

INTERVIEW for 4 Face Space, Beijing

‘Immersive photography’

Tim Gruchy interviewed by Rhana Devenport

The experiential possibilities of creating immersive environments incorporating the moving image have absorbed New Zealand-based artist Tim Gruchy for nearly three decades. He has worked primarily in the fields of synaesthesia and experimental performance, moving into opera and contemporary music collaborations. In more recent years his work has concentrated on the articulation of installations involving video and interactivity. For Beijing, Gruchy has distilled those interests into complex photographic works that address the ‘natural’ environment. These works highlight the artist’s interests in perception as both a sensorial process and as a culturally-formed modality.

Rhana Devenport: You have steadfastly dedicated yourself to experimentation in the field of expanded video since the 1980s, how have these interests and experiences informed your current photographic work at this moment in time?

Tim Gruchy: I see all of my work in the same flow of practice and still cameras have always been an important element in my suite of tools. Though primarily known for my moving image work, I see it as perfectly logical to express my concerns as still images and have always resisted the pressure to work within any one medium. Exploring temporal and spatial dislocations is consistent with my interests and in these photographic works I have developed a series of techniques that takes them away – temporally and spatially – from standard single shutter photographs towards a static image that still conveys spatiality, a sense of time shifting, and subtle layered abstraction.

RD: You sometimes describe yourself as a visual musician, can you speak about the role of the soundtrack you have created to accompany the photographic prints?

TG: My work has always involved sound and vision. I have always been very interested in working with vision in a musical way and music in a visual way, thus it seems natural that I would have a sound component to accompany the work. The sound component is a means to heighten the immersiveness of the viewer experience within the conceptual framework. By its inclusion, the soundscape immediately hastens and deepens the audience’s perceptual engagement with the work.

RD: Can you talk about the subtle manipulations you bring to the final coalesced images?

TG: I am not interested in photo-realism, the aspect of the work that interests me is about ways of viewing and perception. Although we like to think of our visual reality as a cohesive whole, it is actually a construct of shifting attention and focus augmented through time, overlaid by

cultural and physical realities. Along with spatial and temporal stitching, I have undertaken multiple layers of digital and hand-worked effecting, both globally and regionally within the image, to move it away from reality in an irregular and diverse way. Importantly, it also alludes to memory, as over time our mental image of a scene changes and becomes distorted.

RD: Why a 360° view? How does the work relate to your recent interactive, multi-screen, 360° video installation, Clesthyra's Undoing for the Taichung Asian Art Biennial?

TG: I have been working with expanded cinema and immersive environments for a very long time. 360° is the logical extension point of this approach. With these photographs I am unfolding these views back into a two-dimensional plane as a way of representing them in a fixed way, unlike my interactive moving image installations, such as Clesthyra's Undoing (CU) 2009 or Museum of Dreams 2004, which offer the audience a truly immersive physical environment within which to experience the work.

In the case of CU, which comprises a 14 metre diameter cylindrical screen space, the audience is not only surrounded by the moving image and multichannel sound, but their movement within the space is monitored and controls aspects of what occurs on the screen. Museum of Dreams is a booth environment within which a smaller audience is partially surrounded by screen space and a surround sound system.

My recent still image works in this current exhibition and my light box works for Invisible City seen at Shanghai Metro Station in 2010, both utilise 360° panoramic content and are both ways of manifesting temporality and spatiality in an unorthodox fixed way.

RD: You were born in Wales and grew up in Australia, your father was born in India and your mother in Canada, can you talk about your ideas about place, in particular about New Zealand and China, and how they have informed this work?

TG: Given my background and ideology, nationalism has never had strong appeal for me. Perhaps this has given me an outsider's view of other cultures and allowed me to look at cultures in a fresh way. Similarly, having spent my childhood in rural Australia with its vast tracks of untouched landscape meant that I grew up with a very peculiar understanding of what nature was. Now living in New Zealand, I understand the concept of nature to be very different and in fact the perception of nature as '100% Pure' [the trademark of a successful international tourism campaign for New Zealand] could not be further from the truth. Though unarguably spectacularly beautiful, New Zealand is none the less a landscape hugely effected by the relatively short period of human habitation. Notions of nature in China, given its vast history, have another entirely different meaning with its complex history and massive population, all Chinese countryside has been shaped by cultural concerns and human touch. This understanding of nature is of interest to me, and in this new work I seek to create representations of nature that allude to these concerns.

RD: Has making these photographic works shifted your conception of, or feeling for, the natural environment in New Zealand or China?

TG: Making these works has further heightened and focused my perception of the environment around me and just what it is we call 'nature'. I now understand nature more as a cultural

construct than as an idealised absolute. These constructs take on different qualities in different countries, the differences between New Zealand and China being particularly interesting for me.

New Zealand is very fortunate to be a place in the world that still possesses apparently pristine countryside, but much of it is actually under threat. I do think people need to see the reality of what is actually happening and the threats that nature is under. Complacency is no defence. China has acute environmental problems but I am heartened to see the growing awareness of environmental issues. There is much to be done and there is a huge ability to harness resources once a clear direction is charted.

RD: There are about 52 billion photographs taken each year in the world. There is a tremendous challenge for photography to earn value and meaning in our heavily mediated and digitally distributed environment. Why do you use a camera?

TG: Over my career all technologies have evolved tremendously particularly since the digital revolution, at the same time their usage has evolved as well. I have always tended to use the tools at my disposal in unorthodox ways that push and extend the boundaries of popular usage. This body of work is just another example of that practice. A camera is just a tool, albeit hugely popular at this point in history. It is what one chooses to do with that material, and the conceptual motivations and frameworks that inform it, that imbue outcomes with value.

RD: Why do you make art?

TG: I have no choice; it is always something I have felt compelled to do which is now part of my very being. I had a clear conception very early in my life of the creative direction I wanted to pursue. I spent the early part of my practice learning a broad skill set to achieve that direction. Now I feel that I am able to bring tremendous complexity, subtlety and hopefully a poeticism within a broad longstanding set of conceptual concerns. Hopefully the outcomes – that now embrace a range of mediums – touch the broadest range of audiences possible. Whilst being easily approachable, they provide a depth for those who wish to engage further. Above all else, I appreciate the privileged position that being an artist allows me, and seek though my work to be a positive if critical force.

Rhana Devenport is Director of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in Taranaki, New Zealand. She worked with the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane for ten years and with the 2006 Biennale of Sydney and the 2004 Sydney Festival on a project with Nam June Paik. Her recent project China in Four Seasons was a year-long project involving artist residencies and exhibitions by Jin Jiangbo, Guo Fengyi, Zhang Peili, Yin Xiuzhen and Song Dong.

The interview took place on 5, 6 September in New Plymouth, New Zealand.