1

It takes more than 140 characters to write a novel

—

In 1980 the world's largest computing company, IBM, commissioned a small start-up to write operating software for its burgeoning personal computer business. This company, Microsoft, lead by ambitious director Bill Gates, had a vision to put a computer on every desk in every home. Almost half a century later, Gates' ambition has well and truly been realised. What he perhaps could not have imagined at the time is the complete transformation digital technology would have on people's lives. Since that first conversation between IBM and Microsoft the world has been transformed by the birth of the internet and the development of the mobile phone into an all-encompassing, hand-held smart device. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have become entrenched in our lives and traditional media outlets have disintegrated as the public demands immediate content to consume on demand. The digital camera has allowed anyone to be a photographer and for their pictures to be published immediately.

The technological advances we take for granted today have made our lives easier, communication faster and more flexible and have helped the world to become more connected. However, technology has perhaps made us less critical of the vast amount of information that is readily at hand. Do we consume without always necessarily comprehending? We now experience events via a digitally mediated filter. At a live music event it is common to see a wall of phone screens over the crowd as people record, upload and share their favourite moments after the gig. Galleries have not been spared this phenomenon. A crowd lined twenty deep stands with cameras and phones aloft in front of the *Mona Lisa* every day. Snapping away like cultured paparazzi, they experience this most famous artwork not by looking at it directly but rather through tiny phone screens or the back of their cameras. Friends and family can relive the experience within seconds by connecting to Facebook, Instagram or whatever other social media platform is in vogue at the time.

2

4

5

3

6

As if by design, the prevalence of technology in our lives has been accompanied by the rise of reality television. This is not by chance, it's instead a reflection of how digitally mediated experiences have come to define and inform all aspects of contemporary society. In a world where boundaries between public and private spaces and experiences have been eroded, it can only be expected that everyday events and people simply doing what they do is now entertainment. Digitally mediated experiences, whether they be iPhone snaps, conversations shared on Facebook, random thoughts tweeted or TV shows about people watching TV, are all instantaneous, somewhat saccharine and are quickly consumed with little critical reflection. They are also, most importantly, devoid of human interface as we have traditionally known it and are always at risk of being mere sound-bites lost and forgotten in the white noise constantly infiltrating our lives.

This exhibition does not seek to comment on the state of modern technology, the digital world and all its platforms. Rather, it explores the use of digital technologies and the photographic image by a number of artists as the foundation of painting, drawing and ceramic object making. It posits that artists who use technology as the basis of their art making are extending the experience of the "digital eye" to reclaim an analogue familiarity. It suggests that the physical act of making a work of art and the presence of the artist's hand brings us closer to the physical world, which we inhabit. It celebrates rather than criticises the endless possibilities of technology, revealing how artists use the internet, modern media advertising campaigns and software such as Photoshop and CAD to create artworks which respond, reflect and create new worlds for us to explore.

Alvaro Alvarez sources photographic images to which he is, first and foremost, attracted. After close investigation he processes this information, creating abstract interpretations of the original photo. Rhythmic and personal, these works demonstrate the human capacity to deconstruct an image into a format which celebrates form, colour and structure; the essence of architecture, landscape, space and place.

Peter Ben, Erica Berechree and Darren Wardle, like many other artists, trawl the internet looking for source material. However, they do not simply find images in order to produce a faithful reproduction. Instead they use these found images as a platform for further investigation and creation.

Peter Ben is fascinated with images of ancient ruins as much as contemporary skylines. Underpinned by his interest in science fiction and a healthy dose of humour, his paintings and drawings invent worlds where both the ancient and contemporary coalesce to create new wonderlands. While he sources images of famous sites such as Egypt's pyramids and New York's skyline from the internet or magazines, there is no photoshopped manipulation; Ben's collages are made exclusively from the mind. Ben recalls images from his own imaginative archive and layers them harmoniously in his colour-blocked, strongly outlined style.

Erica Berechree references satellite snapshots from Google Maps to create her drawn kaleidoscopic wonderlands. The dryness of aerial photographs, where the constructed world dominates, is transformed into suburbs where roads are active, parks are populated and houses pulsate with life. In contrast to Google map images, which are utilitarian in nature, Berechree drawings are unique and lively narratives where we wander around seeking human stories, relationships and reflections of our own neighbourhoods and daily lives.

Like Berechree, Darren Wardle scours the internet seeking images that vary from the mundane through to recognisable artworks and architecture. This visual archive, in conjunction with Wardle's own collection of personal photographs, forms the basis of his digitised collage process. Using the power of Photoshop, Wardle reassembles images to create new pictures. For Wardle, the computer and Photoshop are the new sketchbook and pencil. The technology helps to create new narratives, hyper coloured and dystopian, which are then realised by hand, through an analogue process, to create large-scale paintings. In a further acknowledgement of the debt he owes to the art historical canon and the tradition of painting, Wardle often includes references to past modernist masters. *Heavy Metal Gym Junkie* is set in a derelict gym in a decommissioned school and is anchored by an Alexander Calder sculpture and surrounded

by graffiti based on the mark makings of abstract expressionist paintings.

Simon Finn and Justin Andrews are two artists who, like Wardle, use technology to construct images, which are then rendered using analogue technologies. Finn's beautiful charcoal drawings of buildings in flux are copies of video stills. Originally created in the architectural software program CAD these buildings become animated and collapse and implode. For Finn, the opportunity to begin with technology subverts the accepted traditions of art making; the computer and software replace the pen and pencil sketches. Translating them into charcoal drawings provides Finn, as he explains, "intimate contact and control over the final output" where the inadequacies of the human touch remain visible.[1] "It's a kind of stone-age approach in a meeting with technological innovation".[2]

Andrews' work has long been process driven. His abstract paintings begin as sculptural objects created by dropping timber to create random structures, which are then photographed. These images are manipulated in Photoshop before being transferred to canvas as delicately painted, hard edge abstract works. In more recent times Andrews has continued his investigation of the possibilities of technology by using photocopiers and printing technology: evident in his recent series of works *Beyond Time*. These works hold an inherent tension between the precision of hard-edged abstraction and the grittiness of photocopied images. They investigate how abstractionism and painting can depict time and history. They also ask this question of time and history within a humanist framework. The layering of images and processes that constitutes these works is also analogous with the palimpsest of our life experiences and our constant transitory state.

Chris O'Brien's wonderful ceramic houses, like Berechree's drawings, are imbued with human stories and relationships. Created after high-gloss real estate brochures, O'Brien animates floor-plan illustrations into accurate three-dimensional representations. Informed by photographs and text, which aim to seduce potential buyers, O'Brien transforms the coldness and hyperbole of real estate marketing into the warmth and joy of family life. His ceramic houses become homes, full of laughter, activity and daily suburban machinations.

Undoubtedly when future historians seek to find a term to define the early 21st century, "the digital age" will be thrown up for consideration. Human connections and communications, which for thousands of years have been truly analogue—face to face meetings, the intimacy of letter writing—are now dominated by technology and social media. Such is the dominance of technology in our lives that we now experience the world digitally. Welcoming all viewers to this exhibition is a wall of Alan Constable's ceramic cameras. Modelled after SLRs, Polaroids and compact digital instamatics they create a physical barrier between us and the works of Alvarez, Andrews, Ben, Berechree, Finn, O'Brien and Wardle. We are reminded by the lenses peering out at us that the camera and other digital technologies and platforms sit merely between human presence and interpretation and do not replicate or replace it. What the works beyond this wall of cameras so poetically remind us, is that analogue techniques – painting, drawing, ceramics – have at their core human imagination, investigation, ingenuity and a thirst to make sense of the world we inhabit, rather than simply consuming it.

Twitter, the apparatus that has made it possible for people to instantly deliver sound bites whether commenting on public issues or merely vocalising random thoughts is defined by its restrictive use of 140 characters. It might be true that such technology has made communication easier, given those without a voice a platform, and has democratised the way we communicate. However, it does not offer the opportunity for deeper and critical thinking and reflection. Nor does it allow for genuine expression or a poetic or graceful articulation of the human condition. It simply takes more than 140 characters to write a novel.

DR VINCENT ALESSI, 2015
Senior Lecturer, Creative Arts and English
La Trobe University, Melbourne

1. "The Creators Project interview". http://simonfinn.blogspot.com.au
2. Ibid.

7

ARTISTS

Alvaro Alvarez
Justin Andrews
Peter Ben
Erica Berechree
Alan Constable
Simon Finn
Chris O'Brien
Darren Wardle

**It takes more than
140 characters to
write a novel
17 Oct – 21 Nov 2015**

PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY

Australian Government | Australia Council for the Arts

art guide AUSTRALIA

LEONARD JOEL Est 1919

IMAGES

COVER: Simon Finn
Steady State Expiration
(detail) 2015
charcoal on paper
120 × 70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Fehily
Contemporary, Melbourne
–

1. Alvaro Alvarez
*Not titled (Buffalo City
Hall, NY)* 2015
texta on paper
37 × 70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne
–

2. Justin Andrews
Beyond Time 6 2013
unique print on canvas panel
39 × 54 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
NKN Gallery, Melbourne
–

3. Peter Ben
Modern Egypt 2011
ink, gouache and acrylic
on paper
45.5 × 65 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne
–

4. Erica Berechree
Google Earth 2011
gouache and texta on paper
35 × 50 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne
–

5. Darren Wardle
Heavy Metal Gym Junkie 2015
oil and acrylic on canvas
153 × 213 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Fehily
Contemporary, Melbourne
–

6. Alan Constable
*Not titled (KFR
SLR camera)* 2015
ceramic
9 × 21 × 11 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne
–

7. Chris O'Brien
*Marysville House in Clarke
Street Northcote* 2013
ceramic
19 × 20 × 11 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne
–

24 High St Northcote
VIC 3070 Australia | T +61 3 9482 4484
F +61 3 9482 1852 | info@artsproject.org.au
www.artsproject.org.au