





The art of Nell seems to lilt to and fro between polar opposites: silence and noise, life and death, text and abstraction, smiley faces and transparent ghosts, and between the ephemerality of performance and the concreteness of form. The artist has said that "in between black and white runs a river of gold". From the detritus of the world, Nell sifts gold and it assumes unexpected form. The freshness of her practice seems limitless as she plays with ceramics, painting, live-art, formed glass, drum sticks, tatami mats, graffiti and small stools. Her breathless enthusiasm for things leaps from the lyrics of Nick Cave to funerary figurines from Japan's Jomon period, quite literally from the Neo-poetic to the Neolithic. Nell lives in Sydney and her work has been seen and heard across Australia, the Netherlands, the US and at the Glastonbury Festival. Over the last month we have been talking about her work and her forthcoming exhibition for Spark Festival 2017.

Rhana—What is art for?

Nell—Everything. There are so many things we could say about the way art functions in society and culture. But also, I don't know what art is for. And it's in the unknown and the unknowable that we connect to the mystery of all things throughout space and time!

R—I often think about art and its phenomenological existence — its sheer physical 'materialness' and its literal connotations. Music is so exquisitely abstract, theatre is so utterly reliant on language, and visual art hovers in that liminal space between specificity and immateriality. I know music is something that looms large in your life, what is music for you?

N—For me, music operates in the same way as art does — it is simultaneously essential and mysterious. And you phrased the dynamic of it even more beautifully as "between specificity and immateriality". Art and music just makes more sense to me than anything else!

Growing up in a rural town in New South Wales I was desperate to go to museums and see bands but all I could do was turn on the radio. Music was my first love. And it's a love that has never waned! It's pretty amazing to live in an era where you can listen to whatever you like, whenever you like. There is part of me that has Rock star fantasies and then another part of me that feels a calling toward a monastic life. So being an artist is a perfect balance of those two poles of my nature as I get to have introspective and contemplative times in the studio and then to express my extroverted side during exhibitions.

R—

"Let there be light,
and there was light

Let there be sound,
and there was sound

Let there be drums,
there was drums

Let there be guitar,
there was guitar, ah

Let there be rock"

These words were famously sung in Let There Be Rock by one of your favourite bands, AC/DC. You have said that in these words the sacred and the profane marry in a meditation on time, the genesis of Rock'n'Roll lies smack bang in mid last century and here it coalesces with the Book of Genesis. How do your three healthy obsessions — Rock'n'Roll, early Christian iconography and Buddhism — manifest from thinking into making?

N—The journey is not so much from thinking to making as from experience to making. Music and religion were integral to my childhood. The first compelling aesthetic I ever experienced was going to church and the second 'whole look' I knew was seeing boys walk down the main street of Maitland wearing AC/DC T-shirts and ripped and patched jeans. And I'm still making work about the collision of those two worlds. Buddhism and my interest in Eastern thought and aesthetics came later when I moved to Sydney to go to art school. There, I was a student of Lindy Lee, an amazing teacher and artist and I became her studio assistant. She practiced Zen meditation and essentially she was my art and life mentor at that formative stage when one needs guidance in the world.

In limitless combinations and manifestations it's certainly my relationship to Rock 'n' Roll, Christianity and Buddhism, along with my Australian-ness and Western art history, that forms the basis of who I am and what I make.

R—In your installation at MCA in Sydney for The National 2017, I was struck by the presence of absence in your sculptural work — the glass ghost, the tender nest, the seductively brittle ceramics and an empty quiet place for the seated. Can you speak about absence and disappearance in your work?

N—This is quietest body of work I've ever made. Both the painting and the installation used negative space as a major ingredient. It took a lot of restraint not to fill in those negative spaces. Some of this restraint comes from the first whispering of maturity in my practice. But moreover these works directly dealt with the loss of my baby and subsequent infertility so this is undoubtedly the presence of absence you felt.

R—For WORDS + CROSSES you are installing a large painting that functions like a massive poster announcing the exhibition in the same way Colin McCahon did in 1954 for Object and Image: New Zealand Fellowship of Artists at the then named Auckland City Art Gallery. Your painting directly references McCahon's Object and Image 1954, an oil on canvas 'painted noticeboard' that is held nearby in the collection of Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato. The text on McCahon's painting transcribes as:

"OBJECT
something presented
to the Sight or other
Sense; a material thing.
IMAGE
[abstractly] appearance,
form, Semblance,
embodiment"

How do these ideas about sense and embodiment figure in your work? And what is it about McCahon's practice that resonates so powerfully for you?

N—I could talk for ages about how McCahon's work resonates — his use of light and dark, his visual and spiritual tussles, the New Zealand landscape as allegory for big questions, his use of Māori motifs and subjects at a time of burgeoning biculturalism and his use of text in multidimensional ways. That is, text as a formal and compositional device within the picture plane, his concern with text occupying the same physical space as the viewer and then the very meaning of the text itself. It's these sentiments and meanings that continue to linger in hearts and minds in an altogether different dimension to the works themselves that makes me excited. And of course it must be said that he is an extraordinary painter!



Your question about sense and embodiment reminds me of a line from The Mercy Seat by Nick Cave: "I began to warm and chill to objects and their fields". It's this push and pull that we feel in our bodies when we experience objects and their auras that I'm interested in. It seems to me that no object is isolated and every material is connected to the whole world. It's funny because the dictionary definitions of the words "Object" and "Image" in McCahon's painting are wholly interchangeable; Objects are embodied forms and Images are presented to sight and have materiality too. No wonder I love this work of McCahon's so much as I've always made 2D and 3D works and the interplay between them is very natural for me.

R—Also for WORDS + CROSSES, you are juxtaposing your Let There Be Robe (2012) against a wallpaper of your paintings, revisiting your fabric design for the Australian fashion label Romance Was Born, albeit reversed. Here again you are playing quite literally with notions of Object and Image. The bodiless robe also connects with Zen Buddhism both in its former purpose and for you personally. How does your daily practice of Buddhism filter into your art practice?

N—Well, on a good day, it's the same practice! Generally speaking, the whole point of a practice is to break down the barriers between activities and make one's whole life one practice. It is just a matter of being present to whatever is happening. Of course it's easy to say, impossible to do and it's a lifetime task!

But more specifically my Buddhist training has taught me to not have preferences about what is happening, to be able to stay a bit longer with difficult situations and not run away from problems and to accept and even celebrate imperfections when making art.

In terms of the day-to-day reality of how Buddhism informs my studio practice is that I just sit down and start making, I do not get up and do something else. I try and watch my mind, I watch it skirt off from what I'm doing and often I'm a million miles away and then I bring my mind back to what I'm doing. And I do that over and over and over again. I usually have intention for what I'm making, but I have to look at what is actually happening in front of me and as things change I have to decide if I stay with the intention or if the material and the work is telling me to go somewhere else... and that, in summation, is the magic dance of an art practice!

List of Works

Window
[works listed left to right]:

Middle :) Orange

2017
traffic cone, marker

44×27.4×27.4 cm

WORDS + CROSSES

2017
acrylic paint on linen

216×452 cm

Big :) Orange

2017
traffic cone, marker

71×35.5×35.5 cm

Little :) Orange

2017
traffic cone, marker

33×21×21 cm

Gallery 1

[works listed left to right]:

Another Golden Ghost

2017
acrylic paint on linen

90×73cm

The way of saint shell

2009
Bronze

10.5×12×3 cm

Edition of 5 + 2 A/Ps

In JUST seven days

I can make YOU a man

2017
acrylic paint on linen

90.5×72.4 cm

same but different

2017
acrylic paint and ink on linen

90.5×73.5 cm

I AM just A SIMPLE MAN TRYING TO make MY WAY IN the Universe

2017
acrylic paint and mixed media on linen

90.5×73 cm

NZZN

2017
acrylic paint on linen

91.5×72.5 cm

A short history of a man

2017
acrylic paint on linen

217×70.5 cm

2017 NELL

2017
acrylic paint on linen

93.5×72.5 cm

I'm going HOME

2017
acrylic paint on linen

90.5×72 cm

NELL/MOTHER (inverted)

2017
wallpaper made in collaboration

with Romance Was Born

dimension variable

Gallery 2

[works listed left to right]:

Let There Be Robe

2011
Zen robe, T-shirts, beads, badges,

mannequin, socks, Converse

All-Stars, guitar picks, paintbrushes,

drumsticks, scissors, pencils,

screwdrivers, chopsticks

dimensions variable

Installation view: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 2015. Photograph: Penny Lane