

Interview with Geoff Overheu by Louise Morrison, June 2009

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Geoff Overheu is an Australian sculptor currently based in Gingin. He studied at Central TAFE and Curtin University in Perth and at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. On the weekend before his exhibition opened at Turner Galleries in Northbridge, Louise Morrison got Geoff to explain his exasperation with “crazy curators” and his joy at seeing what he hopes is the death throes of “me-me art”.

Despite your geographical isolation, or perhaps because of it, you are one of the most plugged-in artists I know.

I have fifteen or so favourites bookmarked in Internet Explorer and I check in with some of them most days. I read the Arts sections in *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Brisbane Courier Mail*, *The Telegraph* (UK), *The Guardian* (UK), *The New York Times* (USA), *The Independent* (UK), *The New Yorker* (USA) as well as *Art Tattler*, *Art Forum* (USA), *Wooster Collective* (USA) and *ArtLife* (AUSTRALIA).

I enjoy writers such as Jonathon Jones and Adrian Serle, reviewers for *The Guardian* and also Peter Schjeldahl’s reviews in *The New Yorker*. Schjeldahl was initially untrained in the visual arts and guys like that make the best critics; you know, people who just fall into it and get passionate about it. They come from an uncontaminated position. At art school, we were force fed to a degree and it takes a few years to get rid of it once you leave.

And is it through your daily surfing that you’ve spotted an abundance of what you call “me-me art”?

Yes, an example would be the second series of *The Art Life* on ABC TV which seemed to focus on the artist as hero, but I found a lot of the work to be self indulgent and fairly impenetrable. One of trends I’ve noticed in Australian art at the moment is performance art. Some of it is very interesting; some of it’s as boring as batshit. Most of it is “me-me”. I find the trouble with “me-me art” is that it’s everywhere and it’s boring. The aesthetic is global; I recently went to Hong Kong and London and a lot of the contemporary art in both places looked the same as at any grad show here in any year. Why? Well, “me-me art” is almost Jungian in form; it’s all about me and my importance. It’s reflects consumerism and a longing for celebrity.

Look at it and you’ll see it’s all about the artist – they’re saying “Look at me, this is my life.” There seems to be no place for the viewer. I knew a guy who smoked a lot of dope; he made a book about it and put a whole show together about that experience. That’s fine but it would’ve made a better film. The exhibited works were incredibly tedious to look at. I thought, “well, that’s great, you got stoned for ten years and it’s led to some personal repercussions”. This guy has made some great art but this piece drove me mad because I thought, “hey, why do I have to listen to your pain? I have enough of my own”.

One major thing that “me-me art” lacks is joy and that’s a shame. Where is the joy? Gimme joy! I remember a Lecturer at the VCA telling us to celebrate banality. Well, you can celebrate it on your own, pal!

The aesthetic of “me-me art” always seems to be cluttered and relies on the found object. These objects are given new meaning but only new meaning for the artist. They tell us, “this represents that”. But it’s aesthetic banality. Inevitably “me-me art” is poorly conceived and has either been not-made or badly made; it’s haphazard and slapdash. They say, “oh yeah, well it’s not about craft, or making, or finishing” but that’s crap. I always hear the same thing. It’s actually an aesthetic laziness that comes out of art school. Sure, Carl Andre did it, but it took him ten years to get those bricks aligned. People come out of art school now and put a brick on the floor and they tell us it means this or, just as bad, it’s about this or that theory. That’s the other thing I’m noticing, a lot of art that illustrates theory.

“Me-me art” has no risk, it’s so cool and you can disappear behind that cool. So, if someone comes along and goes, “this is crap”, the “me-me artist” can say, “oh, you don’t understand it, it’s about me and it works for me”. Because there is so little diversity in the work or so much of the work is the same, it seems to me that the “me-me” artists come from the middle class and are filtered through the elite universities and art schools. There is total acceptance of authority and “me-me” art craves to join that status quo.

That whole conversation that goes “there is no such thing as good or bad art” is nonsense, of course there is! What drives me crazy about “me-me art” is that it’s inflicted on my eyeballs. I’m pissed off about that. I love seeing great art. It’s **visual** art, after all.

Sometimes that gets overlooked, I think.

That’s right. I read recently the comments of an experienced senior curator in a capital city newspaper after she had put a show together in Melbourne. She said that she can tell a really good artist by simply talking to them. I’m just gobsmacked, how does that work? It’s **visual** art. What does she do? Talk to the painter in the kitchen before going into the studio and thinks “oh yeah, his painting is really good?” That doesn’t make sense but for some reason, as a curator, she gets away with it. I kept a very close eye on the newspaper for three or four days after that comment was published and nothing happened. Readers must’ve been either like me, not wanting to put a comment out there saying that what she had suggested was ludicrous or that people just accept it.

Like Dale Hickey said in *The Invisible Dragon*, there’s a whole language built by these people that keeps them empowered. In farming, we called it “bamboozle them with bullshit”. The language is art speak and artists who speak fluent art can use this verbal to dress up their work with all the kit so when a curator comes along they’ll say “wow man, you’re the goods”. And, hey, why wouldn’t you do this because if you do, you’ll get the gigs. The

craziness of this is that we end up looking at banal, hurting-my-eye art and everyone watches the success of this and thinks, "jeez, that works, I'll do that too" and suddenly we've got a movement.

I love going into galleries and being amazed and challenged and I'm tired of going in to galleries and having to read something to understand the work, it's just boring. Often there's nothing you can take out with you from just having looked at it. There hasn't been a synapse in your head that's gone "ping". But when you go into something like the Oscar Munoz show, you think about it for days afterwards. Or William Robinson, and I'm not a great lover of painting, but when I look at his paintings and I've lived all my life in the bush, I say, "wow, that's what it's like, I look here and then I look here and then I look here but I'm still here. Fantastic."

I love that work and I also like Chinese contemporary art, particularly the object makers. I can take something away from these works, even though I haven't had the same experiences as the artist. I can say, "yeah, I kind of know what you're talking about", I mean, I didn't go through the cultural revolution, I've read a lot about it and I'm responding to what's going on inside my head based on what I've read, but just seeing the work and the tough humour in it means I take something away from it. "Me-me art" can't do that.

There really is something about life experience that makes for good art, but not in a narcissistic 'artist as individual creative genius' way. It seems to me it takes 10 years or so after art school before you start finding your place in contemporary conversation and it is then that interesting work starts to manifest itself and have some relevance to this conversation. Sure, Michelangelo was making great stuff at 18 but he was dropped off at the quarries at the age of 10 so you could argue that it took him 8-10 years to get it right too.