



Claire Anna Watson, *Sortie*, 2009, still from video work; HD 1920 x 1080, 4.42min; image courtesy the artist

Micro-niche

JANE O'NEILL

We might use the term 'micro-niche' to describe the type of artistic practice that results from the intense scrutiny of a particular, often obscure, body of knowledge. Artists working this way are distinct from those whose practice has a broader philosophical reach. For in a climate where the art market has grown exponentially, where there is an oversupply of artists (not forgetting the ever-expanding China and India), the opportunities to stake out new thematic turf have shrunken to a miniscule patch. Were an emerging artist to adopt a broad-ranging approach today, it would be seen to be verging on hubris.

There are a number of ways to account for the micro-niche phenomenon. On one hand, we might see it as the result of the tendency towards academic specialisation, where topics of inquiry become magnified, teased open, and ritually dissected many times over. One may wonder whether this specialisation is mirrored in the art world by works that suggest an almost obsessive focus on the minutiae of a phenomenon. We now see huge numbers of artists completing higher degrees as part of a broader emphasis on professional practice. As part of this system, artists are required to write extensively and tease out in a logical fashion what is essentially abstract and is hostile to logic. This is not to decry at all the idea of deep and rigorous reflection of art, or its rigorous contextualisation, but it is now the case that art is no longer just art – it must also be called research. And artists, especially under the institutional aegis, are

compelled to find their own specific niche. As ever more artists are funnelled through this process, so grows the expectation that an artist professionalise with higher degrees. Then there are the expectations placed on his or her practice that are wrought from the justifications that arise out of the intricate web of academicisation. Some artists, however, manage to resist these pressures. Instead, as the following examples suggest, there are artists who take a genuinely idiosyncratic approach to the forensic investigation of highly specialised areas of interest.

It is undisputable that technology has opened up the capacity for closer, detailed and multifaceted examinations of physical objects. But as Jessie Scott points out, 'does this expansion of vision enable us to see more, to see better? Or is our encounter with nature limited by these increasingly "accurate" but increasingly abstracted, mediated imaging technologies?'¹ In the creation of her video work *Sortie* (2009), emerging artist Claire Watson acknowledges this disparity by referring to *Still life with strawberries* by 18th century still life artist Adrian Coote. A black backdrop, similar to the one in Coote's painting, supplies the setting for a large-scale projection of a strawberry. The fruit is held up for scrutiny before each seed is methodically plucked with surgical tweezers. We hear the amplified drop of each seed into a metal receptacle as the fruit's flesh is torn apart. Eventually the strawberry no longer resembles food and the extraction, or dissection, gives us the discomfiting sense that we are witnessing heart surgery. Many viewers of this work fled the projection room in a state of distress,



1 +2/ Scott Robinson, *small choir*, 2012, stills from video work; single Channel HD video loop (continuous); image courtesy the artist and Beam Contemporary, Melbourne

unable to cope with its very gory connotations. Watson's work begins as a meditation on the strawberry and its insides, and the work never waivers from this goal. But the highly textured experience of nature resonates so strongly with ideas surrounding the mediation of natural materials (including our own bodies) that, in the end, the capacity of technology to provide a large-scale, three-dimensional experience of a piece of fruit fails.

Scott Morrison also uses video to focus on the small details. The artist depicts landscape from the inside out, and in doing so poses the question: 'How do we convey something as complex and deeply textured as Nature?' His works begin with a microscopic detail, such as a raindrop or a grain of wheat, in order to provide a point of entry to vast natural environments. Morrison stretches and repeats time in intensely looped footage that magnifies our experience of the subject. *Oceanechoes* (2008) consists of footage of a field where heads of wheat sway back and forth in an increasingly hypnotic swirl of patterns. Morrison stretched nine seconds of footage into a nine-minute sequence.

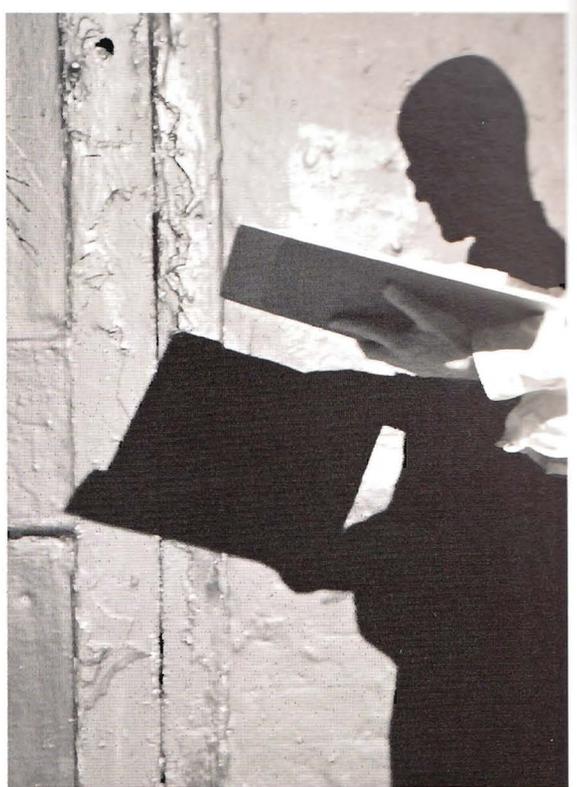
At Morrison's most recent exhibition, *small choir*, at Beam Contemporary in Melbourne, the viewer was immediately immersed in the thick Penrose State Forest in the Southern Highlands in NSW. The film stills weave in and out of each other on the screen; the gentle rotation of images is barely perceptible. At times what is being represented is indistinct; hazy pockets of sunlight obscure any view beyond the trees. At others, the artist emphasises refined details, such as the indentations of red coloured bark on a pine tree, or a small clearing of land between tree trunks. Morrison plays with the shift between obscured and clear vision, and in doing so draws attention not only to the proximate trees but also to the vastness of the beyond that is invisible to us. Through the creation

of a filmic collage where our attention is drawn to the nooks and crannies, the artist asserts a decidedly anti-panoramic attitude to the landscape.

In a similar vein, Russell Walsh works with a collagist sensibility as evidenced in his recent theatre piece, *The Trailers*. Walsh devised a sequence of fifty-nine fragments to be read by four actors from William Archer's translations of Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*. Archer translated this lesser known play by Ibsen twice, first in 1888 and then in 1895. In the script, Walsh merges both the first and second translations, achieved by the actors reading the first translation, hesitating with 'no', and then correcting themselves with the second version, as follows: 'Aune goes quietly to the Consul's door and knocks once or twice, softly ... no, knocks softly, pauses a moment, then knocks again.'² Thus the director draws our attention to the gentle moment of the translator's own invention. This method of isolating fragments of a play, that are then repeated and read by varying actors, has the uncanny capacity to draw attention to nuances of the language and the atmosphere of the original Ibsen work. As an audience we are severed from any emotional engagement and instead made to focus on linguistic minutiae (which are often the causes of misunderstanding and tragedy in Ibsen's works anyway.)

If there were a grandfather of the micro-niche it would be the Austrian author Thomas Bernhard. His ferocious appetite for close scrutiny manifests in slightly varying but insistent modes of repetition. In doing so, he successfully reorients our attention to the ways that ideas are formed. When he speaks, for example, of the idea of correction, he describes how:

We're constantly correcting, and correcting ourselves, most rigorously, because we recognise at every moment that we did it all wrong (wrote it, thought it, made it all wrong), acted all wrong, how we acted all wrong, that everything to this point in time is a falsification, so we correct this falsification, and then we again correct the correction of this falsification and we correct the result of the correction of a correction and so forth ...³



left: Final performance for debut season of *Trailers* (made by Russell Walsh, Greg Brown, Paul Buckley, Andrew Kelly and Simon Wilton) at La Mama theatre, Melbourne, 21 November 2012; left to right: Greg Brown, Paul Buckley and (obscured) Simon Wilton; photo: Laura Hegyesi

above: Promotional image for *Trailers*, 2012; photo: Nedd Jones

In a similar way, Morrison and Walsh present versions of larger objects in small, repeated fragments. Instead of depicting the landscape or a piece of theatre as one sublime whole, it is as though these artists hold up a prismatic lens, giving us a sequence of close-range views.

I had never actually realised that the small flecks on the exterior of a strawberry are the seeds. I haven't been to the Penrose State Forest either, but I now feel as though I know parts of it intimately. I've never read *The Pillars of Society*, but I now feel a grasp for the style and tone of the play so much that I can still repeat some phrases by heart. It is true that the consequences of academic specialisation may be damaging for many artists. But in these cases, each of the artists successfully reorients our attention to a fuller awareness of very particular subjects. Just as Cézanne took to painting oranges and apples with obsessive force, or Monet to haystacks, there will always be in art a celebration of close observation, an almost obsessive immersion in things. No matter if it is a raindrop or a piece of fruit, the work will resonate with notions well beyond the immediate and the local.

1. Jessie Scott, *Sortie*, exhibition catalogue, Blindsight, Melbourne, 2011; *Sortie* was exhibited at Blindsight, 17 August to 3 September 2011: www.blindsight.org.au
2. Russell Walsh, *Trailers*, 2012, Act 2, p.1; *Trailers* premiered at La Mama Theatre, Melbourne, 19 October 2012.
3. Thomas Bernhard, *Correction*, Vintage, London, 2003, p. 222.

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Mirdidinggathi Juwarnda Sally GABORI, *Nyinyilki*, 2011, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 196 x 455 cm, courtesy the artist & Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Obituary

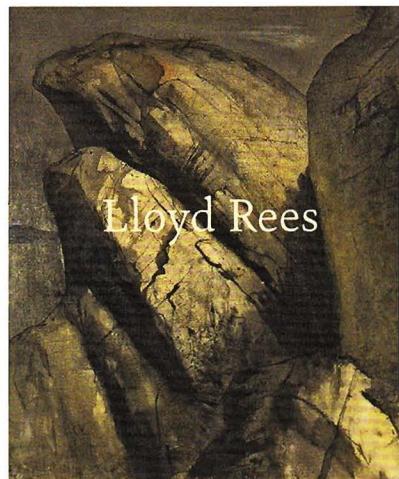
Jean Baptiste Apuatimi (1940-2013)

Tiwi artist Jean Baptiste Apuatimi passed away in February after a four-decade strong career as an artist, mainly through painting, and mainly through the Bathurst Island-based Tiwi Design art centre. She was regarded as 'an Australian icon' and 'national treasure', according to friend Tim Hill, whose paintings now grace significant collections Australia-wide and internationally. National Gallery of Victoria curator Judith Ryan paid tribute to the artist, noting 'the intense love she had for painting, it will never be forgotten'. Melbourne gallerist Beverly Knight expressed her sadness at the artist's passing, recalling the days when Knight helped to set up the Jilamara arts centre (on Melville Island) in 1989, when Jean Baptiste was one of the few Tiwi women then painting, along with Kitty Kantilla and Freda Warlapinni.



Jean Baptiste Apuatimi, *Untitled*, 1991, ochre on cotton duck, 60 x 82cm, exhibited in *Art of the Tiwi* from the Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1994; image courtesy Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, and National Gallery of Victoria

Jean Baptiste was born at Pirlangimpi (Garden Point) on Melville Island, and moved with her family as a young girl to Nguiu on Bathurst Island. There she was promised as a 14-year-old to husband Declan Apuatimi (1930-85), himself a highly acclaimed artist who subsequently became Jean Baptiste's formative artistic influence. 'He gave me eleven children that old man', said Jean Baptiste, as quoted in the catalogue for *Culture Warriors*, the National Gallery of Australia's inaugural National Indigenous Art Triennial, curated by Brenda L. Croft, in 2007. Jean Baptiste featured prominently in this exhibition as one of five senior Indigenous artists whose work comprised a special focus gallery. The catalogue includes a striking portrait of Jean Baptiste (taken by Croft) standing with a hand-held stick in the sand against a backdrop of brewing storm clouds. 'I am a painter', declares the artist in her artist statement for this catalogue – 'I love my painting, I love doing it'.



Lloyd Rees, *Lloyd Rees*, Thames and Hudson Australia, 2013, large-format hardback; rrp \$60, 176pp; ISBN: 9781741740882

Pick of the crop

Two picks from Thames & Hudson Australia's April 2013 releases include *Artists of Nigeria in Private French Collection* and *Lloyd Rees*. The former, by Nigerian artist and art historian Onyema Offoedu Okeke, is the first book of its kind to comprehensively document over a century of Nigerian art, comprising almost 700 pages and over 1100 colour images. Okeke skilfully traces the evolution of modern and contemporary Nigerian art within a broad network of differing cultural and institutional contexts. He previously curated *Africa Passage: Six Artists from Nigeria* for London's Air Gallery in 2003, and represented Nigeria at the *Artiade: Olympics of Art* at the Athens Olympic Games, 2004.

Brisbane-born and long-time Sydney resident Lloyd Rees (1885-1988) is described by Art Gallery of NSW Director Michael Brand as Australia's closest equivalent to 'an old master'. The *Lloyd Rees* publication accompanies the exhibition *Lloyd Rees: Paintings, drawings and prints* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales which opens later this month (24 April to 7 July). With an introductory essay by Hendrik Kolenberg, the Gallery's Senior Curator of Australian Prints, Drawings and Watercolours. The book

likewise draws on the Gallery's extensive (and unparalleled) collection of Rees's paintings, drawings and prints (numbering over 1000 works which span from 1918 until the year of Rees's death). Kolenberg is a noted authority on Rees, with this publication adding to our appreciation of the artist through its focus on his landscapes, and in articulating (particularly through the book's visual logic) key relationships between Rees's paintings and drawings. thameshudson.com.au; artgallerynsw.gov.au



Scott Morrison, *small choir*, 2012, still from video work; single Channel HD video loop (continuous); image courtesy the artist and Beam Contemporary, Melbourne

Errata/clarification

A few apologies relating to our March 2013 edition, 'the emerging issue', No. 257: to Scott Morrison, whose work *small choir* (2012) was wrongly attributed (to a Scott Robinson) in Jane O'Neil's article 'Micro-niche', pp. 33-35; to Logan Macdonald whose article on FELTspace in the 'ARI Experiment' misspelled his surname as 'McDonald' (p. 48), and for any errors on AMA's part in Rex Butler's article 'The QCA School', pp. 40-43 (see related Letter to the Editor, p. 37). Finally, Leanne Waterhouse's article on Darwin ARI, DVAA (p. 59) failed to mention that the *Art on Wheels* project actually came about through the project management of Rebecca Arbon and Siying Zhou.