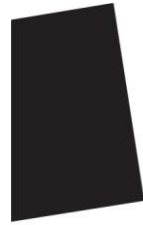


Boyd Webb: COMMA 24

Essay by Paul Bonaventura



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Opening times
Mon - Sat, 11:00 - 18:00

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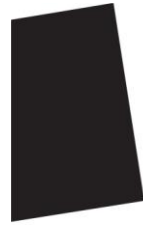
Boyd Webb: COMMA 24

There's no getting around it. Those two large images in the front gallery at Bloomberg SPACE – one of a toy animal and the other... well, goodness knows what that is - are plain strange. Then again, strangeness is a quantity that has never been in short supply in the work of Boyd Webb.

Boyd Webb revels in staging elegantly observed and absurd scenarios, which often reflect on the eccentricities of human behaviour. His richly coloured Cibachrome photographs of painterly panoramas are widely acclaimed, but he also makes installations, sculptures and performances, and he has directed four short films.

The critic Stuart Morgan commented in 1987 in what is still one of the best pieces of writing about his art that no name exists for the genre Webb has perfected, and the accuracy of that observation remains in force up to today: 'Flaunting the power of fiction, [Webb] simultaneously lays it bare. His work is a fabrication, in the fullest sense of the word... [His] need to make deflections [and] complications within a unitary meaning proves as strong as his desire to mix media, to employ words, to be honest to the confusion of events and the particularity of objects.'

Born in New Zealand in 1947, Webb studied at the Ilam School of Art in Christchurch (1968-71) before coming to London to undertake a postgraduate degree in sculpture at the Royal College of Art (1972-75). His earliest one-man exhibition at the Robert Self Gallery in 1976 was followed two years later by the first of two solo shows at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. The second, in 1987, was a real triumph and led to major presentations at prestigious venues all over the world. He



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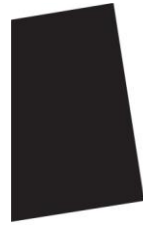
represented Britain at the VIIIth Indian Triennale in Delhi in 1994, and his work featured in the Sydney Biennale in 1995.

Yet for all his success every new show of the artist's work in this country has been met with a slight note of puzzlement. Partly this is to do with the fact that most of his exhibitions since 1990 have taken place abroad, so there can be long gaps when the artist is invisible in his adopted home, but it is also a function of the offbeat, allegorical nature of the work. Although he is now in his sixties, Boyd Webb is probably one of British art's better-kept secrets.

Emily Perkins has suggested that the quintessential Boyd Webb is 'one of those vivid universes of the underneath'. At the time the New Zealand writer and novelist was referring to the iconic Cibachromes of the mid-1980s like *Lung* and *Evesdroppist*, but we could quite easily extend her description to encompass all the artist's work. For the past forty years, Webb has sought to explore the dark matter of life, chipping away at the complacency and familiarity that adults display towards their visible surroundings.

Of course, this isn't true of children. Children live in a world of make-believe and play, which only occasionally rub up against the supposed certainties of everyday reality. In *Homo Ludens*, his ground-breaking study on the importance of play in human society, the Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga remarked: 'Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. (But) civilisation does not come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play and never leaves it.' During the course of his remarkable book, Huizinga went on to demonstrate that every aspect of culture derives from and is inextricably linked to play, and that creativity is the most clear-cut demonstration of the play factor in operation.

Webb's creativity speaks to the childlike, play-making impulse in all of us. His art is provocative, captivating and enchanting; it acts as a spell over us. Everything about it is



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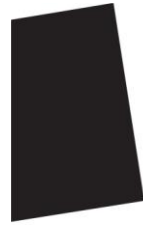
tangibly bogus and illusory yet it manifests enough authenticity to incite our curiosity. In point of fact it is impossible not to look for a plotline in the pieces that Webb offers up for our perusal. We know we are witnessing the hermetic, fantastical imaginings of the artist's brain, and we know those imaginings have a surreal, hallucinatory quality, but we cannot quite stop ourselves from trying to make sense of the work on our own terms.

The two dominant images in the current show are visible from Finsbury Square, luring us into the gallery for closer inspection. Once inside we have an opportunity to see two smaller photographic reproductions of the same images, framed together like a double-page spread in a book. This diptych-excused functions as a key to the exhibition, and is accompanied by a semi-explanatory caption, which reads: 'Sleep/Sheep - Memories compress & expand like breath.'

Webb has been making billboard images since the early 1980s, but this is the first occasion that he has worked with wallpaper, and his use of it at Bloomberg SPACE sets up a thoughtful conversation between art, advertising and the public realm. 'Both of the depicted objects are very small,' says Webb. 'The atrium-like volume of the gallery allowed me to present them on a truly vast scale; the idea of the viewer wallowing in dog sleep does appeal. I would like the images to annoy the quizzical and provoke head scratching.'

So just what is going on here?

Sheep looks like an escapee from the Roslin Institute, the animal sciences research laboratory in Scotland that gave us Dolly the sheep, the first mammal to be cloned from an adult cell. Webb's crude, chunky toy is clearly handmade. Its wool is fairly realistic, but it seems to be missing a nose, and the feet are decidedly odd. The artist thinks it might have gone astray genetically over time and looks as if it has been bred solely for its breast meat, like the proverbial Christmas turkey.



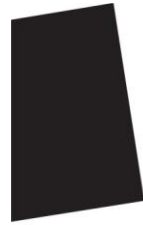
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It is interesting to be considering this image as we digest the implications of what has recently been taking place at the J Craig Venter Institute in America. Earlier this year Venter and his team succeeded in developing the first synthetic living cell, constructing a bacterium's 'genetic software' and transplanting it into a host cell. The advance was published in *Science* and has been hailed as a scientific landmark, but critics say artificial organisms like Cynthia pose unknown dangers. The fact that Webb has been manufacturing outlandish hybrids for decades appears to have been overlooked by society's moral guardians.

The other, even more mysterious image in the exhibition turns out to be a reconstruction of the sleep from a dog's eye, and specifically Archibald, the artist's Bedlington/Border Terrier Cross. Webb agrees that *Sleep* is a pretty unattractive image. 'When you look carefully at dog sleep,' he explains, 'it contains hair. It's quite moist when fresh, but as it dries it comes to resemble a sparsely hirsute asteroid.'

The original object proved to be too small to photograph clearly so Webb was obliged to create a larger facsimile out of shoe polish, quince cheese and dog hair. *Sleep* is undoubtedly ambiguous, and the artist is happy for us to put forward different accounts as to what it might be: 'My work often invites wayward explanations, and I'm happy for this to happen. I don't do hard and fast.' Ultimately, the fact that the sleep was sourced from a dog is immaterial, as Webb wants the viewer to read it as generic sleep, bringing with it all the associations of dreaming and the passage of time; the residue of seeing things with our eyes closed.

Sleep and *Sheep* continue the concern with impossible grafts and combinations that characterised Webb's work in the 1980s and 1990s. What has disappeared, however, are the theatrical settings. Gone are the ingenious carpet seas, the linoleum rocks and the paint-flecked heavens. In their place we find nothing but almost featureless backdrops of whiteness, stark and clinical; both objects have been photographed like scientific specimens, hovering in pristine space.



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This exhibition comes on the back of a period of reflection and consolidation for Webb, following his 2008 visit to Antarctica on the Invited Artists Residency Programme administered by Antarctica New Zealand. Whether the forensic-style presentation here can be traced to his time on the planet's southernmost continent is fanciful, but not totally implausible.

In moments of wakefulness and as an aid to sleep, many of us resort to counting identical white sheep jumping over a fence. And if androids dream of electric sheep, why can't dogs conjure up their mutant counterparts? What we are witnessing on the walls of Bloomberg SPACE could be the birth of a new kind of life, but there's no surprise there. As Stuart Morgan pointed out all those years ago, in his own private cosmos Webb is God.

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Paul Bonaventura is the Senior Research Fellow in Fine Art Studies at the University of Oxford