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Opus #5 Embedded in the Pattern (Lucretia after Cagnacci) (detail), 2000. From the installation series Cantata: A Play of the Trace & Modulations: Cantata ReConfigured, 2000-2010. Chiffons, laser print, paint and mediums on shaped stretcher in perspex box, 55 x 40 x 3.5cm (photography: Rodney Browne).

“Little Asylums Amid Chaos”

*Mi yet, mi longpela winim olgeta, lukim,
nau ting ting tasol,
nau harim tok tok bilong ples
nau painim painim planti kainkain tingting olsem
wanpela liklik tret samting,
bilong wokim samting olsem bilum.
Dispela ya olgeta bilong wokim samting tumbuna
bilong mi yet ¹*

Within the layers of reference in the series of installations *Modulations: Cantata ReConfigured* is the search to reveal “the will to communication.” *Modulations* infers changes in pitch and tone and, consequently, in the connotations possible in utterances and the traces of marks of all types. My installations over the past nine years involve both the mark/trace, as well as sound, in the form of cantatas. These traces are a way of marking/referencing the existence of an experience; a way of taking possession of an experience; a way of controlling its existence as memory, if not the actual experience in real time. The layers of reference and ideas are extrapolated from long contemplation and observation, combined with my experiences and studies while in Papua New Guinea.

We tend to take for granted the possession of language and the sense of control that this facility gives us. The nature, rhythm and structure of different languages relate directly to the character of the medium and its processes. For instance, stitching, lace-making and embroidery, too, have vocabularies that form languages. These variants in communication, like the visual arts languages, while tangible and vital, are in a sense silent and are therefore often not recognised or are overlooked in relation to the metaphors they imply and the unspoken aspirations and conditions to which they frequently refer.

Each of the sound tracks, in earlier as well as the current series of installations, forms an important link to the idea of a language evolving and the discovery of a voice that can describe and can evoke the realisation of the right to challenge and the ability to dissent. Words/declarations – while not providing the power of total control over the environment that it was first thought could be achieved by thus calling to the gods – in the utterance of singular sounds, or by developing and repeatedly exclaiming names of certain phenomena in an interactive situation and through strings of words, can, nonetheless bring forth a sense of satisfaction felt through the level of control that can be achieved and experienced.

My years of living in Papua New Guinea (and before that, envisaging and reading about it while a teenager) were important experiences in forming my understanding of the structure of the societies we fashion in order to retain semblances of control. As an artist, what interests me is the structure of systems of communication languages and how they construct our time and space.

I became fascinated with the notion that the sounds of words carry unspoken meaning and intonations beyond the word’s sign indication of concepts and things. These sounds communicate beyond their literary signification and, if the sound becomes the focus, then it emphasises underlying connotations and expands the power and breadth of the communication. As I listened to the *ples*² languages and asked my Papua New Guinean companions for translations, some insights connected my observations regarding the act of binding to the utterance of words. I realised that just as we had in the past crudely bound together two things with twine, or string, to make a tool, a shelter, a weapon, that we had also made utterances to help us to control and to survive in the chaos of the world as we encounter it. Both of these rudimentary processes – binding with twine and binding with utterances – were efficient to a limited degree. In time, we began to develop more decorative and descriptive/narrative approaches to both.

My observations led me to conclude that, over time, binding and interlacing became more and more decorative and the decoration expanded both beyond the areas that needed to be fastened and also beyond the amount of twine needed to hold the elements together. Eventually the interlaced cane, twines, strings, ropes, tapes and threads became wider and wider, forming ornate patterns that both fixed/fastened and decorated sophisticated tools and rigging such as adzes, arrows, masts, lintels and posts. It seems that the interlacing eventually became independent from the binding process and, as the breadth of the entwined band widened, the new, “unbound” fabric could be shaped into objects such as carrybags, belts, and head-coverings and capes.

The ideas surrounding the interlacing of sound with spaces and pauses became intertwined with my insights into binding and the references in Tok Pisin to the small spaces either piercing objects or between things – such as the holed sheets of Marsden Matting, which are called *lais*,³ brought in by the Americans and left lying around Papua New Guinea in their thousands after the Second World War and subsequently used for a myriad of unrelated uses.

In certain of the words of some of the languages of Papua New Guinea, generically called *ples tok*,⁴ I thought I detected sound remnants from those early raw declarations and passionate intonations that were said to be entreaties to a higher power for assistance in controlling the hostile environment. The essence of the breath seeming to be forced out, constrained, or disrupted by the shapes formed by the chest, mouth, tongue and teeth to reveal the energy of these sounds and to accentuate their power. Such resonating utterances call into service a reverberating, potential energy – utterances that may not summon the gods, but still have the power to summon up great human energy, especially when chanted in unison.

The poetry produced in the years that followed these observations of mine, investigated a widening space/pause surrounding chosen sounds/words, and also the vibrations that came from their rhythms and the patterns of echoes (real or imagined) thus created. This work also experimented with a reduced vocabulary and the shifts in meaning that occur as the juxtapositions and spaces are shifted from one word and one pattern to another. From the early 1970s, I have been exploring the idea that, through a systemic reduction, the control of restraint can create spaces and forms that are dynamic and that engender multi-layered readings and responses.

The insights into hovering sounds that are connected to isolated consonants that click, bump, heave, tug, hiss, kick, shudder and lull and the yowling vowels that are wailing, squealing, crying, smouldering and directive, moved into the visual works, and the control that sounds and intonations have over our lives and responses became a constant concern in my visual works since 1977. After many years of experimentation through materials and with sounds, I discovered that a long theoretical history backs up these insights with regard to attempts to control our environment and to condition it through utterances.

Since the late 1990s, investigations into notions of the “trace,”⁵ as well as a fascination with the codes embedded in texts, such as the *litterae formatae*⁶ and other covert meanings of texts and combinations of letters and numbers, have been bound into my work.

Over the past few months my sense of helplessness and sadness in observing my mother's loss of the ability to converse – through her loss of command of meaningful words and sounds – has underscored for me how the loss of language highlights, more poignantly than any other human loss, how vital the capacity for coherent articulation and communication is for us to keep some semblance of control over our personal situation and our environment.

Stefan Merrill Block is a young American who is surrounded by relatives who have suffered early onset Alzheimer's. Therefore I was drawn to what he had to say when he was recently interviewed when visiting New Zealand. He has written a moving novel, *The Story of Forgetting*, wherein he has created an imaginary space. In his interview on National Radio NZ, he shared how he has tried to understand the place to which the afflicted may retreat. He has created a fabled structure for that place. He has reconfigured the oblivion into a mythical landscape named Isidora (“...a fantastical land free from the sorrows of memory”).⁷ He stresses that this place is not allegorical: “It is a way to give it hope.”⁸ But I noted that this, too, is a place without words; as memory also implies the memory of the meanings of words and of letters.

When listening to this interview with Block, I was drawn to his eloquent way of relating how he reduced the personal quality of the experience, added to all one's research and insights, to an essence, in order to generate a resonance. I identified with his statement about making visible, control (or a sense of control) – and therefore revealing what he referred to as hope. He stated:

But I think that I am obsessed and compelled towards art because, either positive or negative, there are these, like, ‘little asylums amid chaos’ where things make sense in some way. I mean that to speak the truth in some way, to speak it in a way that it is going to resonate, you have to hold off; you have to cut something out. It's like this little room we build for ourselves where things temporarily make sense even if the news is sad.⁹

As artists we create structured spaces and this is not possible without the tight control of *restraint* and *reduction* and a considered emphasis on the resulting active, *reverberating space* and *forms*. Here, through art, we are able to create spaces that hover lightly above the minutiae and catastrophes of everyday existence – these spaces present a sense of a *ples masali*¹⁰ – a *haus tambaran*¹¹ – spaces that are “little asylums amid chaos.”

IMAGES ON OPPOSITE PAGE

Top row from left:

Noviate Velate (Detail of Veil). From the Installation series *RE enact \DIS enchant*, 1994-1996. Fabric, steel, oil and acrylic paint, mediums, tissue, polyurethane, 260 x 110cm diameter (photography: Rodney Browne).

Opus #2 Manuscript, 2000. From the Installation series *Cantata: A Play of the Trace and Modulations: Cantata ReConfigured*, 2000-2010. Canvas, brocade, paint and mediums, gold threads, on shaped stretcher, 55 x 40 x 3.5cm (photography: Rodney Browne).

Shredded Remissions. From the series *Adroit Performers*, 1988. Fabric, lace, letters, images, thread, hair, oil paint and mediums, polyurethane, approximately 40 x 20 x 20cm (photography: Rodney Browne).

Bottom row from left:



Haus Tambaran, Sepik, Papua New Guinea, 1965 (photography: Tony Plummer).

Elections in Southern Highlands, Papua New Guinea, photograph taken by the author while staying in a village in the Southern Highlands, 1976.

Eastern Highlands man with *bilum* woven cape, Papua New Guinea, photograph taken by the author while staying in a village in the Southern Highlands, 1976.

Southern Highland woman in mourning, Papua New Guinea, photograph taken by the author while staying in a village in the Southern Highlands, 1976.







IMAGES ON PAGES 48-50:

Installation view *Modulations #2: Cantata ReConfigured*, 2007, Southland Museum & Art Gallery, Invercargill (photography: Rodney Browne).

Installation view *Modulations #3: Cantata ReConfigured*, 2008, Forrester Art Gallery, Gallery 2, Oamaru (photography: Rodney Browne).

Installation view *Modulations #3: Cantata ReConfigured*, 2008, Forrester Art Gallery, Main Gallery, Oamaru (photography: Rodney Browne).

- 1 I am looking seeing, looking –
now
thinking a lot,
now
listening to the sounds of the languages,
now
looking for many various kinds of ideas like fine threads that are woven like *bilums*,
now all this is part of making my individual art.
- 2 *Ples* is the Tok Pisin word for homeland and *ples tok* means the language of that area. (Over 800 different languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea. It is also recognised as probably the world's most linguistically complex country.)
- 3 The Tok Pisin word for Marsden Matting is *lais*, and the notion of lace being associated with mechanical patterns and a web being placed over the organic world became another important aspect of my concepts and association of ideas and images. This led intuitively to an extensive investigation of all types of weblike structures and their associations with lace – such objects and concepts as cane navigation grids, chicken wire and organic structures such as the woven net bags of PNG *bilums* and decorative and primitive binding of all types. (Marsden Matting: the holed metal lengths which were clipped together and formed the airstrips built during The Second World War in PNG. Material taken from an MFA Seminar Series lecture by the author entitled “Foundations, Formulations, Layers and Accretions: Macro-perspectives on Micro- associations”, presented on 7 November 2007 in the School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- 4 See endnote 2.
- 5 Trace & *écriture*: (trace): “Whether written or spoken, no element can function without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. Each element is constituted on the basis of the trace in it of the other elements of the system. Nothing, in either the elements or the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent.” J Collins and B Mayblin, *Derrida for Beginners* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1996), 70.
“A trace is what a sign differs/defers from. It is the absent part of the sign's presence. In other words, through the act of *différance*, a sign leaves behind a trace, which is whatever is left over after everything present has been accounted for.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deconstruction_\(trace\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deconstruction_(trace)), as last accessed on 28 June 2008.
“In deconstruction, the word *écriture* (usually translated as writing in English) is appropriated to refer not just to systems of graphic communication, but to all systems inhabited by *différance*. A related term, called *archi-écriture*, refers to the positive side of writing, or writing as an ultimate principle, rather than as a derivative of *logos* (speech).” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deconstruction_\(écriture\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deconstruction_(écriture)), as last accessed on 28 June 2008.

- 6 “The *litterae formatae*, or letters commendatory, took their name from the seals that were attached to them... In these letters, the Greek alphabet is used in place of numerical signs. In order to prevent fraud or imposture, it was said that the Fathers of the Council of Ni[c]jaea had formulated a decree to the effect that the *litterae* must contain such a series of letters as, on addition of their numerical values, that would determine the origin of the document.” See www.newadvent.org/cathen/01333a.htm Arthur S Barnes, *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume X* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911).
- 7 From cover synopsis of *The Story of Forgetting* (New York: Random House, 2008).
- 8 Notes on interview with Stefan Merrill Block, author of *The Story of Forgetting*, Tuesday 27 May, 2008 with Kathryn Ryan, *Nine to Noon*, Radio National NZ:
 Block: Isidora – a mythical landscape where people go when they lose their memories to give it a geographical place. Not an allegory. A way to give it hope. For the way the family take... and reconfigure it into a mythical fable, it is very similar for me to the way fiction writing feels to me. (My précis of answer.)
 Block: A way to understand where they go into the oblivion of Alzheimer’s and reconfiguring it into a mythical landscape.
 Ryan: Do we reconfigure in a positive way for the most part, do you think?
 Block: I don’t know that we configure in universally positive or hopeful ways. But I think that I am obsessed and compelled towards art because, either positive or negative, there are these like “little asylums amid chaos” where things make sense in some way. I mean that to speak the truth in some way, to speak it in a way that it is going to resonate, you have to hold off; you have to cut something out. It’s like this little room we build for ourselves where things temporarily make sense even if the news is sad.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 *Ples masali* – place of spirits.
- 11 *Haus tambaran* – spirit house.

Lyn Plummer holds an MA(VA), by research, from Monash University, a PGDip FA (Sculpture) from the University of Melbourne and a DVA (Painting) from the Australian National University in Canberra. She lived in Northern Queensland and Papua New Guinea for many years. She has been Academic Leader of Painting at the School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, since 1998. She has taught Sculpture at Cheltenham School of Art (now Pittville Studios, University of Gloucestershire) in England and also in Australia, at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne; and she has also taught Painting and Drawing and Art History & Theory at Charles Sturt University in New South Wales.

Since 1994, as well as the sculptural and two-dimensional elements, her work has incorporated multiple and multi-tracked soundtracks, which have been created in collaboration with Australian artists Rodney Browne and Mark Finsterer. Digital media installation artist Rodney Browne has created three individual, computer-generated, soundtracks for two installation series, and composer-musician Mark Finsterer has composed and performed one for the series *RE enact\DIS enchant*. Browne and Finsterer are currently collaborating with Plummer on an interactive video and soundtrack for an exhibition at Latrobe University Museum and Art Gallery, Melbourne, for the Contemporary Art Fair in 2010.