



REVIEW - 01 JUL 2016

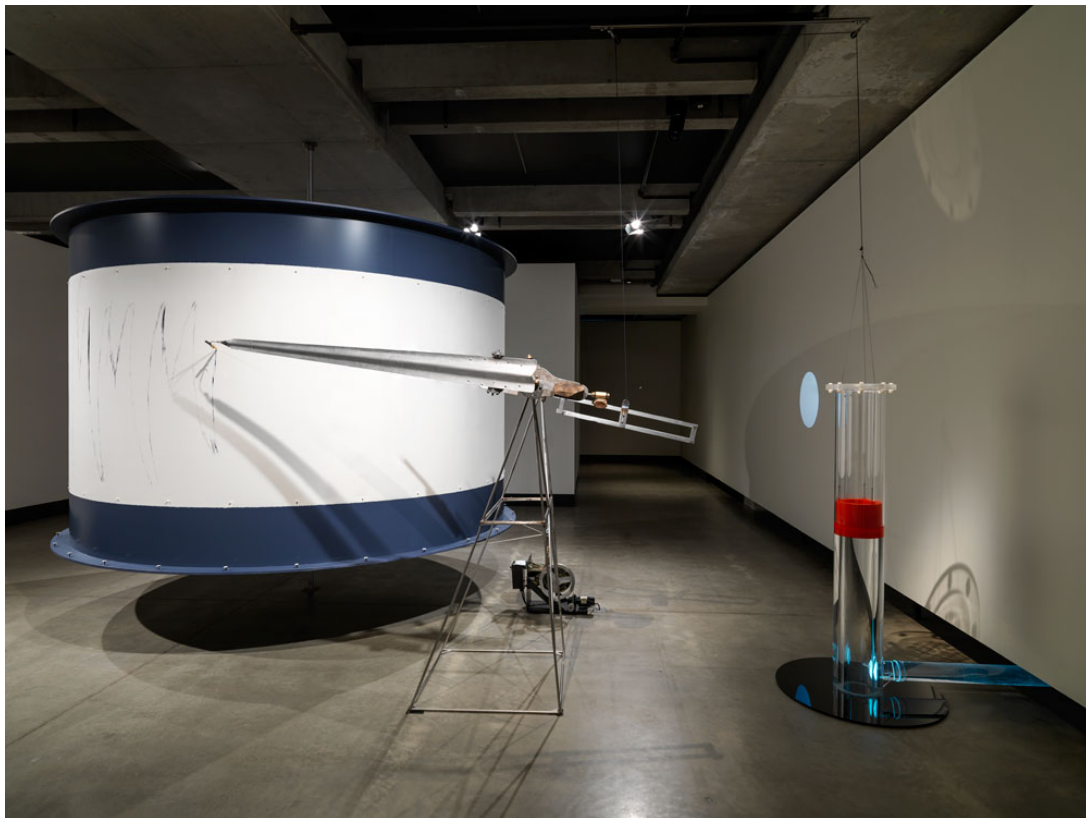
# Cameron Robbins

BY SOPHIE KNEZIC

Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart,  
Australia

Cameron Robbins's first museum survey highlights the artist's 25-year obsession with the elemental forces of the natural world: rain, snow, ocean tides but, most of all, wind turbulence, which Robbins has harnessed through his drawing machines. Part recording mechanisms, part kinetic sculptures, these hand-built contraptions

feature a mechanical arm affixed with a ball-point pen powered by wind trapped in a series of swivelling steel cones mounted on a vertical axis. Sheets of drawing paper attached to a horizontal wooden plane are secured for specific intervals or set to rotate slowly: the erratic behaviour of the wind drives the pen to cover the paper's surface with delicate, feathery lines that recall the natural world – smoke vapours or eddying water, tree bark or birds' nests. Built up over time, these lines form compositions that are, in effect, pictorial transcriptions of the movements of wind.



Cameron Robbins, *Tide Line* (detail), 2016, installation view. Courtesy: MONA, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia; photograph: Mona/Rémi Chauvin

While the prototypes of these drawing machines (*Portable Wind-Drawing Machine*, 1990-2016) were designed to be carried over rugged terrain, Robbins's more recent works deploy greater mechanical sophistication. The MONA commission, *Tide Line* (2016), uses industrial-scaled hydraulics to mobilize tidal motion in the Derwent River – located six metres beneath the museum's site – to power a pen-mounted mechanical arm across the paper-clad

surface of a giant drum, recording the ebb and flow of tidal currents. *Wind Funnel* (2016), an enormous tapering fibreglass structure, erupts fan-powered breezes into the museum's stately spaces.

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New iterations of the drawing machines, named 'Anemographs' (a compound of the Hebrew term for truth and the Greek for recording instrument), work with light rather than pen and paper. Appended with a LED light, the wind-propelled mechanical arm produces agitated overlapping lines whose nocturnal coursings are captured through time-lapse photography and transformed into fiery ribbons of light.



Cameron Robbins, *Anemograph, Lion's Head*, 2014, c-type print on rag paper, 1.6 x 1

Combining magnetism and illumination, Robbins took his wind cartography into new territory in the series 'Mt Jim Magnetic Anomaly' (2011). A mountainous area near Falls Creek, the land is the site of an unexplained kink in the magnetic field of the earth's terrain. Using a hand-held compass and LED light, Robbins charted the contours of this capricious magnetic field with time-lapse photography. The resulting c-type photographs reveal staggered luminous loops whorling through the night-time landscape as strange eyelets of light. The companion piece to this series, 'Magnetometers' (2016), comprises a cluster of compass-mounted structures set in basalt, whose thin bronze arms point North-South. Placed in the cavernous spaces of MONA, however, invisible magnetic obstructions – such as the building's electrical cabling – retard their natural orientation, forming a built environment analogue to the magnetic anomalies of the natural world.

Robbins's interest in geo-physics situates his practice squarely in the realm of land art. Associated with iconic figures of the 1970s (such as Walter de Maria, Richard Long and Robert Smithson), land artists sought to make objects of the natural environment, with minimal modification, constitute works of art: against the commercialism of the art market and the perceived artificiality of studio-made objects, these artists saw in nature materials and processes they found more compelling. De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977), whose square kilometre grid of steel poles set in the New Mexico desert was designed to channel the high-voltage electricity discharged during lightning storms, is perhaps the closest parallel to Robbins's work in its natural force-harnessing ability. What makes Robbins singular, however, is his inexpugnable drawing sensibility. On the one hand, the artist's works are fine-tuned apparatuses that neutrally record the earth's restlessness; on the other, the artist's own orientation to the attenuated nature of the drawn line means these registrations devolve into something we can unequivocally call drawing. In other words, Robbins's instruments allow the world to draw itself.

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