

Play nice: The collaborations in *group show*, curated by Louise Klerks By Christine McFetridge

The experience of everyday life is made up of small interactions. Mostly these interactions are significant for the exchange they generate with others; whether as the result of conversations or gestures. *group show*, curated by Louise Klerks, answers the question: what eventuates when artists are invited to collaborate on a shared goal—the creation of artwork for exhibition—without parameters?

The production of art is often understood in the way it relates to play. Inevitably, the relationship between the imagination and intellect in the conception of artwork and the way it is perceived by others expands when two artists collaborate. Each pair in *group show* drew upon their individual practice and knowledge to establish remarkable collaborative partnerships, all unified by an openness to experimentation. Working together variously at a distance and at close proximity, the resulting exchanges of reference material and artworks became instrumental in developing a unique visual language between the artists. The process of collaboration is as consequential as the artworks themselves.

Benjamin Lichtenstein and Alan Constable began their collaboration through nonverbal means. In order to establish a narrative for their collaboration, Lichtenstein took photographs of his personal collection of cameras, which included a photograph of a ceramic camera made by Constable, and mailed them to Arts Project Australia for Constable to work from. What developed were a series of photographic prints, watercolour and ink drawings and a suite of ceramic cameras.

Producing work about image making, the essential grounding of the collaboration between Lichtenstein and Constable was its reflective nature. The exchange was process-driven, giving way to intuition rather than logic or dense concepts. Having engaged with Mail Art in his practice previously (*Das Boot*, Next Wave Festival, 2014), Lichtenstein works in defiance of the proliferation and digitisation of imagery on the Internet. He employs traditional methods, such as painting and drawing, in the darkroom to explore the very nature of image making. Constable too, his thick painterly coats of glaze over the clay cameras a parallel to the mark application in his drawings and watercolours, literally considers the way images are created.

Similarly, Matlok Griffiths and Julian Martin undertook a collaboration by exchanging photographic documentation and artworks. The collaboration began with Griffiths mailing photographs to Martin that he had taken whilst living on the tropical island of Dumaguete City, Philippines. Selective about his chosen reference material, Martin responded to all of Griffiths' photographs by creating works with pastels abstracting singular elements present within the images. A series of charcoal drawings, pastel works and paintings followed between the pair.

In response to Martin's process of engaging with abstraction, Griffiths created several works layering different versions of them onto the picture plane. In addition

to this, Griffiths was fascinated with how Martin read and translated his reference material, which was relatively literal. The act of reflection became a crucial process for Griffiths and Martin to engage with. Alongside *Pavers and Staircases (1)* and *Bricks and Pavers (1)*, Griffiths created a series of charcoal drawings and an additional painting that referenced Martin's pastel works. Indeed *Bricks and Pavers (1)* is a response to Martin's *Not titled (food trolley reference)*, which itself is a response to one of Griffiths' photographs; generating a dynamic back and forth exchange.

Other approaches to the collaborative process were also explored. Pia Murphy and Georgia Szmerling worked side by side, both at the Arts Project studio and painting outdoors at Fairfield Boathouse. After studying printmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts, Murphy has expanded her practice to include painting and ceramics. She travelled to Melbourne from Birregurra in South-Western Victoria to be able to engage with Szmerling in person; the physical space a key component to the sharing of ideas between the two.

Similar to the exchange between Lichtenstein and Constable, the collaboration between Murphy and Szmerling was self-referential. Reflecting on her impressions of the Arts Project studio and experience painting *en plein air*, Murphy based *Georgia's leaves* on Szmerling's *Not titled*, informed by Szmerling's ability to focus in on details present within the landscape.

The collaboration between Aaron Carter and Stephen Benwell, like Murphy and Szmerling, was very hands-on. Though Carter lives in the Wimmera, a three-and-a-half hour drive away from Benwell's studio in St Kilda, the pair worked together regularly. Prior to this project, Carter had only collaborated informally with others and Benwell had not held an interest in doing so. Identifying shared motivations and a willingness to experiment, each responded to the actions of the other.

Exemplifying a playfulness in their joint practice and exchange of knowledge and ideas, Carter and Benwell created work together. They worked simultaneously on the same piece, individually from a source (such as Dewi Sri, the Balinese goddess of rice and fertility) and have retrospectively fused pieces from their individual practices. The latter can be seen in the combination of a base made by Carter with the addition of Benwell's *Yellow Man*, created in 1987; emphasising the importance of improvisation and spontaneity in the way they worked together.

Being an artist is often a solitary pursuit by choice. To then engage in a collaboration with another artist requires an immense amount of trust. What we can see in *group show* is the creation of an articulate and idiosyncratic visual language between each pair of artists. Indeed, the value of the project rests as much in the process of collaborating as in the work that resulted; the interactions between each pair of artists is tangible through the work on display. As in all collaborations of a creative nature, a conversation about the potential of art to exist outside of itself arises. Collaborative process contributes crucially to the way art functions in society; enabling artwork to become more accessible to others and to expand upon traditional ways of making.