

Tomahawk and Blue

I found myself creeping around the back of a Dunedin Nightclub, I could still smell and see the urine stained to the pavement, there were 3 or 4 bins of empty bottles, glass smashed on the ground. I found the door that I was told was there, and pressed 62A. 'Come on up' a warm, welcoming but distracted voice announced on the speaker. I started walking up the 3 flights of stairs, and pondered at the rubbish, empty beer bottles, the flickering and humming fluorescent light, holes in the walls and spilt liquids... I arrived at a door where Adam Douglass met me. Douglass explained to me that the neighbors were a bit untidy, they had been evicted...he said with an appreciative smile. The neighbors had managed to create drama and tension in the stairwell which Douglass embraced whole heartedly approaching his studio exhibition. Adam Douglass is an interdisciplinary artist, whose practice explores philosophical conundrums through chance encounters and creative and spatial relationships. Douglass' primary concerns are based around painting and painting related artistic endeavors.

'Tomahawk' is an installation held in the artist's studio; an apartment residing upstairs from a nightclub. The space consists of three bedrooms, lounge, kitchen, bathroom, corridor and the installation has merged with the outside world to a balcony on an adjacent building and a roof structure outside the studio window.

Entering the apartment the viewer finds themselves engulfed inside a baby blue painted corridor. This corridor is the main artery of the installation, the walls and ceiling are saturated with blue, the white skirting leads the viewer to two potential destinations; a lounge and an old bedroom. The lounge is open planned with a kitchen separated by a bench. We encounter a series of blue paintings featuring floating cloud like forms, with real physical holes, from these holes protrude arms gripping and swinging tomahawks. There is a painted blue sofa, a blue painting protruding from a fireplace, a table which has been covered in blue canvas, a blue chair, a blue painting on the adjacent building and a roof structure has been painted blue also, the kitchen has been immersed in site specific blue paintings. In the two bedrooms we notice three more blue paintings and on an upward glance the ceiling. The ceiling is painted baby blue, an idealized illusion of the outside world, (ideal in Dunedin anyway.) Whilst entering the space, life seems to have been paused. The painting protruding from the fireplace looks to be ready to absorb the sofa and about to flood the corridor... if it hasn't already done so. The sky is falling in two bedrooms and the paintings are attempting to leave their strainers that they were stretched on. The installation looks to have taken a life of its own, being in the studio the viewer is being injected inside the creative process, like listening to music while being in the band.

The domestic urban environment is detrimental in the reading of this installation. Rather than isolating the viewer and placing them in a foreign pristine environment which a gallery can do, this installation places an individual in a familiar domestic space; a domestic space which has been subject to the elements environmentally and by man (holes and corrosion) a majority of the holes have been covered in paint but not fixed, the viewer absorbs information, participates and interacts in a recognizable environment, a relational human aesthetic is formed. The relationships between the paintings, content of the paintings, the viewer, the space as an art studio and an urban domestic environment unravel a series of ideas about impermanence, decay and growth, aesthetics of beauty, emptiness, illusion and a cities craving for tidiness and the pristine in a naturally corroding and regenerative environment. By placing the exhibition outside of the commercial gallery and into the artists working environment the artist has complete creative, obsessive control.

'I live in Tomahawk which is a beautiful, exposed, raw village on the beach... I've always liked a raw aesthetic and Dunedin is renowned for this, I'm thinking of the Dunedin sound, the architecture the weather, geography, artists; Jeffrey Harris, Ralph Hotere, James Robinson, Phil Frost, Jo Robertson. I identify with a raw 'non illustrative aesthetic,' it's great to be making work in a building/ flat with history, holes and decay. Creativity isn't pretty, but it is beautiful, existence and creation require dual forces... I can identify with Anselm Kiefer's comment regarding a space to view his work. "My works are very fragile,

and not only in the literal sense. If you put them in the wrong circumstances they can lose their power completely.”¹

Douglass isn't an illusionist but a truth seeker. However he does mask things with paint and/or canvas. Douglass works with the assumption that perception creates an individual's reality, 'the work of art should challenge or disrupt the viewer's expectations about a given image, object or meaning and that the viewer in turn requires this disruption to overcome his or her reliance on habitual forms of perception.'² The paintings in the Tomahawk exhibition are primarily blue. The colour blue in this instance seems to allude to the sky or sea. There are no horizons in these paintings only vast expanses of blue, I would like to attach the idea of the void and the infinite to this blue. These paintings feature cloud like floating forms, within the majority of these clouds we find real physical holes with arms holding tomahawks protruding from them, not painted arms but physical arms made of canvas and stitched, the stitching holds these forms in place and also act as tendons for the hands to clench the tomahawks, the cotton also act as lines of movement, everything is painted to the background. There is a formal use of stitching and cutting to create an object. Similar to New Zealand artist James Robinson, both seem to have common beliefs in creative destructive cycles, Douglass draws figuratively with a knife, and sutures it back together, Douglass then attempts to resolve this destructive beginning with paint, it is important to mention the image drawn and the process of it being drawn, and the relationship to the paint the painted process and painted forms. We see hints of Phillip Guston (1913-1980), 'whose profound paintings of cartoonish things'³ have played a major influence.

Douglass has been attempting to create some sort of reality, some real existence on a two dimensional surface, this surface has slowly become sculptural and three dimensional, and eventually his experiments seem to have over taken and absorbed the studio. The outside void of infinite possibilities, maybe the sky maybe the sea, has seeped through in to the building through the two places the outside world meets the studio space, the chimney- the sky, and the plumbing- the toilet- the sea. Douglass has created the sky as a solid object a physical object as is the sea? He has also created physical holes in the illusionary blue painted surfaces... This exhibition provides more questions than answers, existential, environmental, political, artistic questions. Art can never provide a definite truth; truth is subjective dependant on the viewer's ideals. I'm sure Douglass believes certain things, well I know he does, Douglass' role as an artist isn't that of a preacher. 'Art can never give the enlightenment of the Buddha but through aesthetic experience one can see that life is not futile, however limited.'

"Though different forms are perceived, they are in essence empty; yet in the emptiness one perceives forms.

Though different sounds are heard, they are empty; yet in the emptiness one perceives sounds.

Also different thoughts arise, they are empty; yet in the emptiness one perceives thoughts."⁴

There has been a series of issues in Tomahawk over the last couple of years; a battle between the community and the council over a proposal to recontour the sand dunes, This would have marked the end to the Tomahawk community and environment, the community beat the council in one of the most intensely fuelled David vs. Goliath battles in Dunedin for years. ..There's the sewage issue also, a vast percentage of Dunedin's raw sewage has been released at Lawyers Head (Tomahawk headland) for the past 100 years. A sewage pipe is currently being extended nearby to take the raw sewage further out to sea?

Walter Heke

Adam Douglass *Tomahawk* Blue Oyster Offsite Exhibition, 28 June – 3 July 2008

1. Anselm Kiefer. Pg 72- **Modern Painters**. November 2006

2. Grant Kester. Pg 17 **Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art**. 2004

3. Justin Paton. Pg 69. **Jeffrey Harris**. Published by Victoria University Press and the Dunedin Public Library.

4. Dudjurn Rinpoche. pg139. **Spirit and Art**. Van James. Anthroposophic Press