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The *Circumbinary orbits* suite of exhibitions deals with sentience, trust, mortality, decay and mythology. The project is developed through the Artist-to-Artist curatorial model first undertaken at Contemporary Art Tasmania in 2016. This iteration of the model comprises three solo exhibitions that have been curated by three artists and presented in rapid fire succession across three consecutive Fridays. How might we think about what the artist curator does that is different to that of the institutional curator? Informed by the unique relationships artists have with other artists, this project sets out to consider how the personal and professional proximities between artists intersect and influence exhibition outcomes. Each artist pairing has been derived from deliberation of the value that one artist may bring to the other while trusting in 'gut instinct' that constructive and supportive relationships will emerge. With a non-hierarchical approach and emphasis on peer-to-peer collaboration, *Circumbinary orbits* converges artist methodologies, techniques and approaches to artwork presentation.

CIRCUMBINARY ORBITS

A suite of three solo exhibitions
curated by three artists

The Cut

Julie Fragar curated by Amanda Davies

An Unsteady Compass

Lou Conboy curated by Mark Shorter

Transmission Line

Matt Coyle curated by Joel Crosswell

Project curator Kylie Johnson

Julie Fragar, *Baby dreams*, oil on board, 60 x 50cm, 2020



The Cut

JULIE FRAGAR curated by AMANDA DAVIES

In conversation with KYLIE JOHNSON

AD Julie, in The Cut your paintings chart your unusual experience of shadowing a gynaecological surgeon and witnessing surgery. You sent me a text message in January 2020 about the shock and exhilaration of this super intense spectacle you had just witnessed, the shock of that moment is evident in your paintings. Do you think about the work as a kind of witnessing to traumatic experience?

JF Not always traumatic but certainly felt experience. I've always made work about human experience and have become interested in what happens when we - individual people with individual needs - hit up against larger institutional systems like courts and hospitals. Some of the most deeply felt experiences of

our lives take place in the context of big - necessarily ham-fisted - organisations. We haven't (until Covid) paid much cultural attention to the hospital, especially in art even though it is the place where we are born, give birth or die.

AD On a formal level, your paintings are phantasmic, 'dizzily compressed' spaces full of narrative. In both formal and thematic terms, they remind me of Max Beckmann's The Night (1918-19). He experienced war as a medical orderly and this horror led him to develop paintings depicting multiple realms of experience. Your works seem to have both this intense and urgent expressionist field. Are they linked to Expressionism?

JF I haven't thought about my work on those terms, probably because I have been working from the Realist tradition for so long, focussing on the everyday end of life. In more recent composite works though, I have been thinking about psychological affects. I used to start with an image/ photograph. Now I start with what the whole situation feels like and make a drawing that has that feeling. The more concrete imagery comes later. With Baby Dreaming (2020), for example, I saw the expectation women place on this very specific part of their bodies to produce a child and by extension an imaginary world of bliss and bows. So I wanted to make a painting that embodied that feeling of expectation where the image would visually and energetically erupt from that part of the body. But I try also to not get too carried away with expressive elements and to keep one foot in reality. I use tropes like the white sneaker in The Surgeon (2020), to root the psychological in the physical, because that's where our psychology lives.

AD During your time at St Andrew's War Memorial Hospital, you witnessed patients being anaesthetised: being rendered insensible, moving through states of awareness, from sleep to wakefulness. Looking alive to 'deadish' under the glare of the theatre lights. I wonder how a painting can represent this rollercoaster of emotions?

JF Yes and under those conditions one has to ask where we actually exist. In the operating theatre I viscerally understood the flimsiness of a person. The very same bodies that were in one moment talking were, in another moment, meat objects. And that transition happens invisibly. There's no clear point at which the person is extracted and set aside. When the operating starts the surgeon goes inside the body, and inside the body is more body—Underneath is More Underneath (2020)—until they come out the other side. Throughout which the person is nowhere to be found. This seems like a basic clichéd idea—who are we?—but the operating theatre makes that question of what a human life actually is, absolutely palpable.

AD Could you talk about the slippages in your work? Was this a means to give form to witnessing of patients moving between states of consciousness in the operating theatre? You wrote to me about the overlapping and simultaneous stories, the 'all at once' as Greenberg said. Multiple perspectives and multiple layers rendering your paintings with a dreamlike appearance.

JF Yes like the Cubists already knew, we have to consider a multiplicity of perspectives in any given scenario. Of course all these perspectives are being funnelled and processed through

my subjective eyes. I think today, in politics and in the world, we have become uncomfortable with slippage, and this is demoting to me that everything has to be named and argued from a dogmatic perspective. I am mostly interested in the flip side of everything and I want to insist that everyone and all experiences are far more multi-faceted and nuanced than we readily accept. The operating theatre at the centre of the show is a place where many subjects converge for the express purpose intervening in the body of one other subject. In a way the operating theatre is one of the most acute possible points of human connection or integration. At the same time, the scene is completely different depending on one's place in it.

AD You have reflected deeply on Marlene Dumas' work on death and, her ability to depict 'deadness' in paint and the limits of paint's physicality.¹ Deadness is there in your horizontal planes of figures and monochrome colour, yet your paintings also move towards life, encompassing portraiture, individual gesture and temporality. You seem to be using the materiality of painting to play out those observed oscillations between life and death, using the single field of painting to show that irreconcilable simultaneity you suggest. At the same time you seem to be playing out this idea of the cut or the wounding of the 'skin' that has a long history in painting. Peggy Phelan writes about Caravaggio's, The Incredulity of St Thomas, 'the wound' and the limitations of Painting's 'interiority', which can't be accessed though Painting's body - its skin and its surface.² This for me is the issue, feeling is always represented through both the skin of the body and the skin of painting.

JF I wasn't thinking about that when I went into the project but yes, I liked that parallel between the cut at the centre of the operating theatre and the material 'skin' of painting. The ruptures - wipes, scrapes or 'patches'³ in the paintings ended up serving a combined purpose as both a visual analogue for the surgical cut and an affective kind of wake up call to one's own corporeality. These kinds of visual interruptions can snap us out of the illusion of the image and bring us back to the real world and to our bodies. In these hospital paintings, that corporeal affect takes on another doubled layer of meaning. Referring not just to our own mortal bodies but to all those physical bodies at the centre of a hospital's purpose.

KJ Julie, earlier in the conversation you mentioned that as part of your making process you have hit up against institutions such as courts and hospitals and have had to navigate these ham-fisted systems. Curating has different systems and power structures but I am interested in your observations of working with an artist curator as opposed to an institutional curator?

JF With institutional curators, in group shows, I have mostly been given a brief and left alone to develop the work. The Artist-to-Artist curatorial model is very different and I think this was why I found it difficult in the early stages of this project and why Amanda and I perhaps 'ran a-ground'. I am very self-directed - maybe this is usual for a painter? - so it was initially a challenge for me to work in collaboration. At some point during the process Amanda and I discussed this and everything changed. I really appreciated our conversations as the work progressed. Amanda wasn't providing critical feedback but I could hear when certain

things excited her, particularly when we spoke about the skin. This process started to inform the work. It was a much more intimate experience than how I have worked with museum curators.

KJ AJ (Amanda) you have previous experience with the Artist-to-Artist model but on the other 'side of the coin' when Pat Brassington was the curating artist and you were the exhibiting artist (a bruise has no tears, 2016). Was it a challenge to move into the curatorship role?

AD Circumbinary orbits was different to my previous experience. I already had a friendship with Pat when we started to work together on a bruise has no tears. I have known Kylie and her practice for a long time and she sets up these informal situations which evolve through conversation. There are a lot of twists and turns along the way. As painters we often work in our studios in isolation so there is not opportunity for the dialogue Julie and I have had.

JF I have enjoyed the experience and I suspect it will have a lasting impact. When life is less affected by Covid and we can travel again I would like the opportunity to come to your studio Amanda.

- [1] Julie Fragar, *Kissing the Toad: Marlene Dumas and Autobiography*, PHD Griffith University 2013 p107 - 108
- [2] Peggy Phelan, 'Whole wounds: bodies at the vanishing point', *Mourning Sex*, Routledge 1997 p.35
- [3] Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The art of not describing: Vermeer-the detail and the patch', *History of the Human Sciences* 2 (2):135-169 (1989)

Julie Fragar, *The Surgeon*, oil on board, 60 x 50cm, 2020



Julie Fragar, *The Anaesthetist*, oil on board, 60 x 50cm, 2020



An Unsteady Compass

LOU CONBOY curated by MARK SHORTER

In conversation with KYLIE JOHNSON

An Unsteady Compass takes place on Nitwuni country. We pay my respect to elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

MS Lou, you have sited your work for Circumbinary orbits in the mining town of Queenstown on the West Coast of Tasmania. How has your relationship with the community in Queenstown developed over the project?

LC I received a Qbank art residency which has been amazing and enabled me to visit Queenstown numerous times over the last year. With each visit I have brought my 2.4 metre sculpture of a

boulder which I made to fit in the back of my ute. I think turning up to town with a giant boulder in the back of your cab is a bit of a statement. The last time I visited, within 10 seconds of pulling-up someone yelled "the rock lady is back!" The community really pulls you in. I've pushed my boulder around the township, surrounding hills, industrial sites, rail stations and more. I'm always interested in the conversation that stems from the gesture of rolling the rock.

Initially there was a bit of protectiveness of the place from some Queenstown folk but I feel that if you make the effort to traverse the terrain and if you show an interest in the landscape a connection is inevitable. The last time I made the trip from Hobart to Queenstown there was a lot of black ice on the road and it felt dangerous. The locals are constantly reminding you that the weather and the landscape are the rulers of the town. You have to listen. If you want to be in the town you have to abide by the elements. If you can have that conversation about the elements with the people of Queenstown you are kind of accepted.

MS Working with landscape raises the history of the Island's colonisation. How have you acknowledged Country through this process?

LC To be honest I find this question very difficult to answer. It's a hard thing to navigate and I'm not sure if I'm doing it right. The second-hand bookshop in Queenstown was very helpful pointing me to texts regarding Aboriginal communities on the

West Coast. One was Richard Flanagan's *A Terrible Beauty: History of the Gordon River Country*. But it has been difficult to research because the history has been deliberately erased. I have also been reading *The Peaks of Lyell* by Geoffrey Blainey. It runs through the history of the mine in Queenstown starting from 1856 which is before the mine was open. *The Peaks of Lyell* is probably the most well-known publication about Queenstown. Unfortunately, there is not one mention in the book of an Aboriginal presence in the area.

There are some very significant Aboriginal sites near Queenstown including the Darwin Crater where Aboriginal communities collected Darwin glass which was used to make stone tools. The tools were also exchanged around Tasmania. Aboriginal history has largely been omitted from publications such as *The Peaks of Lyell*, so asking questions and building on conversations that relate to country is important.

MS In your work *Sisyphina* (2019) you literally embodied the Myth of Sisyphus by pushing a boulder up Jacob's Ladder. How does the Myth of Sisyphus return in this new work and has it evolved through the Queenstown residency?

LC I have been pushing my rock around Tasmania for a few years now. I pushed the rock up Jacob's Ladder, which is a wild switch back road that runs to the top of Ben Lomond. I have also pushed the rock around Stanley, Mount Roland and Hobart. The original rock doesn't feature in the new work but it was necessary to bring it to Queenstown to help me get to the next stage or

junction. The rock is my muse, and why wouldn't you bring your muse to investigate a project.

Sisyphina's rock felt important as a point of connection with the township. Everyone relates differently to the rock. One of the train drivers at the station mentioned that for him the rock was his punishment for being born on the mainland. The comment was made as a joke, but at the heart of it was his sense of being an outsider in his own community. That was his Sisyphian battle.

I do feel that my work has evolved significantly in Queenstown. I'm no longer pushing the rock, there is a transformation that has happened in absorbing the myth into the body. Like an elemental change of state.

KJ Throughout the development of the project I have enjoyed hearing you both talk about the work as embodying a performative space. It has been a pleasure to be on the fringes of these conversations and watch your friendship grow as the project has developed.

LC I feel quite lucky. At the beginning Mark and I were contacting each other weekly and that helped to establish a rapport early on in the project, which has evolved into a friendship.

KJ How has working with another artist informed the relationship and the work?

MS In terms of the relationship, I was a little nervous. There were some similarities between this project and supervising an artist for a MFA at the Victorian College of the Arts where I work but there were also differences. Initially I found the lack of a formal working structure quite challenging. Finding a way to not respond to that fear by overly controlling the process was important. We began with a studio visit and Lou was very open. I was more cautious but I feel that we really found our stride with the Queenstown residency. I identify with that way of working, that is to put yourself in an unknown situation or site and take risks to see how you might respond to resolve the work. When I came to Queenstown to visit Lou we were still negotiating the nature of our relationship. But I felt we had an important moment of synthesis of working together when we went and visited the mine together. We did some filming together and we also explored the site separately on our own. I felt that we had slowly arrived at a common meeting point of creativity. At that moment I learnt to trust the process we were developing together. It takes time to find that.

LC It was a little bit overwhelming at the start of the project and I felt that it was important for us to define the boundaries. I agree that something 'clicked' in Queenstown and from there it was a really lovely exchange.

MS I always found the conversations with you (Kylie) really important because they kept me honest. When we have talked I have had to reflect on my role in the project, which is very different to how I have experienced projects before, as an artist.

With this experience with Lou I have had to really reflect on where I might offer feedback and where might I offer guidance. In that respect I have really appreciated your experience of working with artists and bringing exhibitions together.

KJ What have each of you found valuable through the project?

LC I've never really had a focused mentorship experience before and as such it has been incredibly valuable. I think what Mark and I have shared is perhaps looser than what would happen at a University. The process has been such a gift for me in terms of how ideas are shared.

MS: I learnt something about how we come to a creative moment together through collaboration because every time you work with someone it is different. It was a privilege to travel to Queenstown and experience Lou's process. Not having the pressure of having to produce a work meant I could reflect on the site in a different way. I could share with Lou my experience of critiquing the Australian Landscape tradition and offer my observations. I really enjoyed taking that on.

LC There were a couple of moments in our conversation that brought us closer. I don't know if it was the quality of the time we spent in Queenstown. There was one particular moment where Mark shared a story about how he had modified his car. He'd taken the front seat out of his car to fit his sculptures in for transporting. These sorts of stories really dissolve barriers for me.



Lou Conboy, *An Unsteady Compass*, production stills, 2020



Lou Conboy, *An Unsteady Compass*, production stills, 2020



Lou Conboy, *An Unsteady Compass*, production still, 2020

Transmission Line

MATT COYLE curated by JOEL CROSSWELL

In conversation with KYLIE JOHNSON

JC Matt, during our Transmission Line sessions we have often spoken about light, within the work or in the context of the gallery but what about in the production of the work? Does day and night come into it in some way?

MC I am so used to working at night that I feel I am more productive then. I have been working late into the night in a quiet house for years. There is something about being cocooned in the dark that enables me to get more in the zone.

JC There is a feeling of that in the work but also a sense of the theatrical. Has your side gig at the Theatre Royal in Hobart influenced your work?

MC There is often a certain amount of drama in my work and there are aspects that are a lot like set design – model building, lighting, mood etcetera. It is probably just coincidental that I work at a theatre however I once produced a body of work based around the interior of the Theatre Royal so there is something of the place that seeps into my work on occasions.

JC Can you talk about how film has influenced your work and how you use photographs within the making process?

MC I have always been strongly influence by film, especially early on in my career when I was producing graphic novels. I took a lot of notice of filmmakers whose work emphasized composition – particularly bold symmetrical shots like you get with Kubrick or Peter Greenaway. I tried to replicate these cinematic shots in the narrative of the graphic novel medium. Cinema has had a long lasting influence on me and I think this is also evident in my paintings – how the scenes are composed and lit.

My direct reference materials are usually photographs. When I have an idea for an artwork I usually build models or create scenes with objects, light them and take multiple photographs. I will then use the photographs as a point of reference when making the artworks rather than making preliminary sketches. But I will have a very clear idea of how the piece is going to be constructed and look. This process is

closely entwined with creating photo-realistic works. You need the photographs to get the shadows and the light just right. As I move away from this style of work I find I am using sketches more and photographs less.

JC Once we had a conversation about a recurring dream of yours. Can you tell me a little bit more about that dream and how your dreams in general are reflected within your paintings and drawings?

MC I occasionally have a haunted house dream that usually centres on a very malevolent space within a house. There is nothing in the room that is tangibly frightening. No visions, no sound. There is just an overwhelming physical presence – almost electrical. Usually the room in question is so over powering that it can't be entered. So in the dream I am usually aware of the bad room rather than facing it head on by going into it. There is a connection between this and the title of the show, Transmission Line.

On several occasions I have made artworks based entirely on an image I have seen in a dream. When you wake up with a readymade image that can't be ignored it feels like a gift that has to be captured. This is rare but I think the works that I have created like this have been some of my more successful and interesting pieces. Dreams have occasionally helped me solve problems with artworks as well. I don't pretend that producing work that links directly to my dreams adds weight to meaning or substance in the artwork but the

mysterious nature of it all intrigues me. I am after something that makes the normal appear a fraction off-kilter.

JC I know you like found objects and these often come into your work in some way.

MC I think initially its about light and shadow. When I see an object that attracts my attention I'm thinking about how it will react to being lit under various conditions. Recently I bought a large square seed-starting tray from the Tip Shop. It was lying on the ground near the car park. I saw it, something clicked and I thought well it only costs \$5 so even if I don't use it for anything it doesn't matter. Through experience I know it pays to accumulate the things that 'speak to me'. I store them away and then I wait until I know what to do with them. Usually once I have an object I will know what to do with it after I find another piece or a third and they form some sort of visual relationship. I love not knowing why I want to work with certain things but being compelled to nonetheless.

JC I'd like to know if you believe in the supernatural?

MC I really want to believe in the supernatural and love all references and stories involving the supernatural but having never experienced anything in that realm I can't in all honesty say I believe in it. All the mysterious things that exist on the fringes of the supernatural like coincidence; chance encounters,

prophetic dreams, madness and premonitions fascinate me and are great source materials for creative work.

KJ I got excited when I heard that soil was to be included in the exhibition. I love the stuff for its aesthetic qualities as much as it being conceptually very loaded. Why have you chosen to work with it?

MC I like the look of it and the way it can be lit to create shadow and texture but I also like that objects can be hidden in soil or buried in the dirt and emerge from this underworld.

JC The reference to life and death is important but dirt is also playful stuff - playing in the mud as a kid and making mud pies. Play is a good entry into the darker themes of the exhibition. I can remember that Matt and I went to the New Sydney Hotel for a meeting and we started talking about the soil and that is when things really started to come together. We had fun with it. We also talked a lot about music.

KJ The synergies of how you both use play and humour within your work is what started me thinking of you coming together within the Artist-to-Artist curatorial model. How have you each found the process of working with another artist in this way?

MC I've had a few experiences working with institutional curators where we have had regular catch up meetings but

mostly I've been left to produce the work. With this process I felt a responsibility to go to Joel and get things 'ticked off'. Even though it is my work I feel like this has been a combined effort and the exhibition is our 'thing'.

JC I don't know if I like curating but I have always been curious about Matt's practice and this has been a way to get to know him and how he goes about making his work. It has been a beautiful eye-opener for me to see that side of an artist that I can't see within myself because there is no distance when I am making work. I have really enjoyed working with Matt.

Matt Coyle, *Man in an Enclosure*, 2020





Matt Coyle, *Head VIII*, 2018

Matt Coyle, *The Shades #13*, 2010



BIOGRAPHIES

Julie Fragar lives in Brisbane. Within her practice she focuses on auto/ biography and human experience. She is represented by Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney and Block Projects, Melbourne.

Amanda Davies lives in Tasmania. Davies is known for her figurative paintings that deal with unease and decay. She is represented by Bett Gallery, Hobart

Matt Coyle resides in Tasmania and is known for his meticulous graphic pen and ink drawings and enigmatic mixed media works. Coyle is represented in Tasmania by Bett Gallery.

Joel Crosswell lives in Tasmania. He uses biographical stories and events in his drawings and sculptures to connect with themes relating to spirituality, existence and the human condition. Crosswell is represented by Bett Gallery, Hobart.

Lou Conboy is from Tasmania. Using video, photography and sculpture she documents gestures that explore themes relating to impermanence, absurdity, conjuring, grief, the uncanny and decay

Mark Shorter is a performance and installation artist based in Melbourne. His work questions dominant narratives around landscape, gender and the body by stretching and turning the ideologies that sit deep in their form to see what bends or breaks.

Kylie Johnson works at Contemporary Art Tasmania. She employs curatorship within her practice as a means of enabling and shaping the social relationships through which art is generated.

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Lou Conboy developed *An Unsteady Compass* while in residence at Q Bank Gallery, Queenstown, Tasmania.

An Unsteady Compass video assistant, Joseph Shrimpton.

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