

Alex Kershaw

“As an artist, you are not a machine in a studio. You’re not working alone, you’re in a community, working with other people...”

ALEX KERSHAW is a Sydney-based artist whose practice incorporates still photography, video and installation. His early photographs focused on “forgotten” functional objects set in the landscape, such as surveying markers placed by the NSW Department of Lands. More recently, his work has compelled him to travel to remote locations, where he spends time conducting extensive research, and involving members of the local community in the production of stylised videos that blur the boundary between documentary and fiction. The first of these, *A Lake Without Water* (2005–06), took Kershaw to Weereewa in southern NSW, while later works have been made in Alice Springs and Thailand.

INTERVIEW: Amber McCulloch

Where does name Kershaw hail from?

It’s English, essentially. My mother’s side is Irish, my father’s side is English.

Did art play a part in your upbringing?

Definitely. My parents used to sell art posters, and I guess as a kid I was exposed to these things called artworks. I mean, they were reproductions – Impressionists, Fauvists – but I was always around them. I spent a lot of time looking through catalogues in Mum’s shop after school.

You’ve recently moved away from still photography to embrace video as a medium. What’s the reason for this shift?

There’s a certain freedom that video affords because the images move – they appear and disappear. But with photographic images there’s a kind of fixity. And there are always funny little things that happen while I’m making a work, and often those things are easier to capture on video than in stills.

Travelling to remote locations appears to be integral to your recent work, with your series *One of Several Centres and Untitled (Phi Ta Khon project)* (both 2007–08) taking you to Outback Australia and Thailand respectively. Did you go to these places with a definite idea of what you would make?

It’s sort of strange, like the idea is there and somehow I’m attracted to working in a particular place, but I don’t go there with any fixed ideas. I have some ideas about what I want to say, but I let that go. When I’m there, I think more visually. Like: “What could I do with the people that are here?”

What was it about the town of Alice Springs that appealed to you for *One of Several Centres*?

The desire to make a work [in Alice Springs] came from my realisation that it was such a different place to what I thought it would be.

So many of the visual representations of Alice Springs that I’d seen fell short of the experience I had there. So I thought it would be possible to do something [in Alice Springs] that was unexpected. But the piece was also a kind of transformation: the Alice Springs in the work is not the “real” Alice Springs.

Do you see video works such as *One of Several Centres as community projects*?

Not at all. I’m not there long enough. To think I could go into a place and do worthwhile community development in less than five years would be really shortsighted. I’m there to make a work, not to try to sort out community issues. I don’t exactly know what I give to these places – maybe another way of seeing what they do.

What relationship does Nicholas Bourriaud’s theory of “relational aesthetics” have to your work?

As an artist, you’re not a machine in a studio. You’re not working alone, you’re in a community, working with other people, and that relationship affects and informs the work. You use art as a vehicle for learning about and understanding other people.

Your recent practice seems to be more “populated” these days, particularly in comparison to your 2004 photographic series, *Conversations with Absent Others*, in which the subjects were replaced by significant objects like watermelons and wine glasses?

With that series, the idea was that no-one would be present in the images. I didn’t want people in them because the point was that they were there [in the form of the objects] anyway. When I finished that series, I decided that I wanted to work with people. I really enjoy allowing other people to become part of the work and jiggling the ideas around. People help blur that space between what’s real and what’s fiction. My strategy is to put

people in the work who are “real” people, doing real jobs in the real world. Obviously, it’s highly constructed and fictionalised, but there’s also the possibility it could be a document.

What reaction do the people in your films have when the work is complete?

It’s always different. People [participate] for so many reasons. I don’t know how they feel about it. They tell me things but it’s difficult to ascertain what it actually means to them.

What would you cite as the major influences on your work?

I guess the places I travel to [to make work] are the main sources of influence. I start with a place then I look at other artists who’ve worked there; or the way the geography of the place has been talked about. In Alice Springs, for example, I looked at Central Land Council stuff and Indigenous stories about Caterpillar Dreaming.

Can you name any artists who have inspired you in your recent projects?

The photographer Jon Rhodes and his book *Wichaway?: Photographs from Kiwirrkura 1974–96* has been a huge influence. And Rirkrit Tiravanija, a Thai artist famous for his community-based projects in which he transplants rural cultural practices as a way of community building. I also like Newell Harry’s work – it’s performative and playful.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

I’m already living with it. It’s a painting by Lee Brady, an Indigenous artist from the Amata community in South Australia. It’s the most fantastic work. It’s a Dreaming painting about a trip he made to Sydney.

Exhibition: Freemantle Arts Centre, Perth, 29 Nov 2008 – 25 Jan 2009; GrantPirrie, Sydney, 2–25 Apr 2009



1 *Conversations with Absent Others #4* (2004), type-C photograph mounted on aluminium, 146.5 x 120cm

2 *Conversations with Absent Others #4* (2004), type-C photograph mounted on aluminium, 146.5 x 116cm

3 *A Lake Without Water* (2005–06), production still, 8-channel video and 6-channel sound installation, DVCPRO/DVD; director/producer: Alex Kershaw; creative collaborator: Scott Otto Anderson; sound design: Gail Priest

CV Born: 1977, Sydney, Australia Studied: College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney Lives and works: Sydney, Australia Represented: GrantPirrie, Sydney

All images courtesy the artist and GrantPirrie



Top and above: *One of Several Centres* (2007–08), production stills, digital video, sound



Top and above: **Untitled (Phi Ta Khon project)** (2007–08), production stills, digital video, sound

Top and above: **One of Several Centres** (2007–08), production stills, digital video, sound