



Jeff Henderson

...the desire to have a place.
Even if only in the mind...

Harald Szeemann, 1981



Victoria McIntosh

A Museum of Obsessions

Jodie Dalgleish - Curator

A Museum of Obsessions explores the importance and generative potential of: persistent ideas, repetitive techniques, and the obsessional object and its collection. It pays homage to the late Swiss curator Harald Szeemann (1933 – 2005) who established the kind of speculative thought that drives contemporary curatorial practice. Szeemann identified a 'museum of obsessions' as the space that individuals occupy when they are driven by the intense energies of obsession to create their own intellectual and sensorial worlds. For him, the 'museum' was both a space in the mind and the gallery; it was 'possibility and form, for testing connections, for the conservation of the fragile, to document drives.'

I have curated *A Museum of Obsessions* to speculate on obsession as the positive 'unit of energy' Szeemann described as the source of creative individuality and the catalyst of 'intensive intentions' and 'intensity in art.' In particular, I am interested in re-semanticising the word 'obsession', in casting it as a constructive, self-defining, and even transformational force. 'Obsession' can be a word to identify something other than the weird, strange and abnormal – although, 'strange' is a useful word when it is used to highlight the ways in which artists make the familiar new to us. With *A Museum of Obsessions* fourteen artists present work that manifests the creative obsession that drives artistic practice and generates concepts of the self.

Some of the first works encountered on entering the Blue Oyster can be more or less described as collage, which is of interest in a museum of obsessions for the way it combines a particularly intensive and repetitive technique with the potential to constantly remake worlds of perception. California-based artist Peter Wegner's *Reverse Atlas III* continues his process of reconfiguring the world with his version of the interior American West. In late 2007 I worked with Wegner on the big-wall installation of *terra firma incognita* at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, sorting and pinning over 3,000 paper disks – each one a vignette of some part of the world. Wegner had spent a year digitally atomising an atlas he found on top of a dumpster. His is the obsessive process of dismantling and rearranging our world and coming to know it as always unknown. Dunedin artist Michael Morley's presentation of record covers, and the watercolours he has painted after them, introduce the idea of the artist's museum as a space for a free and curious form of collecting. It also suggests the collecting that occurs with collage. Two years after Wegner, Morley installed a big-wall of painted seven-inch records at Dunedin Public Art Gallery to collect the physical and heard-in-memory sound object and suggest an artist's museum of sound.

For me, Wellington-based artist and musician Jeff Henderson's collages are a testament to the pleasure



Hair Nozzles her own hair sprouts, twists and twirls from antique icing nozzles. She co-opts the previous life of domestic objects to create self-made objects of memory and a sense of personal history. Her works point towards Michael Morley's *Twenty years of a wasted life*. Morley has collected his own hair to mark all of the 'major hair cuts' of the last 20 years. He references the fetishism of memorial objects and dark magic while making a quasi-scientific record of a personal process of change.

In a central nook of the gallery local artist Angela Lyon's obsession with Elvis is presented as evidence of a creative drive to claim imagery and construct concepts of the self. It also presents evidence of the way in which an individual's chosen signs and symbols create the 'individual mythologies' (Szeemann) that become a life's matter of course. In *Double Trouble* Lyon's collected images of Elvis as well as her own photographs and drawings of herself as the King of Rock 'n' Roll spread into the gallery. Over the last five years Lyon has collected and artistically claimed Elvis's image for herself. She has also been obsessed with the ways in which Elvis has popularly been idolised and collected. Her work suggests the way in which a museum of obsessions can become the world of the artist's collection.

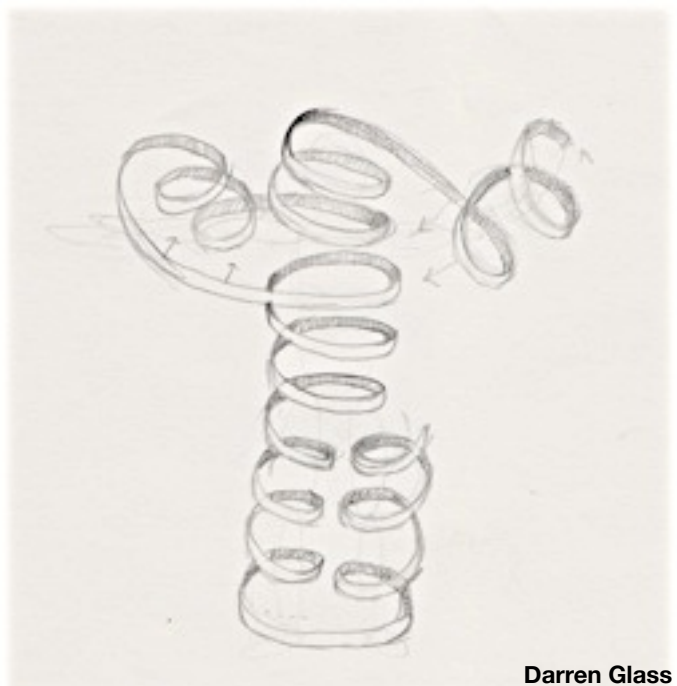
Auckland artist Darren Glass's installations are set along the wall that is seen through the gallery's central archway. The first installation comprises 25 working drawings that present the fundamental importance of an obsessive process of ideation and the potential for new ways of seeing. Here, for example, we see the drawn idea for *Body Cam* that will spiral around the human body, and is to be made in 2011. The second installation presents a small collection of five tiny experimental cameras that extend this kind of process. It is with such cameras that the artist continually explores not only the process of idea-to

and absurdity of constructing a world-in-pieces. They somehow follow the form of his improvised music and make me ponder upon the ways in which we give our lives a sensorially-rich and disordered kind of order.

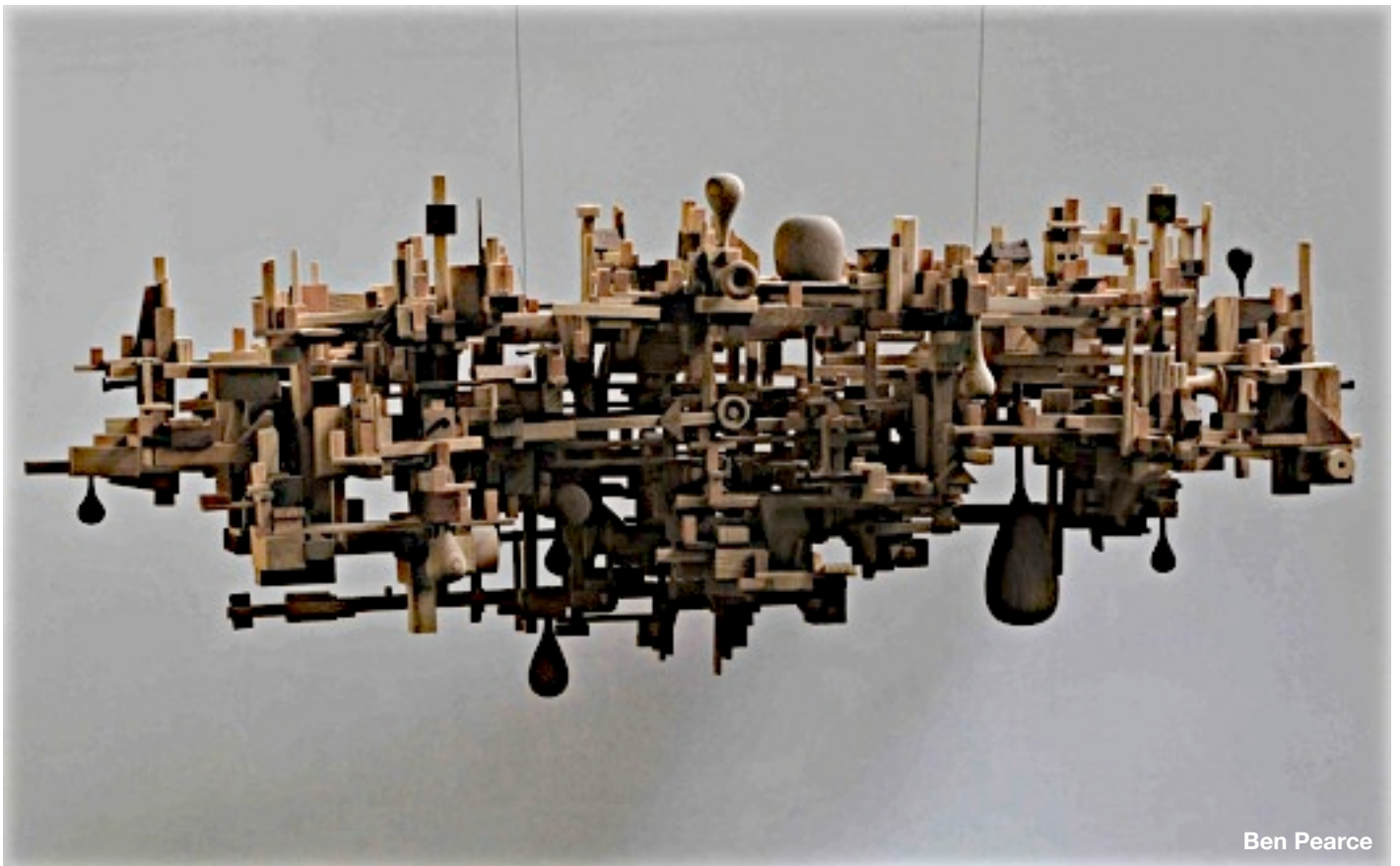
Dunedin-based artist James Robinson's drawings grab at phrases and images that open psychological territories to investigation. They are but a small selection of intimate and yet environmentally-permeated travel notes made over the last three years in Auckland, New York City, Wanganui, the East Cape of New Zealand, Thailand, Nepal and Berlin. They represent Robinson's constant and deliberate yet subconsciously-driven investigation of 'home' and identity as well as the art and potential of drawing. They are displayed as if they are the excavated layers of interior landscapes in the manner of the artist's recent canvas-based works.

The works of Victoria McIntosh (Dunedin) and Scott Flanagan (Christchurch) lead into the next part of the exhibition. Scott Flanagan is an artist that weaves. His woven *Patchwork Mainsail (anstelle Narrenschiff)* transforms the complete printed text of New Zealand's anti-terrorist legislation into less burdened units of language while he creates a light and ethereal object made free of a 'ship of fools'.

Victoria McIntosh is an artist and collector obsessed with issues of history and identity and the highly personal practice of placing oneself in the world. With



Darren Glass



Ben Pearce

object-to situation, but also the generative play of light and image that defines photography and underpins the artist's ideas. With these installations I have echoed the spirit of Glass's recent book *A Field Guide to Camera Species* which focuses on a process of making and the documentation of its consequences. I have displayed the *Field Guide* entry for each of the five cameras along with them to provide further evidence of the artist's free process of experimentation, classification, and documentation and a particular museum of obsession.

In a larger nook of the gallery, the works of Ben Pearce (Napier) and David Clegg (New Plymouth) highlight the relationship of obsession to memory. Ben Pearce is an artist creatively obsessed with exploring an adult remembrance of childhood and the often dark yet hopeful worlds of mind and sensation unlocked by - or perhaps locked within - those memories. With *If found, return to 21 Snowdon Ave* Pearce re-presents his major work *21 Snowdon Ave*: a labyrinthine wooden construction made of hundreds of tiny compartments or cells with which he imaginatively recalls his childhood home and the 'networks and passages of memory that reside there'. *If found...* also presents a newly fragile and whimsical construction made from some of the off-cuts produced during his process of making *Snowdon Ave*. Treating the original work like an ever-expanding expressive drawing, Pearce 'rubbed out' parts of it with a saw or by having a whole area sandblasted away.

David Clegg has relied on the constructive nature of mind and memory as well as the sensorial life of

image and sound to revisit Parque Bustamante in Santiago, Chile as it could have been between 3:30 and 4:00 pm on 19 September 2006. Clegg is an artist that walks cities and records a myriad of everyday 'events' in photographs and associated soundtracks. *Parque Bustamante* presents an image and three field recordings taken and made by the artist while seated in the park. In this work Clegg allows us to focus on the rhythms and polyrhythms within and between the sounds of skateboarding and birdsong. We hear what the artist might have heard and has recorded as part of an ongoing and intensely personal and specific process of museumisation that suggests a fascination with a notion of memory and impossible return.

Facing Pearce's work is local artist Nigel Bunn's *Frequency Modulated High Voltage Experimental Image Maker No. 1*. With this work Bunn has drawn from his collection of all kinds of obsolete audio, image making and scientific equipment to create and present an 'instrument' or 'machine' that paints. In this work the energy of sound waves becomes the energy by which ink marks paper and creates jewel-like paintings that uncannily reflect a notion of some cosmic kind of order. The artist's drive to construct such a unique machine from overlooked components to produce art that would not otherwise have been produced epitomises the kind of intense energy Szeemann identified as essential to a revelatory museum of obsession. The artist's accompanying line drawing and explanation of his work also highlight the intense process of ideation and experimentation that underlies Bunn's practice. It is no accident that this



highly personal instrument and its affective 'artefacts' are in close proximity to Glass's experimental cameras.

Providing an interesting twist on the idea of individual mythologies, local artist Fiona Shaw's *The Unsexing of Women (notebook)* and *Medusa* present her preoccupation with Greek mythology and 'more modern urban myths' that have associated female genitalia with the monstrous. With her own signs and symbols she recasts 'the feminine' as unworthy of fear. In one of her exquisite handmade books Shaw presents the tiny copper printing plate she created to copy an antiquated medical diagram found in *Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929*. This relates to the unsexing of women: the removal of the uterus and ovaries, which has been associated with hysteria (hence 'hysterectomy'). *Medusa* then evokes the female genitalia with its twisting strands like pubic hair and the terrifying snakes of the gorgon's head. With this highly crafted, intimate and precious object Shaw makes a token of the feminine as sexed and beyond claims of terror.

Athens-based Alex Mackinnon's soundwork *An Orthodox Observation* overlays many of the works in this exhibition and makes the sound object suggested and explored in Morley and Clegg's works a matter of sonic focus. Mackinnon is obsessed by the physicality of sound and a notion of 'ritual-in-sound' that recognises its affective and creative force. For most of this year Mackinnon has been living on the Grecian island of Naxos during which time he has

collected the pervasive sounds of Orthodox Church celebrations: the ringing of bells and chanted prayers. The artist has made the sound of bells essential to his work – he lets them ring out while he also isolates their fundamentally resonant notes. In the first two thirds of his work he creates a richly layered texture to re-sound the resonance of bells and imparts something of the mythic potential and mystery of sound. In the last third of his work the aural pageantry of the orthodox service and background sounds of the island are left uninterrupted and are all the more strange for it. Mackinnon creates a sonic composition that captures something of the tension of obsession: its creative potential and its darker hauntings.

Beyond the reach of Mackinnon's soundwork in the lower gallery, local artist Claire Beynon presents her installation *Drift*. Beynon has made hundreds of paper boats and presents them as the same subjects as those released under the ice and filmed in Antarctica in 2008. With this work Beynon presents a strangely intimate underwater world in which boats, when inverted, ride invisible currents of air to rise to the surface of the ice. Perhaps unexpectedly, its silence heightens our senses. As a kind of visual mantra, Beynon's offering shows us how affective the quiet folding of paper boat after paper boat can ultimately be made to be.

A web site documents and expands the exhibition at <http://museumofobsessions.ning.com>.