

## MICROCOSMS

Max Bellamy



Figure 1: *Microcosms* (photograph by Emily Cannan).

In a culture where the steadfast traditions of myth and storytelling are integral to language, communication and production of meaning, screen-based narrative has become second nature for me. The challenge of defining and crafting substantial stories is a compelling task, and one I'm only beginning to understand. Memories of television shows, films and video games dissolve into memories of "real" life. I'm the same age as the Simpsons, and I took advantage of the internet and the freedom of information it offered as soon as I could. Making movies by 14, the language of montage quickly overtook my lacklustre attempt at Japanese. Nearly a decade later, the wider implications of a society characterised by their fixation with screens of all sizes is profoundly intriguing for my research and art practice. Slavoj Žižek asks: "What remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy?"<sup>1</sup> Exploring this question through making is central to my practice. My investigation into the cultural, social and environmental politics embedded between our modern human condition and the moving image has helped to clarify my motivations and goals as an artist.

I work predominantly as a filmmaker, and the sculptural project *Microcosms* was born partially from a latent frustration with spending what can often feel like a lifetime in front of a screen in an editing suite. Minutes easily become hours and hours easily become days when you're dealing with the rearrangement of reality in a non-linear timeline. After long days and nights embraced in computer editing, real time inconsistently drags and meanders – as when one focuses on the second hand of a ticking clock.

The first work in the *Microcosms* series, entitled *Silencing the Lambs*, is a depiction of a drive-in movie theatre set in a dystopic “scorched earth” locale. The gaze of the audience in this work is focused entirely on this re-authored pastiche of media that assumes a banal non-meaning with my repositioning of its context. Effective channel surfing! The audience in this work is so engaged on a pre-conscious level that the presence and might of the military right behind them is unrealised. Brian Massumi elaborates: “Television assumes and fosters a certain inattention, as the viewing body is invited to zap channels or slip relays into other activities into the commercial slots and slow patches.”<sup>12</sup>

This piece is partly a reaction to what I feel is a lazy reluctance on the part of the wider audience to engage with the screen on the level of active intelligence – a situation which unfortunately allows centralised sources of content production (often with questionable vested interests) to proliferate nonsense signs without signification. Effective collective hypnosis. This apathy can be a metaphor for a broader social zeitgeist. The Invisible Committee, an anonymous French collective, write that “today western imperialism is the imperialism of relativism, of the ‘it all depends on your point of view’; it’s the eye rolling or the wounded indignation at anyone who’s stupid, primitive, or presumptuous enough to still believe in something, to affirm anything at all.”<sup>13</sup>



Figures 2 & 3: *Silencing the Lambs* (photographs by the author).

The next sculpture, *The Last Infatuation*, is a polar image of this cognitive apathy and bodily magnetism: a pessimistic portrait of the last gasp of the human race. Asses parked in front of a flat screen watching an enticingly glossy recording of the last life-giving flickers of an open fire exhausting itself.

I was pleasantly surprised by an unexpected reading of this work at an exhibition opening earlier in the year when a friend and classmate described it as “very romantic.”



Figure 4: *The Last Infatuation* (photograph by the author).

*Some Wonder* is the third in the series. This remote and unforgiving outpost is an unexpected point of interest to a stream of visitors on a pilgrimage of religious proportions. Families and individuals from half a world away employ the knowledge of locals to guide them to this crack in the earth where a distorted, liquefied pool of seductive imagery stares out at them as they stare back.

The installation of this work has been particularly successful, the bodily relationship at the heart of my subject matter mirrored by the way my art audience interacts with this head-high pocket universe. The horizontal positioning of the screen in this work forces adults to stretch and to tiptoe with intrigue, and children to jump and peer or pester their parents to be held aloft.



Figure 5 & 6: *Some Wonder* (photographs by the author).

The screen in *Medioxumous*, the fourth and final piece so far, is deliberately absent. This has had a particular effect when the works are installed with a left-to-right narrative flow, the first three works leading the audience on a wild goose chase for the screen in the fourth.

*Medioxumous* (“intermediate”) alludes to the perceived sociopolitical barriers reinforced by dominant media institutions. Particularly with news and current affairs reportage, overtly subjective perceptions and hierarchical power structures play on a postmodern skepticism by assuming what I feel is too much social influence. Paul Virilio warns: “Due to its overwhelming power, the totalitarianism of the information-medium is going to be even more powerful than the traditional political totalitarianism of the old national-socialist or communist hues. The dangers are looming larger.”<sup>4</sup>

This work is also an attempt to reframe sobering statistics in a more striking format. The statement that “20% of the world’s wealthiest consume 86% of the world’s resources while the poorest 20% consume just a miniscule 1.3%”<sup>15</sup> takes on a new impact when the numbers come off the page and into a dioramorama like this. The term “global” is often perceived in exclusive terms in the public imagination and negates the wider implications of the privileged way of life we experience in wealthy countries like New Zealand.



Figure 7 & 8: *Medioxumous* (photographs by the author).

The causative power of screened narrative has an important and direct correlation with how we understand societal constructs and invent new alternatives. It has become glaringly obvious that the infinite economic and social growth I've been nurtured by as a child and teenager will not exist as I grow older, if the world's finite physical resources will continue to be wastefully depleted.

It's too easy to become wrapped up in the ethereal nature of digital technologies and forget their reliance on and connection to existing modes of production and consumption. Beyond the immense symptoms of distraction and apathy provoked by the screen lie possibilities for effective, humanising connection and conversation on a vast scale. The democratisation inherent in affordable digital video production is however a double-edged sword, as it potentially creates a plateau of meaninglessness, with the viewer drowning in banal content.

It is human nature to yearn for narratives; a modern consequence of the combination of the conditions of distraction, apathy and skepticism can be a failure to recognise and act on more legitimate, useful knowledge.

I'm using the growing hunger for a more diverse and balanced screen culture to my advantage. As artists like me, and the many others with a comparable agenda, strive to provide this opportunity and deligitimate existing dialogical paradigms of the screen, the desperation of the homogenising enterprises we seek to subvert increases and, in some parts of the world, this is accompanied by a rising intensity of authoritarian culture. Grant Kester states: "Mass media are condemned, not because they signal the bad taste (or limited leisure time) of the working class, but because they suppress working class consciousness of the operations of social power."<sup>6</sup> A contest for meaning is being performed, and the screen is a stage for all to see.

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1 Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997).

2 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

3 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 2009, <http://tarnac9.wordpress.com>., accessed 11 August 2009.

4 Carlos Oliveira and Paul Virilio, *Global Algorithm 1.7: The Silence of the Lambs: Paul Virilio in Conversation*, 1996, [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=38](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=38), accessed 11 August 2009.

5 Anup Shah, *Wasted Wealth, Capital, Labor and Resources*, 2001, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/242/wasted-wealth-capital-labor-and-resources>, accessed 11 August 2009.

6 Grant H Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).