after primary school, although he always made art in his own time and enjoyed painting, drawing, photography and construction. A chance encounter with an old friend with similar art interests motivated Elliott to apply to Claremont Art School. It was here that artist and lecturer Tony Jones proved to be an encouraging and supportive influence for the fledging artist. Armed with Claremont's Diploma, Elliott would subsequently graduate from WAIT two years later with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in sculpture. At this time he coined the term 'fakeology' to describe an emerging approach to art making and established a studio in Wellman Street, Northbridge with university classmates Terri Bird and Jon Tarry.

While based in Northbridge, Elliott worked in Fremantle for several years for Spare Parts Puppet Theatre (SPPT) making puppets and building sets with the late Beverley Campbell Jackson. It was at SPPT that Elliott experienced first hand the transformative artistic and socio-political potential of puppet theatre and sampled major performances such as Nigel Triffitt's *Momma's Little Horror Show* at Melbourne's Last Laugh Theatre and Nigel Trantor's dark expressionist solo performances at the Adelaide Puppet Festival. Unfortunately for Elliott, opportunities to participate in adult puppet theatre in Perth were few and the low wages at SPPT unsustainable. However the direct influence of SPPT making experiences would appear in Elliott's emerging practice in *Icons* 1983 at Praxis and

later *The Study* 1984, first shown at Quentin Gallery, Perth then selected for the *First Australian Sculpture Triennial* at the NGV in 1984. Both *The Study* and *Icons* involved creating a 'static theatre' of installations consisting of hundreds of separate components to create a fictional and ambiguous synthesis of multiple cultural histories.

Leaving SPPT after several years to help senior artist Hans Arkeveld complete several carved wall commissions, Elliott worked in the Kimberley, subsequently gaining an invitation to work with the emergent Broome Community Arts Centre. While maintaining a practice in the North West, Elliott received a grant from the WA Department for the Arts, enabling him to travel and work internationally for 6 months in 1987. Significantly, Elliott gained further formative experiences seeing notable art and museum collections in America and Europe, in particular ethnographic, military and toy museums. It was overseas that Elliott came face to face with the wartime art of Otto Dix and the contemporary making strategies of artists Eduardo Paolozzi, Bruce Connor and Canadian painter Alex Colville.

Subsequent to his return from overseas, SPPT commissioned Elliott to produce a major sculptural work about Fremantle funded by a Commonwealth grant from the Australian Bicentennial Authority. Elliott would be intensely focused for many months producing *Fremantle* 1988, one of the important works of his early career. This large piece is framed by architectural references and presents a multi-tiered cabinet of sinister cultural readings of Fremantle's history since the arrival of Europeans. The work was installed prominently in the lobby of SPPT for thirty years before its donation to the City of Fremantle in 2018.

Stuart Elliott is an important senior WA artist, a respected lecturer and writer who has exhibited locally and internationally. He has been a recipient of numerous awards and grants, and has been commissioned to produce work in a range of public, private and corporate settings since 1985. His sculpture and painting is held in numerous public and private collections in Australia and overseas including AGWA, Bankwest, Janet Holmes à Court Collection, L&L Horn Collection, Kerry Stokes Collection, Trevor Eastman Collection, Sanyi Museum Taiwan, USST Shanghai China, Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University and University of WA.

Dr. David Bromfield wrote and published an illustrated monograph (*Fakeology*) on Stuart Elliott's work in 2004.



# CHECKLIST

All artworks are by Stuart Elliott and from the City of Fremantle Art Collection or as otherwise stated and listed chronologically by date.

Artworks from the Artist's Collection are for sale. Please see reception for details.

**1. Portrait of a Sailor 1984**

acrylic paint, acrylic lacquer on cotton and board, steel chain, steel and wood frame  
83 x 37.5 x 5cm  
Collection of the artist

**2. Twelve Metre Dreadnought 1984**

wood, string, acrylic paint  
35 x 64 x 13cm  
Collection of the artist

**3. Quandary: Red Boat & Possible Salvage 1987**

acrylic paint on plywood  
121 x 95 x 7.5cm  
Collection of the artist

**4. Fremantle 1988**

wood, acrylic paint, cardboard, steel, china, sisal  
261 x 210 x 84cm  
Commissioned by Spare Parts Puppet Theatre 1988  
Donated to City of Fremantle 2018  
City of Fremantle Art Collection no. 1516

**5. The Red Boat 1988**

wood, acrylic paint  
21 x 80 x 35cm  
Collection of the artist

**6. Wheeled Red Boat 1988**

wood, acrylic paint, steel, sisal  
41 x 66 x 17cm  
Collection of the artist

**7. Votive Red Boats 1988**

wood, steel, acrylic paint  
13.5 x 85 x 20.8cm  
Collection of the artist

**8. Penultimate Dreadnought 1988**

wood, steel, acrylic paint  
28 x 115 x 16cm  
Collection of the artist

**9. Black Nuke 1988**

wood, steel, acrylic paint  
25 x 90 x 24cm  
Collection of the artist

**10. Small Nukes 1988**

wood, acrylic paint  
variable dimensions  
Collection of the artist

**11. USS Bludgeon 1988**

wood, steel, acrylic paint  
13 x 67 x 13.5cm  
Collection of the artist

**12. Stone Boat 2006**

Stoneware brick clay, acrylic paint, plywood  
10 x 36.5 x 5.8cm  
Collection of the artist

**13. Paint Berg 1 2019**

oil paint board  
8 x 10 x 2.5cm  
Collection of the artist

**14. Paint Berg 2 2019**

oil paint board  
10 x 13 x 2cm  
Collection of the artist

**15. Shirberg 2019**

oil paint board  
10 x 15 x 2.3cm  
Collection of the artist

**16. Furnberg 1 2019**

oil paint board  
10 x 13 x 2cm  
Collection of the artist

**17. Furnberg 2 2019**

oil paint board  
10 x 16 x 3cm  
Collection of the artist

**18. Furnberg 3 2019**

oil paint board  
10 x 16.5 x 2.3cm  
Collection of the artist

**19. Furnberg 4 2019**

oil paint board  
11.5 x 14 x 2.4cm  
Collection of the artist

