

On Display: Cameron Robbins

Roisin O'Dwyer, *Museums Australia (Victoria)*



You participated in the *Heat: art and climate change*, exhibition at RMIT gallery in September 2008, can you tell us about your artwork and its application to the climate change subject

For *Heat* I created a walk-in Vortex Chamber, entitled *CO2 Vortex*. I have always been fascinated with weather dynamics and wanted to present an engaging work to the audience, something alive in the gallery. *CO2 Vortex* was a room-like structure about 2.5 metres on each side and 3 metres in height, made as a reference to household carbon emissions. The airflow was regulated using a laboratory exhaust fan so that a 2.5 metre tall air vortex was created in the room, revealed with the use of fog and dry ice—sublimating carbon dioxide. The *CO2 Vortex* was a reference to changing weather patterns as a result of CO2 accumulation. Black internal walls provided a contrast against which the beautiful vortex tube could be seen in high relief and the viewers' presence could also be observed.

Your art reflects your interest in the elements, with artworks such as wind powered drawing machines, steam organs and vortex chambers, that demonstrate these forces interacting. What started this line of enquiry?

A fascination with natural dynamics began with an intensive period of surfing as a teenager. Coupled with an enthusiasm for science experiments, astronomy and weather, these experiences informed my studies at art school. Sculpture led to a fascination with objects that responded to the landscape, such as radio repeaters and wind turbines. Longing to investigate the natural world, I created a series of wind powered drawing machines on the roof of my studio and documented and made drawings from weather patterns in an exciting outdoors environment. From these weather studies it was natural to extend into other dynamics like water, solar power, human motion and fire.

Have you made artworks using heat?

For the opening ceremony of a huge art event in Melbourne 1998, *Construction in Process VI: The Bridge*, I created a large steam-powered organ. With friends I created a five metre tall turbine-shaped furnace of timber. Inside this fire sculpture a large boiler was installed, connected to a set of tuned organ pipes which were free to respond to steam pressure and heat. Having no keyboard, the tonal variations were created by the pipes and their different harmonics driven by the pressure, heat and environment. The score was set by the way the fire burned. Some wonderful things happened, such as a good wind fanning the huge flames straight onto the pipes, inducing an unexpected high and wild range of harmonics. The composition made an eccentric and natural sound under the Westgate Bridge.

You were a speaker at our Science Matters Seminar in August to speak about the *Heat* exhibition and the contribution of artists in the interpretation of science concepts. I was very interested in your commentary about the divergent ways that scientists and artists approach practices such as experiments. Is it useful to you to adopt other frameworks to investigate ideas?

In making instruments to collect data from types of energy and plot these into a visual format, it is inevitable that science is invoked. It's what makes it art that is interesting, but impossible to define. To realise an idea the appropriate methods and frameworks must be investigated. In this way the craft of an artwork serves the concept—whether painting, machine, or otherwise.

Certain common terms have completely different meanings across disciplines. In art, 'the Experiment' has complex meanings that can indicate an influence from scientific apparatus, or art that sets itself apart from current practice. I try to illuminate hidden dynamics in ways that are truthful to the concept and context, concentrating on processes where the outcomes are always different and hopefully poetic. In Science the Experiment is part of a process of testing a theory. It must be exactly reproducible by a third party to be sustained or disproven. Artists don't want a third party going anywhere near their experiments certainly not reproducing anything! That's forgery!

What other projects are you working on?

I'm creating the last piece for a 1:1 billion scale model of the solar system. Permanently installed around Port Phillip Bay, it is a collaboration with artist Christopher Lansell and features the sun and nine planets. The Sun is a 1.39 metre diameter bronze sphere, while the Earth is 12.8 mm, 150 metres away. Pluto is 6km away. But now we're making Proxima Centauri, the closest star to the Sun, which is so far away that in the model you must travel around the entire circumference of the Earth to approximate the 4.2 light years. On a separate project, I'm working on a series of solar drawing machines which plot out the patterns of sunshine over different periods of time.

Cameron Robbins is currently a Sculpture Lecturer at RMIT and is a part-time jazz musician on clarinet and tenor saxophone.

To view more of Cameron's work visit:

www.cameronrobbins.com/
Above left Portable Wind Drawing Machine, Queenscliff Jetty, 2008. Photo courtesy of Cameron Robbins right CO2 Vortex, installation view, HEAT exhibition, RMIT Gallery, September 2008.