Captain Thunderbolt's Sisters 2010

Prism Break

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When I lived in London, I often watched a television show called ***Most Haunted***. Its premise was simple. Each week, paranormal investigators would explore a different haunted site: a run-down stately home, a Victorian lunatic asylum, a block of flats built over a plague pit. The team would go in at night (because that's when ghosts come out, obviously), set their steady-cams to ghoul-green night-vision, and scare each other shitless as they stumbled through the dark, searching for signs of supernatural life. To give the scenario a semblance of credibility, the group almost always included an historian (Psychic: 'I'm getting a name starting with "J".' Historian: 'There was an earl called James who lived here in the late 1600s. He murdered his cuckolding bride.') and a sceptic (whose job was to explain away any bumps and creaks as prosaically as possible). These voices of hokey reason gave viewers a mandate to invest in the inexplicable moments, of which there were still plenty. Most common were flashes of light, which always looked to me like specks of luminous dust or lost moths, but that were usually taken to be evidence of spooky company.

Britain, with its crumbled history and ancient spaces, is the perfect setting for an occult cheese-fest like ***Most Haunted***. The sheer number of abandoned buildings and forgotten family trees make it easy to fabricate possessions. The country's fixation with class also played a major part in ***Most Haunted***'s success: its spectres were often posh dukes, hysterical upper-crust virgins, or working-class boys who chopped up working girls for kicks. Ghosts and class have a peculiar overlap in British culture, both being preoccupations and entertainments that emerged during the Victorian era; ways to titillate a repressed society by ramping up the danger, eroticism, or foolishness of its shadowy Other (vaudeville, freak shows, pantomime, Jack the Ripper, Punch and Judy, and psychic readings all became popular at the same time). As colonial by-products of that culture, Australians and New Zealanders have inevitably inherited some of those bad habits. While we're less concerned with social status than our British cousins, we nonetheless have a serious taste for ghosts and violence (consider the success of television shows ***Underbelly*** and ***Sensing Murder***). But the colonial experience has meant that, rather than being chased around castles by anonymous demons, we're haunted by real-life figures: outsiders who stepped beyond moral boundaries while they walked among us—rebellious natives, cultish prophets, murderers, prostitutes, confidence tricksters, bushrangers. Our ghosts are foundational characters in our frontier mythology, lurking on the borders between states, laws, and places.

If we accept, momentarily, that ghosts exist, then these frontier spirits pose unique problems for the supernaturally inclined. Most paranormal activities are exercises in containment; their organising principles and structures are almost always about defining spaces in which the dead can be corralled while they communicate with the living. And yet our inability to control our colonial spectres is what makes them so compelling. Carrying the promise of both violence and release, they're the perfect encapsulation of the settler mentality; they hold up a perilous mirror to the culture they left behind, offering alarming evidence of what can happen when whiteness goes bush. While they're usually presented as moral warnings against transgression, they're also a source of profound potential, showing just how much productive chaos can be unleashed by crossing Victorian lines.

Since working with Mikala Dwyer, I have found myself increasingly reflecting on these issues. Dwyer has always been intrigued by the occult, and, in recent years, she's merged this focus with an examination of Australia's violent past. Her psychic spaces are ciphers for a particular kind of Australasian experience, and, like all good codes, they take a long time to crack. This is also what makes them so difficult to write about, let alone curate. The Institute of Modern Art's 2012 survey exhibition of her work, ***Drawing Down the Moon***, is a perfect example: a retrospective that sought to expose the serious systems underpinning Dwyer's playful, supernatural world. But the show also confirmed that, no matter how hard one tries to control it, Dwyer's practice exists permanently on the edge of escape.

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Dwyer grew up in Sydney, not far from Cockatoo Island, in a house her parents got cheaply because local residents had (among other issues) to contend with occasional prison escapees running through their backyards. Thus, even before she was invited to spend six months on Cockatoo in the lead-up to the 2010 Sydney Biennale, this was embedded in her psyche. Most Sydneysiders would probably claim the same thing: the island is inextricably linked to Australia's convict history, first as a prison and later as a reform school for 'wayward girls'—a euphemistic way to describe a detention centre for young women on the wrong side of the law. It was also a major shipyard, and the hulking, rusted traces of that period are still everywhere to see.

Many of Cockatoo's past lives coalesce in a single legend: the story of Captain Thunderbolt, aka Fred Ward, and his lover Mary Ann Bugg. Ward, a bushranger, had been sentenced for cattle rustling but managed to escape from the island in 1863 with the help of Bugg, who allegedly swam across Sydney's shark-infested harbour to spring him. The daughter of an Aboriginal mother and an Essex-born convict-turned-shepherd, Bugg was a physical manifestation of colonial Australia's shadow-side: a bolshy, black, lovestruck girl with criminality running in her veins.

During her time on Cockatoo, Dwyer allowed the dead lovers to possess her thoughts. However, rather than simply plundering their (ultimately tragic) tale for her own benefit, she worked some of her trademark voodoo, using them to evoke the female ghosts of Cockatoo's past—especially the detained teenage girls, many of whom suffered considerably during the 'reform' process. The most explicit example of this is ***Captain Thunderbolt's Sisters*** (2010), a video Dwyer made in collaboration with Justene Williams. In it, the two artists clamber around a circular bunker on Cockatoo, dressed in striped prison outfits, giant 'Ned Kelly' helmets, and glam heels, clanging its metal fixtures with hammers. It's unclear whether the work should be read as the artists trying to raise the island's dead, the girls themselves brought back to life, or as interstitial figures—the artists, but possessed by the girls' spirits.

Ned Kelly's helmet is a ubiquitous signifier of outlaw freedom in Australian culture: something to be feared, but also celebrated. One of the most intriguing aspects of Kelly's headgear is the way it's caught between the industrial and the homespun—an appropriate appendage for a figure walking the line between myth and modernity. The anonymity it afforded him acted both as a threat and a measure of self-protection against authoritarianism, allowing him to become a phantom in a landscape that was yet to be fully conquered. This, presumably, is what drew Australia's greatest twentieth-century painter, Sidney Nolan, to the Kelly myth. For me, Nolan's fixation with Kelly's helmet seems less an illustration of historical fact than an examination of a modern, and ***modernist***, life on the margins: the headgear turning into a Malevichian void sliced into the outback.

Dwyer and Williams's use of the Kelly/Thunderbolt archetype sets up a direct conversation with this period of Australian art history. In merging modernism and Aussie folklore, they seem to be following Nolan's lead, but an important distinction is that they knowingly feminise both. They do something similar in the video ***Red Rockers*** (2010), in which they shuffle around a Cockatoo Island cave on hands and knees, dressed in sparkly red constructivist suits. By becoming girly, proto-formalist bushrangers, they undermine the bravado of colonial mythology ***and*** twentieth-century art simultaneously, infecting both with the transgressive female agency that is such an undervalued aspect of Australia's outlaw past.

These connections between art history, bushrangers, ghosts, and feminism were reinforced for me when I sent Dwyer an article about a New Zealand witch who claimed—with some justification—to have Ned Kelly's skull in one of her kitchen cupboards. Dwyer was, as you might expect, delighted. And this points to the elephant in the room: Dwyer's own witchiness. One could read her works through the 'cooler' lens of contemporary installation practice, or recognise what they actually are: spaces of invocation filled with invisible energy, inextricably bound to her fascination with modernism's occult implications.

This is exemplified in Dwyer's circle-works, which she now includes in almost every exhibition. At the 2010 Sydney Biennale, for example, she made ***An Apparition of a Subtraction***, which included zeroes carved from sandstone blocks left over from the construction

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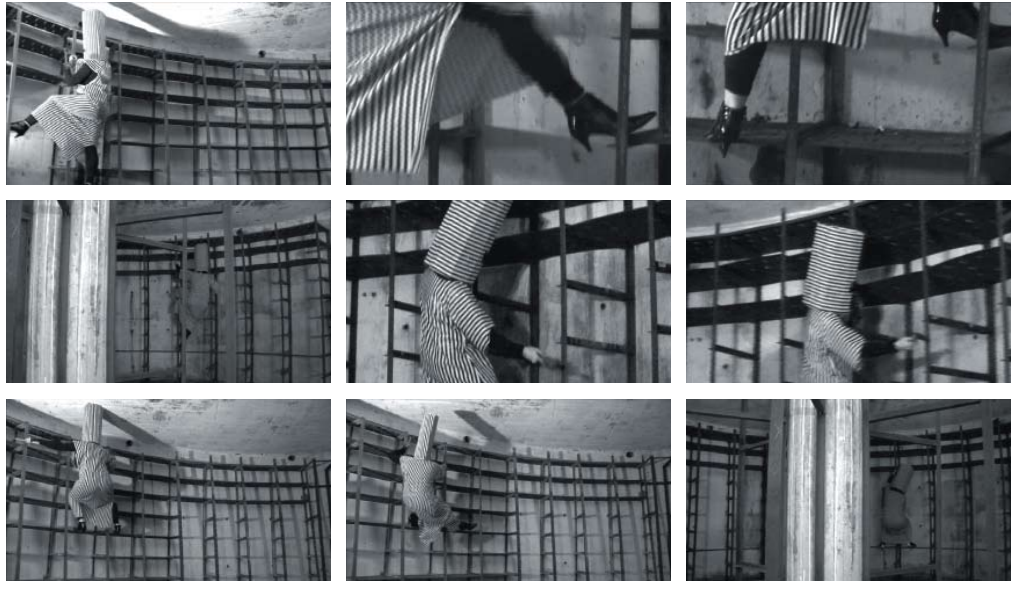

of her parents' home. The blocks had been quarried on Cockatoo, and Dwyer overlaid the sound of the stone being chipped away—a relentless beat directed through several speakers—into the centre of the circle. Her idea was to create a 'sonic object' in the space viewers stood, an unseen force that became a physical manifestation of the history of the work's making, a re-possession of Dwyer's own past, a possession of anyone brave enough to cross over into the circle, and a solid reminder of the hard labour inflicted on the island's former convict population. Similarly, in Berlin in 2011, she created ***Square Cloud Compound***: a floppy constructivist wonderland made from squares of coloured fabric stretched taut by pantyhose tied to prison-striped lampposts. The posts were like prison guards; tools of torture and surveillance that also had the appearance of gallows. Many of them were adorned with handmade trinkets, like offerings from the work's spirit-prisoners.

Dwyer describes the circle as a 'holding pattern'. Adopting the rules of incarceration, the circle creates an architecture of restraint against the work's escape; nothing, and no one, is allowed to leave until Dwyer says so. But they are also choreographic parameters, within which Dwyer collapses the boundaries between subject, action, and object. This linguistic reference is deliberate; Dwyer's art is intensely social, and therefore it pays to think about what she's trying to say and how she's trying to say it. By using a circle to democratise all the key players—viewers, history, objects, space, the artist herself—Dwyer's sentences effectively become jumbled, like she's abandoned cultural rules of speech, or, to make an occult parallel, like she's speaking in tongues. The circle then, becomes a defined space of activity in which the conversations between forms matter far more than the forms themselves. This reversal of focus from the installation's positive solidity to the negative spaces it leaves is similar to the experience of a séance, which invites participants to believe certain arrangements of objects and bodies in space will create electrical fields that enable spirits to transform or reappear.

As a result, Dwyer's work is a mode of tangled communication between the dead and the living, and between a colonial history of violence and a present-day audience too comfortably oblivious of that past. Her circles are also invitations to her modernist forebears to make themselves known again. This manifests itself not so much through precise forms but through a process of making. And here we have to follow Dwyer down yet another vaguely spiritualist rabbit-hole. She has long been fascinated by the work of Friedrich Fröbel, the founder of the kindergarten movement in the 1830s. Central to Fröbel's educational approach were his 'Gifts'—props such as building blocks and balls that encouraged learning through play. Significantly, the Gifts were designed to encourage an understanding of spatial relations. Fröbel's Gifts transformed early-childhood education, but they also had a profound impact on European modernism, most notably, the Bauhaus movement, which adopted his concepts of 'free work' and play in developing its forms and ideas.

Dwyer adopts a remarkably Fröbel-esque approach when creating her installations. Rather than arriving at a site with a fixed plan, she comes bearing objects—sometimes truckloads of them—and allows works to develop in situ, based on a particular relationship with the site and the way those objects 'speak' to it (and, wherever possible, to its history). ***An Apparition of a Subtraction*** is a shining example of this, in which Cockatoo's ghosts and Dwyer's upbringing merge into a single sonic force. Likewise, ***Square Cloud Compound***—a work about encirclement in a city still scarred by its Cold War division, and a space that makes the hard edges of constructivism droop under the weight both of history and Dwyer's spell-like incantations. So Dwyer's circle-works, despite their ostensible messiness, arguably represent a particular strand of modernism in its purest form—realigning the formalist values of early-twentieth-century art with their spiritualist, slightly ritualistic origins, while also making sure they bend to her witchy will.

Dwyer's complex orchestration of imprisonment, the occult, and art history is built on a foundation of conflicted desires: to be both jailer and jailed; to pull viewers in, then push them away; to whisper in someone's ear one second and shout in their face the next. Her ability to make these different strands coexist so effectively might well be because alchemy runs in her blood: her mother was a silversmith, and her father was a scientist who specialised in plastics. It also seems significant that Dwyer herself was an escapee for a time; in her teens, she briefly ran away to New Zealand.

Ordinarily, it would be risky to put so much weight on autobiographical details like these, but with Dwyer it's essential. Take the confrontational sexiness of her early installations, for example. Filled with half-smoked cigarettes, worn stilettos, lipsticks, and 'slutty' fabrics, they have been interpreted as a reaction against the 'form and function' reductionism of her half-Danish upbringing as much as a feminist reaction against the hard, exclusionary industrialism of minimalist art. With hindsight, this can also be seen as period of free work, during which she refined a vocabulary of personal and historical forms that she now uses to summon ghosts. One work in particular seems to tie up all of these biographical, ghostly, and spatial threads: ***A Shape of Thought***, made in 2007 with her now-deceased father Peter Dwyer. At its centre is a large chunk of transparent plastic, molded with a hot-air gun. Two images are projected through it and onto the floor—Dwyer's eye from one side, her father's from the other. The clash results in an idea-made-solid between them—a meeting of minds between chemist and artist, father and daughter. And yet, just when the shared thought seems contained, it splinters into shards of spectral light that dance around the room.

A Shape of Thought perfectly encapsulates Dwyer's personal-conceptual-spiritual world: an installation in which an idea is not just made visible but made physical, and one in which personal myth and an immensely sophisticated relationship with materials collide. It points to Dwyer's stroppy mentality: she wants to embrace her past, but also kick against it and wriggle free. Rather than simply indulging her stroppy inner self, she uses this petulance to address a bigger, more pressing, cultural question: how do we process history against a backdrop of colonial trauma? Dwyer's ghosts are a kind of violent residue—marginalised seers exposing the harsh truths of Australian mythology. By combining them with a reflection on Australia's weird engagement with modernism—including her own—she becomes a disruptive entity, operating beyond traditional boundaries and bending forms and ideas with a witch's moral power. While she doesn't quite make me believe in ghosts, the profound and subtle force of Dwyer's haunted spaces do more than enough to make me believe that—whether they acknowledge it or not—objects, people, and cultures are inescapably possessed by their history.

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