

A.

Located on a busy Street in South Brisbane, The Wandering Room is more of a space passed by than a destination and Rebecca Ross' recent site-specific installation *Landscape of Preoccupations*, visible from quite a distance, seemed to accommodate the passersby. One could get a sense of the work from a vehicle as it drove by or from the surrounding streets, its bright yellow demanding attention.

In this joint project with Independent Exhibitions the surface of the glass became the work, the space behind housing multiple fluorescent lamps, lighting expanses of bright adhesive vinyl. Across a vibrant background, overlapping lines formed shapes and paths that led endlessly in and out of each other, resembling not just abstract compositions, but three elaborate interconnected circuits. In the same multiple colours traced by the lines, circles and ovals marked multiple, almost competing, points both on and off the 'circuit', to which the eyes were drawn.

On first encountering these 'windows' they reminded me of topological maps, such as the London Tube map. As I recalled having been lost in foreign countries, if only such maps were this large and easy to locate! It didn't take long to realise however, particularly from the stationary vantage point of the footpath directly in front of them, that Ross' maps were not some logically ordered guide.

Tackling the city grid that is Brisbane as we travel from point A to point B in our everyday lives our surrounding environment seems to blur into our routine. Same, same, the cityscape is a backdrop to our preoccupations as our mind is elsewhere until ... different. Something is out of place.

For *Landscape of Preoccupations* one didn't look through the glass to find the work, this intervention into how the space was viewed making the work 'out of place' not only in its surrounding cityscape but with other works shown within. As Ross states "I first began working with windows as a way of exploring the built environment. My original notion was making the window into something that was looked at rather than seen through".



DETOUR WATCH OUT FORKLIFT OPERATING IN THIS AREA PEDESTRIANS USE OTHER FOOTPATH

Consider the amount of road signs we encounter on Brisbane streets. We are conditioned to look at yellow, even if just for a moment to decide if there is something to which we must pay attention. Whilst there was no text in Ross' installation the visual language of maps was at work, the same concepts of direction, location and movement revealed.

Perhaps the rules of the street, where this work took pride of place, apply. The passersby may have asked, if indeed they had time before the lights went green, "What am I looking at?" and one could easily ask the same question of an abstract painting in a gallery.

In perhaps what is the worst segue in the history of writing, rules and streets lead to *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43), one of Ross' influences when conceiving this work. In Piet Mondrian's painting, the real world influence of Manhattan's city grid provides an interesting contrast with the real world location of Ross' work. In *Broadway Boogie Woogie* the grid, the primary element of the composition, "appears to be constructed of solid yellow lines" onto which Mondrian applied his limited colour range. Ross' compositions, however, were like an 'unwinding' of the grid's restrictions reflected in the straight horizontal and vertical lines of her cityscape, her hyper colour preoccupations adhered to yellow planes/plains.

"The grid is made to do many things in Mondrian: some that serve its nature, some that subvert it, and some that destroy it, as, for example, when it is finally made to dance." Having escaped to New York after the start of World War II, boogie woogie music seemed to have struck a chord with Mondrian's neo-plastic order and, like the traffic lights of Broadway, found its way into his work. Mondrian's locations, or indeed 'situations', clearly influenced his work and his New York studio, is said to be the site of a "postmodern opening of space". Such is the legacy of what have come to be known as The Wall Works – an insight into his processes, or 'exercises', for which he used readily available materials to work directly onto the studio wall.

In addition to her window works, Ross' practice is such that she makes work to suit her situation. Her choice of materials also extends to include actual maps, specific to her changing locations. Having spoken with her recently, she was in the process of joining vintage maps with mapping pins whilst staying in Milan for a work to be transported on her return flight to Brisbane.

In our conversation, Ross, who clearly has an interest in geometric abstraction, commented on having recently viewed some of Kazimir Malevich's suprematist paintings (c. 1915-18) whilst in Europe, the edges of the shapes and the colours not nearly as perfect as the reproductions seen previously had alluded. Traces of the artist's hand were also visible in *Landscape of Preoccupations*. By-products of the materials used and the immediacy of the process in creating the work, the edges of the cut vinyl had small scissor marks and there were bubbles between the surfaces of the glass and vinyl if you looked closely.

Using adhesive vinyl in an earlier installation, Ross described her experience of listening to music whilst working as something that "transports me to another place". Expanding on this she added, "I am interested in the idea that we can physically be in one place and our minds in another. I wonder how often we are truly anchored to the site that we find ourselves in."

However cheery, I am reminded of the lyrics from the song *Wise Men*, Got to ask yourself the question, where are you now. I am pretty sure James Blunt isn't singing about your current location but rather 'the' question is of a more abstract 'where' and its landscape probably reads a little something like this...

I'M JUST NOT IN THE RIGHT PLACE FOR
A RELATIONSHIP RIGHT NOW.

HOW'S YOUR FIVE-YEAR PLAN GOING?

WHERE ARE YOU WITH YOUR GOALS?

SHIT. I JUST MISSED MY BUS STOP.



■ Rebecca Ross, *Landscape of Preoccupations*, 2010

Following on, perhaps even further downhill, to ask a question posed earlier "what am I looking at?" On one visit to *Landscape of Preoccupations*, I kept seeing dogs – the circles were eyes and the lines formed heads and floppy ears. Whilst I laughed at the time, dismissing this as frivolous, I came to realise that these dogs illustrate what I, despite my serious intentions, brought to the work - my preoccupations (across the landscape of which run two Dachshunds). I let my imagination start to see pictures, which to my mind is a form of escapism. To follow this train of thought even further, I conclude that it may well be enough to just experience the sensation of a public artwork such as Ross' – to let the bright colours lift one's spirits and to take in the movement and rhythm played out before us as we pass by.

B.

Now that we have reached point B, I suggest you go to Ross' site at www.rebeccaross.com but before you go, to repeat the question, "Where are you now?" ■ **By Shaun Weston**

**Rebecca Ross, *Landscape of Preoccupations*,
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Independent Exhibitions and The Wandering Room**