

Beam In Thine Own Eye

David Walsh

I love the King James Bible. Not for all the sanctimonious self-certainty that the words convey, but for the words themselves. Written contemporaneously with the composition of some of Shakespeare's finest plays, these two bodies of work represent, to me, the pinnacle of literary achievement in English.

When trying to find a name for our exhibition Olivier, to whom English is a foreign language, suggested 'Sculptures of the mind'. It's clunky, but it gets across his fundamental notion, that certain art works (perhaps all art works) only become art when held in the mind's eye.

I looked for phrases to convey this notion succinctly but ecstatically. After all this is a celebration of the power of the mind to consider, and compose. But it's more than that, it is also redolent of the idea that minds are able to hold something in common, we can't be seeing the same artwork in each of our minds, but for the most part we agree it's art.

Ernest Schrodinger said that colour 'cannot be accounted for by the physicist's objective picture of light-waves. Could the physiologist account for it, if he had fuller knowledge than he has of the processes in the retina and the nervous processes set up by them in the optical nerve bundles and in the brain?' He concludes that these experiences, called qualia, are subjective, but real. If so, then how much more so for the experience of art?

At Dark Mofu we are grappling with powerful forces, those that shape our version of reality within our minds, and yet we hope to be able to touch minds whatever their hitherto held ideas about the way the world works.

In looking for a title I looked at the dexterity of the words, their rhythm and sequence, to find a phrase that might induce a subjective experience that parallels that of the art itself.

At the Temple of Apollo in Delphi it said 'Know Thyself'. Nietzsche thought this impossible but what we now think is real lies somewhere between the objective and the subjective. 'Beam In Thine Own Eye' lies within this vaporous region, through both the exposition and the exhibition.

That's what I wrote, all that stuff you just read, and I wrote it because Elizabeth Mead (Mona writer) wanted some sort of synopsis of what 'Bitoe', as we have started calling it, is about. (Rhymes with 'right-o').

And it's all true, in the sense that I didn't make any of it up. It constitutes my proximate reality, a thing that I considered true and motivating when I wrote it. So when Elizabeth asked me to write something for our little catalogue, why did I struggle? I never struggle to write something, mainly because I'm happy to write the first thing that comes into my mind, even if it isn't particularly edifying. But this time, nothing came into my mind.

Nothing came into my mind because we were pushing the cart before the horse. Sure, we want a show that explores something and the mind's internal depiction is an interesting visual subject. And one could write a great deal about it. Many others have, in fact, written a great many things about it.

For what it's worth, here's a quick summary of what I believe. The mind is made of matter, nothing else, no soul, no twenty-one grams. The mind emerges from the physics and chemistry of the matter that constitutes us and our brain, and it is a marvel, but as an evolved (in the Darwinian sense) contrivance it is only designed to solve the problems it

has faced in recent evolutionary time. If it can solve problems of a symbolic type, and mostly it can, that is by design, or it's a side effect of a solution to a problem that is sufficiently similar to allow the other solution to be co-opted. No god in this design, no myth of excellence in design, just pretty good solutions to most problems, but only the ones that can be reached in small steps, because those are the only steps that evolution can take (and yes, I know about lateral gene transference, but the genes that are so employed went through the evolutionary process because they were co-opted).

Mitochondria, the power packs of our cells, evolved as independent organisms, but were mutualized into us because of their energetic capacity when they were on their own).

So the brain is pretty good at mind stuff, but it often fails. Failures are called illusions, or delusions. Perhaps they should be called reality checks. Look at a clock. It takes three or so seconds to construct a mental picture of what you are seeing while your eyes wander all over the place (saccades). So you fill in the time from the first position you see the second hand in retrospectively, which may be a couple of seconds after you started looking, and thus your mind decides that the first second is rather long. Yes, we are easily deceived. Everybody knows lots of examples, from UFOs to ghosts to gods to near-death experiences to believing that the hot chick (guy) at the bar fancies you. And if you are at Mofo there is a good chance you have experimented with drugs. Not that we endorse drugs, of course. But the chick (guy) at the bar fancies you.

Alcohol, carsickness tablets, ecstasy and lots of other legal and illegal substances alter your perception of reality. And other things like exercise and sex. Whirling dervishes and schizophrenics, spirit healers and anorexics all operate at extremes in our perceptive ranges but they are normal components of our society. They clearly see stuff. Many of us believe in the stuff they see without seeing it ourselves.

So all those things that I think I know, the things I just summarized, they would have been good things to embed in an exhibition and, maybe, some of them slipped in towards the end. But we didn't start at the beginning. And we couldn't see the end.

What happened is something like this: Leigh Carmichael (designer, festival organizer, other things) asked the government to give us some money towards a winter festival. Exactly what his motives were aren't clear, but they are sure to be, at least in part, personal – like giving himself more to do, perhaps extending his range and authority. But he may have had some sound social reasons, big picture stuff. He might have cared that winter is tough for businesses in Hobart. Hobartians think our winters are unfairly lambasted, and we think more people should visit and find out for themselves.

The government decided to ante-up. There are a lot of independent minds operating within government, of course, so to treat their decision like a conceptual whole is an over-simplification. Nevertheless I proceed – maybe they thought about political realities, making people happy and securing votes, or maybe, like Leigh, they thought about the effect of winter on the Tasmanian economy and spirit. Here I want to use the word etiolate, a word which describes a plant grown without light. I think Tasmanians get a bit withdrawn and etiolated over winter, and they need some brightness in their lives (so maybe I agree with the mainlanders view of our winter, at least a little bit). I could have integrated the word etiolated into the text and made you look it up and made me look a bit smarter. I do that sometimes, throw in a big word, because ego-servicing is a motive of mine, a human motive that may have inspired Leigh when he asked the government to kick-in some cash. And the government probably felt some ego-gratification in saying 'yes'. Something like, 'If this goes well we'll look pretty good, and if it does a face plant at least we will be seen to be having a go. And without a miracle we are on our last legs anyway'. But everybody still probably wants to do some good. And maybe we will. They

might get their miracle. And, who knows, they might deserve it.

Anyway, we didn't do this thing because we did some deep analysis and found our art spoke of things that may, otherwise, forever have remained unspoken. Curators Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling, and a few others, knew of some artists that made great, lively, crowd-pleasing stuff that can brighten one's day and, on a good day, might even make one see something they hadn't before, in their mind's eye. That last bit could have been a punch line but I'm telling the truth here, and the truth doesn't end after the full stop after the glib bit.

It isn't about illusion, we aren't that cheap, yet. It's about having fun, and getting people to look at stuff they don't normally look at, and getting people that do normally look at this stuff to suspend their cynicism. And here I invite critics to identify my attempt to short-cut their criticism by offering them a quote: 'Walsh and his cronies' superciliousness cannot conceal their paucity of depth, nor their conceptual vacuity; while their specious attempt to define science as art is self-evidently self-heckling. They remain unencumbered by pedagogy and thus need to seek wriggle-room in populism. The pretentiously titled 'Beam In Thine Own Eye' reifies their calumny, this latest fairground attraction masquerading as an exhibition cannot further the axiology of Australian art one iota'.

Actually all that is bullshit, but I think it's kind of funny. Sure, there are critics who will immerse their argot-angling in a substrate of pseudo-bokonism (sorry, it's taking me some time to wind down). Most critics, most people, want to grow. But it's bloody hard. First you have to realize that you are rather small.

When I built Mona I felt a little afraid that someone might see through my lack of depth.

A while later I felt afraid that no one might ever see through my lack of depth. While all this was going on I learned, and I learned that learning is what goes on when you risk exposing weakness, by trying really hard at something you're not that good at. Of course, my mates and colleagues, those that did all the work, may already have been good at this stuff, and it might have been them that got us over the line, that made Mona something worthwhile. And while they wallpapered over my cracks, if that's what they did, I expanded my horizons.

'Beam In Thine Own Eye' is our new stuff, moulded by what we've become, influenced by what we are thinking about, expanded by our newfound confidence, but leavened by our uncertainty. I'm learning not to hide behind cynicism, and to be proud of what we do. And I like our new stuff better than our old stuff.