

Arlo Mountford's oeuvre presents a nonconformist romp through the annals of art history. As his signature protagonist - a stylised head represented by a mouth in a black circle - recites in *Stand Up* (2005), for Mountford 'Art will be the culmination of its pasts.'

Projects from 2003 to 2007 share a number of common characteristics. Most works incorporate screen-based moving images or projections within an installation space furnished with objects that set the scene or act as props for the audience's added involvement. Storylines are episodic, involving a male and female stick figure coming into contact with works and figures from art's past. In their clarity of style and narrative, the audiovisuals belie their laborious compositions as digital animations. Some works are completed by the audience experiencing a psychic rush, as they become aware that the physical situation within the gallery is simultaneously mimicked within the video, as when inhabiting the viewing podium in *Ramp for S/Elective Viewing* (2003), which surprisingly doubles as a virtual guillotine.

The endless, unrequited journeys of the central characters are filled with slapstick vignettes, and shadowed by the dark cast of disaster. The travellers trapped in the maze of *Universal language - alternate reality* (2005), having completed the trials required to enable their successful passage, find themselves returned to the same site, and certain death is the only fate awaiting the artists and writers joined in ring-a-ring-a-rosie in *Requiem for the Negativist Spectacle* (2005). The frequent beheadings enacted with cartoonish naivety evoke a childlike sensibility, and recall the fantasy and idealism of JM Barrie's Peter Pan who could believe that 'To die will be an awfully big adventure'.¹

At times the lead personages take different roles, moving seamlessly between being the artist, the everyman or audience, and specific supporting figures from art history. Art's institutions, represented by the museum, are also subject to tongue-in-cheek critique: forming the site and subject of movie mayhem in *Murder in the Museum* (2005); providing the instrument if not the motive for multiple homicide in *Museum Divides and Confused Encounters* (2004), and causing colonial and modern Australian painters to suffer misadventure in *The Pioneer Meets the Wanderer* (2005-06). Mountford clearly conveys the position that art is not a universal

language, but part of a cultural, historical and social vocabulary of conditions that the individual can choose to include or delete from their private list of favourites. His personal preferences until now have attached to international artists spanning the twentieth century - Andy Warhol, Martin Klippenberger, Gilbert and George, Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, the sculptures of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, Robert Rauschenberg, Fischli and Weiss - all sufficiently established not to suffer from the effects of Mountford's creative licence. Two key installations, *Return to Point* (2006) and *Or Nothing* (2007), cleverly cycle through works by artists from this personal inventory, who are either paid homage or their works defiled in the process.

However, while a review of Mountford's practice to date suggests it has functioned to parody his professional field, this is a superficial conclusion. By contrast, his oeuvre represents the philosophy of an artist reflectively questioning his context, researching and accumulating details of specific stimulus and interest, all the while investing in the belief that the vocation of the artist is meaningful. 'Art will change the world', announces his icon in *Stand Up* (2007).

Ignoring the canon of history, Mountford has assembled his own play lists of hits, to which he continues to add not only artists and individual art works, but also writers and music. These subjective, mental inventories are the equivalent of the artist's archive, idiosyncratic histories that to others are partial and puzzling.

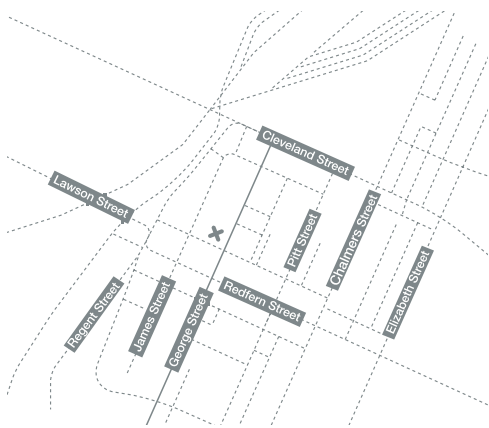
Writers from Walter Benjamin to art historian Rosalind Krauss have warned of the devaluation that is the fate of culture once its contents become fragmented and mobile, able to be reused at will as we find them applied by Mountford. Krauss termed the excessive reproduction that leads to such equivalence and diminution of value, or the removal of hierarchies, within art as a 'post-medium condition'.² Benjamin conceived his peers - writers - as archetypal collectors, securing the future of a subject by compiling its quotations, notes, comments and reflections, and which once published transformed into a new archive within the reader's card index.³ Such was the vision for Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, which remained incomplete on his death. Mountford's playful renegotiation of the correspondences between his archive of significant

moments in art and that of the history books, interspersed with ciphers referring to other aspects of contemporary culture, provides drama (in the tragic theatre sense of the term) as well as comedy. Rather than his archival methodology diminishing art, or pursuing a final endgame, the subtext of his imaginative scenarios is not a darkness, nothingness, but a void that is inevitably and infinitely refreshed again with art and artists. We respond to the canned laughter at Mountford's one-liners in *Stand Up* because we are that same amused audience, too cynical to ascribe to the recited dictums. Who believes that art will change the world, or doesn't laugh at the idea that art will stop the twenty-first century making the mistakes of the twentieth, or will break the divide between East and West? We believe the proposition that things were never the same after Duchamp gave up art to play chess, as runs the punch line in *We Wanted Something More* (2007), instead of locating in Mountford's maxims the various ways we might appreciate (and respectively value) artists' and audience's creative contributions.

Stand Up acts at least partially as a roll of Mountford's manifestos, but look beyond it to other works to find multiple traces of art's worth. In recent works Mountford has forged in new directions, scripting and staging for film an idea initially forgotten, *Return to Form: Nidnavia* (2008), and now he is re-opening the archive, Benjamin-like anarchically disturbing the High Renaissance humanism of Pieter Breugel. Following the footsteps of the Virgilian Sibyl, Mountford is about to travel deeper into the underworld, looking again at history in order to create our vision of the future.

Endnotes:

- (1) First published in JM Barrie's *The Little White Bird*, London, 1901.
- (2) Rosalind Krauss, *A voyage on the North Sea: art in the age of the post-medium condition*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1999.
- (3) Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume I: 1913-1926, Marcus Bullock and Michael W Jennings (eds.), Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999, p. 456.



X GRANTPIRRIE

Tony Stephens
Director

Antoinette Bailey
Gallery Manager

Printing:
IPG Brisbane
Design and
digital artwork:
VOLT

GRANTPIRRIE

86 George Street
Redfern NSW 2016 Australia
T +61 2 9699 9033
E info@grantpirrie.com

Correct at time of printing.
Information subject to change
without notification.

www.grantpirrie.com

ARLO MOUNTFORD | THE FOLLY | FEB 2009

**ARLO MOUNTFORD:
THE FOLLY
GALLERY 1
GRANTPIRRIE
05-28
FEB 2009**

YOUR INVITATION
TO ATTEND THE
OPENING OF
THE FOLLY
6-8PM THURSDAY
05 FEB 2009



Arlo Mountford
The Folly

Opening:
6-8pm Thursday
05 February 2009

Exhibition:
05-28 February
2009

Arlo Mountford's oeuvre presents a nonconformist romp through the annals of art history.

As his signature protagonist - a stylised head represented by a mouth in a black circle - recites in *Stand Up* (2005), for Mountford 'Art will be the culmination of its pasts.'

Projects from 2003 to 2007 share a number of common characteristics. 7

Most works incorporate screen-based moving images or projections within an installation space furnished with objects that set the scene or act as props for the audience's added involvement.

Storylines are episodic, involving a male and female stick figure coming into contact with works and figures from art's past. In their clarity of style and narrative, the audiovisuals belie their laborious compositions as digital animations.

Zara Stanhope

All images:

Arlo Mountford
The Folly
2008/09
(Detail)

3 video channel
4 audio channel
digital animation

Duration:
9:00 mins



Australian Government



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

