As happy as a pig in art
Darren Tofts talks dirty with artist Ian Haig

Innovative, insightful, significant. These are some words that may come to mind when thinking about the appellations artists crave to hear about their work. Ian Haig, it seems, is an exception to the rule. For Haig, revolting barbarous and shameless would appear to be favorites in the ultimate lexicon of recognition. During the exhibition of his most recent work, The Dirt Factory, he was the recipient of that most sought after grail, a full page of free publicity in the Melbourne Herald Sun, courtesy of our lyrical orator of all things cultural, journalist Andrew Bolt. The scourge of artists and cultural funding bodies, Bolt pilloried Haig in his inimitable “your taxes paid for this” style of bellicose belle lettrism. The excremental theme of The Dirt Factory clearly wasn’t to Bolt’s taste and after describing how Haig’s work stinks, he likened him to a pig frolicking in its own filth. Art, it seems, must always be uplifting and enlightening, steering away from the darker less palatable realities of the human condition. If Haig is indeed a pig, then he is in good company. One of the greatest artists of abjection is also of the porcine family, by name Francis Bacon. Not to mention those other spurned artists who have plumbed the depths, among them Samuel Beckett (whose centenary was celebrated last month), Shakespeare and Dante. I took some time out to wallow in the mire.

The Dirt Factory continues the theme of a number of your recent exhibitions, such as Sick at Conical Gallery in Melbourne.

The Dirt Factory is a development of some of the ideas I explored in Excelsior 3000, Super Interactive Toilets [2001]. However with this new project I have tried to push the idea of the body a lot further into a more perverse, psychopathological realm of abject material like dirt and shit. I’m interested in dirt as transformative material, as a metaphor for bodily decay and uselessness.
I like the fact that The Dirt Factory is kind of ugly and fucked up. It needs to be because the material I am dealing with in the exhibition looks at the story behind Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, which is quite strange. Dr John Harvey Kellogg was obsessed with the proper functioning of one’s bowels and there are parallels with that and the whole contemporary detox industry; this idea of cleansing and cleaning as a kind of transformation of the body. Philip Samartzis did the soundtrack for the show, with a soundscape of the human body as a form of plumbing. So in addition to the sound, there are lots of drawings, animations and various installations.

While these are familiar themes in your work, The Dirt Factory and Sick also evidence a rather dramatic shift in your practice away from interactive media to mixed media installation, with a strong emphasis on drawing; in other words, low tech, hand-made media.

I've always drawn. Most of my installations began as drawings first. Over the last 5 years I've been incorporating drawing into various exhibitions. I've always worked across media and I am interested in hybridity in a pluralistic and expanded sense. It's really more about what services an idea at a particular time. This new body of work is exploring notions of fanaticism, so it seemed crude sculptures and drawings would be well suited to such a theme.

Everyone likes to classify artists, maybe this is prescribed from the way cultural funding works in Australia: you're either a visual artist, a performance artist, a media artist or a video artist. I've never subscribed to these categories. I am an artist; when I am drawing I am the same artist as when I am making an interactive installation or when I am making a video or whatever. Working across media you challenge that classification, so no one really knows what you are, which I like, in a perverse way.

Does this shift away from interactive media reflect an attitude to the concept of interactive art?

Interactive art is really about foregrounding the control the artist has over the user. In this sense interactivity is really a fiction I think. I have always found the notion of choice in interactive media quite odd. It's art, not online shopping. As an artist I want to impose my aesthetic and sensibility onto people. I don't want them to have a choice about it.
My aesthetic and sensibility onto people, I don’t want them to have a choice about it.
My take on interactivity, therefore, has been very different from other artists. I’ve always tried to screw with it a bit as I had problems with this whole idea of a digital imperative, of technology and the computer leading the art. This new work is a bit of a break from that.

You’ve raised the thorny issue of arts funding in Australia. What is your sense of the current state of media art, from a curatorial and institutional perspective?

Media art exhibitions can appear like a Sony showroom. It’s often about a ‘sophisticated’ and tasteful aesthetic experience with video works exhibited on plasma screens and interactive works that sometimes look more like demonstrations of software. It’s become more about interior design and presentation. I can’t help thinking this excludes more challenging and experimental ideas in media art. For example I can’t imagine ACMI going for an installation featuring a pile of grungy old 386 PCs from Cash Converters displaying crude ASCII art animation. It wouldn’t look ‘impressive’ and it would look out of place with the design of the place, which is absurd. I feel institutions and curators play it safe, they need to be less concerned about pleasing an audience and more open to work that is challenging, experimental and difficult to categorise.

The Dirt Factory has a strong satiric and ironic force about it. Humour is clearly an important part of your work.

Humour and satire provides for a powerful form of cultural critique in ways that you can’t possibly achieve otherwise. Many of the works deal with notions of caricature and the idea of the amplification of a feature into something highly exaggerated. The by-product of that of course is humour, which doesn’t mean that the work is any less serious. Also on another level, as an Australian, humour is a big part of our vernacular so it actually makes sense for art to be satirical.

How would you respond to the assertion that you may be in danger of ‘type-casting’ or stereotyping yourself in relation to the scatological nature of The Dirt Factory?

I have produced only 2 works that deal with the bowel, so it’s hardly typecasting. A lot of contemporary art deals with very familiar, what I would label generic and validated art themes such as memory, consumerism, globalisation, which are very stereotypical. I am more interested in taking the audience somewhere else, somewhere they may not be used to going in a gallery.

If people have a problem with this kind of material or these themes I don’t really care, that’s their problem. Art should be provocative; it should challenge you. This is fundamentally one of the roles of contemporary art, which we don’t see enough of. The work isn’t about shocking anyone; it’s attempting to deal with themes that have been deemed culturally unsavoury and of no value. I am saying such themes are loaded ones and as such have value as cultural artefacts.

No cornflakes were consumed during the course of this interview.
Ian Haig, The Dirt Factory, VCA Gallery, Melbourne, April 20-May 6; Sick, Conical Gallery, Melbourne, April 7-29

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