



CHRIS BENNIE MOOD SWINGS

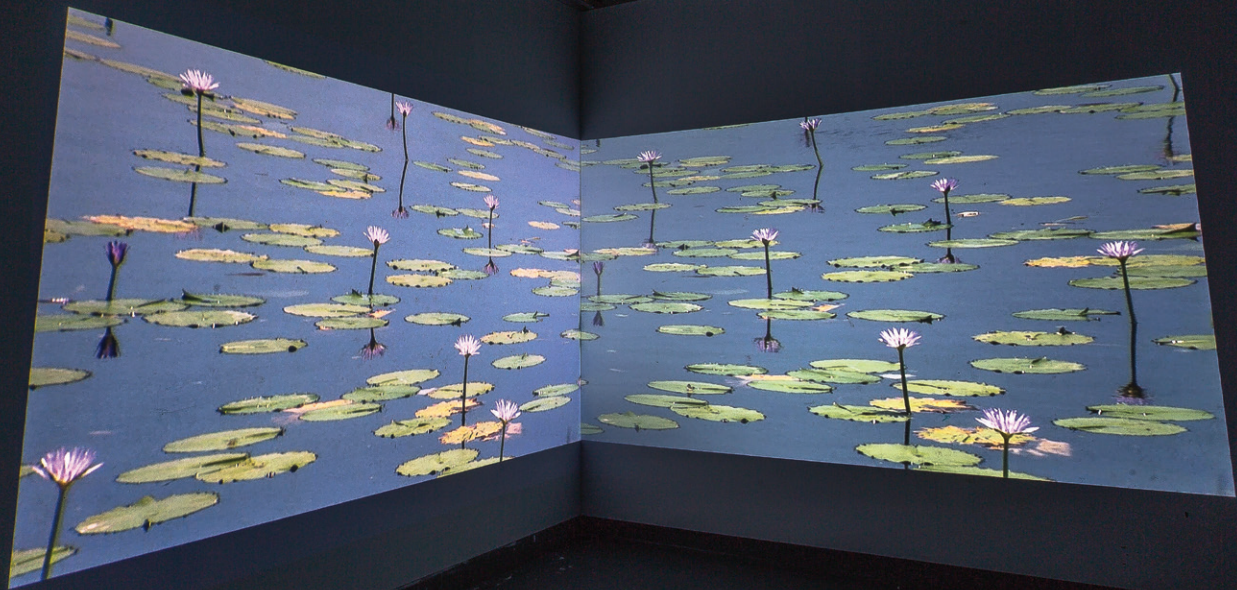
Griffith University Queensland College of Art Postgraduate and Other Projects Gallery
A research based contemporary arts space run by the Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research

19 - 30 April 2017

Essay by Miranda Hine







Mood Swings

There was an ad on TV a few years ago for BCF, the boating, camping and fishing store. It opened with a family sitting on a couch and a very enthusiastic dad, Barry, switching on a nature documentary for the night's entertainment. As the scene cut from the couch to a speedboat skating across a body of water, the narrator declared, 'That ain't living, Barry. This is living!'. This ad aligns unexpectedly with the video work of Gold Coast artist Chris Bennie, whose solo exhibition *Mood Swings* uses screen-based media to raise questions of authentic experience with particular reference to the sublime in nature.

It is worth noting, before we go on, that the Romantics used the word sublime to describe a sense of wondrous terror that nature inspires. Rather aptly, following the mention of BCF, the word's 'modern usage has been so watered down by commercial hype and tourist advertising that it retains only a dim echo of its former power'.¹ By amplifying, constructing and disrupting these ideas of the 'sublime', the works in *Mood Swings* propose yet another renewed meaning of the word that adheres to neither its Romantic nor its modern definition.

1. W. Cronan, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co Inc., 1995).

Pond (2017) depicts waterlilies floating serenely on a glassy water's surface. Bennie has duplicated the footage, constructing a two-channel installation that forms a larger, more cinematic image ruptured by a single join. Bennie's simple intervention enhances the already placid, meditative video, amplifying the sense of what might be considered a sublime natural experience. Yet his duplication of the image indicates a potentially 'unnatural' human involvement that reconsiders the Romantic notion of sublime as found only in untouched wilderness.

This idea of a pure and untouched wilderness, which lends itself so easily to conceptions of the sublime, is generally agreed by ecological theorists to be an illusion², something imagined as sacred because of its supposed absence of human presence.³ Cronan tells us, for example, that when we see pristine wilderness in nature, it is because we are projecting onto it our own expectations, our own desires.⁴ In *Mood Swings*, Bennie plays on this 'wilderness myth'⁵ to create a tension around what an authentic experience of nature actually means. For example, in our desire to see the waterlilies in Pond as transcending human contamination, pristine and unspoiled, we don't consider the Monet-esque bridge which likely spans the pond just out of shot, allowing tourists to soak up their promised handful of the watered down sublime. The wilderness myth means that our experience of nature is arguably itself inauthentic, an idea that complicates Bennie's navigation of authentic experience from his works' very inception.

2. Ibid; V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); A. M. Ellison, "The Suffocating Embrace of Landscape and the Picturesque Condition of Ecology," *Landscape Journal* 32, no. 1 (2013).

3. Cronan, *Uncommon Ground*.

4. Ibid.

5. A. Gómez-Pompa & A. Kaus, "Taming the Wilderness Myth," *BioScience* 42, no. 4 (1992).









This complication is evident once again in *River* (2017), which disrupts the still serenity of *Pond*. The artist leaps, spins and flips, sometimes naked, sometimes clad in swimming shorts, in the Eucalypt stained waters of the Shoalhaven River. The sublime here is not necessarily in the river, sky, or bushland. Rather, it seems to be in the artist's reversal of the video, a strategy that renders his movements alien to his natural surrounds and echoes an absurd ritual that is at once familiar and foreign. If Bennie amplifies already spectacular natural imagery to elicit the possibility of the sublime in *Pond*, in *River* he constructs that possibility using only his body's performance and the honesty of its blatant post-production manipulation. This honesty, in presenting images that have clearly been technologically altered, pervades the exhibition and resists the common conception of video as a relatively inauthentic medium.

In each work, Bennie employs the mediation necessarily generated by video – that disconnect between viewer and reality offset by screens – to question our understanding of the authentic. The mediated image creates distance and control, allowing the natural imagery to become consumable, tame, much like Barry's nature documentary on TV. The sublime becomes small, screen-sized, anthropocentric. With so many layers of mediation between us – the viewers – and the original experience of nature, at what point did the 'authenticity' end, if it did? Was it when Bennie entered nature, which may have been an inauthentic experience to begin with? Was it when he began filming, when he edited the videos, when he projected them? When they were sent from our eyes to our brains to be processed? At exactly what point did Barry stop living?

Bennie uses mediation to pose these questions perhaps most directly in *Moon* (2017). In the work, we see footage of the moon captured with a zoom lens and an unsteady hand. Rather than amplifying or constructing the potential for the sublime as

he does in *River and Pond*, in *Moon* Bennie consciously disrupts it. The clumsy interruptions to the moon's image prevent us from becoming immersed in the celestial view, as the camera's jolted movements remind us of the human lens through which we must experience space and indeed the entirety of nature. By deliberately disrupting our opportunity to engage with the cosmic sublime, Bennie creates a new type of authentic experience in which a new, human, imperfect sublime could emerge.

This, Bennie's new sublime, is derived not from nature but from within an honest reflection on human experience. The works in *Mood Swings* therefore propose new forms of the authentic, again rooted not in nature but in some kind of human intervention in its representation.

There is, then, in Bennie's works a proposition that Barry did not necessarily stop living. After all, what makes a speedboat skating across a body of water more authentic than sitting in your living room? Indeed, Bennie allows Barry to live on through a set of redefined 'authentic experiences' which involve new possibilities of the sublime. This new sublime might reject the need to remove human intervention to leave pure, unadulterated nature. This new sublime might even thrive within screen-based and digitally manufactured or altered experiences. You might see it where no one else does. It is maybe personal and maybe shared.

Miranda Hine







EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED GROUP)

2017	<i>Sculpture at Scenic World</i> , Blue Mountains New South Wales. <i>Too Close To Call</i> , Pine Rivers Regional Art Gallery.
2016	<i>Shift</i> , Judith Wright Centre, Brisbane. <i>Dhanamenta 2</i> , Miami, Queensland. Curated by Dhana Merritt.
2015	<i>Innerspace</i> , Canberra Contemporary Artspace. Curated by David Broker. <i>Hung Out To Dry</i> , University of Queensland Art Museum. <i>Cutback: surfing through art</i> , Gold Coast City Gallery.
2014	<i>Compulsion Loop</i> , Boxcopy, Brisbane. Curated by Sarah Baron. <i>Fibro Coast</i> , La Costa Hotel, Bilinga, Gold Coast. Curated by Virginia Rigney.
2012	<i>SafARI</i> , Alaska Projects, Sydney. <i>When You Drink The Water, Remember The Spring</i> , Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane. <i>Immediacy</i> , Brisbane. Curated by Jay Younger and Beth Jackson.
2011	<i>New Psychedelia</i> , University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane. Curated by Sebastian Moody.
2008	<i>Contemporary Australia: Optimism</i> , Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. <i>Sydney Biennale, Revolutions: forms that turn</i> , Sydney.
2007	<i>New Work 3</i> Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth. <i>Figuratively Speaking: The figure in contemporary video art</i> , Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, Brisbane. Curated by Simone Hine.
2006	<i>Greatest Hits, Previously Unreleased Tracks</i> , Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. <i>+Plus Factors</i> , Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, Melbourne.
2004	<i>Hatched</i> , Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. Perth. <i>Savvy: New Australian Art</i> , Queensland University of Technology Art Museum. Brisbane. <i>All that Glitters: Contemporary Visions of the Gold Coast</i> . Gold Coast City Gallery.

EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED SOLO)

2017	<i>Mood Swings</i> , Griffith University Pop Gallery, Brisbane. <i>On Top, In Front</i> , Gold Coast City Gallery.
2015	<i>The Waves + Control Rooms</i> , PhotoAccess, Canberra. <i>When Will We Ever Be Forever Together</i> , Alaska Projects, Sydney.
2014	<i>Control Rooms</i> , Youkobo Artspace, Tokyo. <i>The Kissing Swans</i> , Bundaberg Recreation Centre, Bundaberg. <i>Fern Studio Floor: a cosmology</i> , The Walls Art Space, Miami, Gold Coast.
2013	<i>Move</i> , Hold Artspace, Brisbane.
2012	<i>Tent Peg</i> , Ryan Renshaw Window Space. Curated by Anna Zammit.
2010	<i>A Wee Sunset</i> , Linden Contemporary Art Centre, Melbourne.
2009	<i>Smooth Machines</i> , South Bank, Brisbane. <i>Jordie</i> , Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia Project Space, Adelaide.
2008	<i>Two Ships</i> . Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney.
2006	<i>The Brandenburg Bear + On Track</i> , Transit Lounge, Berlin. <i>Our Communication Recorded</i> , Blindside Artist Run Space, Melbourne.
2003	<i>Slower</i> , Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
2001	<i>My Successes My Failures</i> , Thornquest Gallery, Gold Coast

WINNING AWARDS

2014	<i>The Clayton Utz Art Prize</i> , Brisbane.
2013	<i>Swell Sculpture Festival</i> , Currumbin Beach.
2012	<i>Gold Coast Art Prize</i> , Gold Coast Art Gallery.

SELECTED FINALIST AWARDS

2016	<i>Sunshine Coast Art Prize</i> , Caloundra Regional Gallery. <i>Noosa Art Prize</i> , Noosa (highly commended).
2015	<i>The Churchie National Emerging Art Prize</i> , Griffith University Art Prize, Brisbane.
2014	<i>Josephine Ulrich and Wynn Schubert Photography Prize</i> , Gold Coast Art Gallery.
2013	<i>National Artists' Self Portrait Prize</i> , University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane. <i>John Fries Memorial Art Prize</i> , Gaffa Gallery, Sydney (highly commended). <i>Sculpture By The Sea</i> , Bondi, Sydney.
2011	<i>The Clayton Utz Contemporary Art Prize</i> , Brisbane.
2010	<i>Josephine Ulrich and Win Schubert Photography Award</i> , Gold Coast Art Gallery. <i>City of Hobart Art Prize</i> , Tasmania.
2009	<i>Stan and Maureen Duke Gold Coast Art Prize</i> . Gold Coast Art Gallery.
2008	<i>HTM Wilson Art Prize</i> , Touring Sophie Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane.
2007	<i>Stan and Maureen Duke Gold Coast Art Prize</i> . Gold Coast Art Gallery.

GRANTS, RESIDENCIES AND COMMISSIONS

2016	Shortlisted Finalist, Urban Oasis Public Art Commission, Gold Coast.
2015	Bundanon Trust Residency, New South Wales.
2014	Asialink Residency Youkobo Artspace, Japan.
2013	Bundanon Trust Residency, New South Wales. Australia Council for the Arts New Work Grant.
2012	Regional Galleries Association of Queensland Bursary.
2010	Australia Council for the Arts New Work Grant.
2009	Shortlisted Finalist Australia Council Kunsterhaus Bethanian Residency.
2008	Arts Queensland Development and Presentation Grant. Brisbane City Council Creative Sparks Grant.
2007	Artworkers Alliance and State Library of Queensland Interactive New Media Residency Arts Queensland Project Grant.
2006	Transit-Lounge Residency, Berlin.
2005	Shandong College of Art and Design Residency and Cultural Exchange, China Griffith University Postgraduate Scholarship.

