

Dust

Alison Clouston and Boyd

Articulate Project Space, Sydney

10–19 June 2011

A curtain of rusted corrugated iron hangs from the ceiling. Like a wave it curls inward in a gesture that invites entry and, looking back, you can see spots of light shining through where nails have been. Trailing through the entire ground floor of Articulate Project Space, the rusted, warped, contorted and blackened remains of a fire are illuminated by its warm white surfaces.

Dust, a sound and sculpture installation by Alison Clouston and Boyd, consists of fire damaged material and willow and includes two compositions, the Prelude 'Breath' and 'Requiem', which were composed and performed by Boyd on counter bass clarinet. Clouston, a visual artist, and Boyd, a composer, have worked collaboratively for more than a decade to create sound and sculpture installations that explore environmental themes.

In December 2010, the artists' studio burned to the ground, destroying their tools, art materials and a lifetime collection of artworks from previous exhibitions such as *Bonetown* (2004), *Nesting Nesting* (2004) and *Bird Cry* (2008). The studio, which was in isolated bushland in the Burragorang Valley, west of Sydney, was constructed from building materials scavenged in Sydney back lanes during the 1980s. An onscreen photo reveals a small corrugated iron house with peaked roof and wooden dormer windows. There is a pond in the foreground and a rocky escarpment stretches across the distant horizon. The scene is peaceful, a rural romance inhabited by wombats, kangaroos and other native species whose found remains – skulls, bones, nests – have been collected and incorporated into the artists' previous exhibitions.

In the main gallery space, the installation objects are spread out on two sides, leaving a track down the middle. On one side there is an assemblage of blackened, rusted and incinerated tools – hammer heads, clamps, pliers, saws; a misshapen sewing machine; a tin box, its lid still attached and opened, containing corroded drill bits and the charred blob of a drill. At my first visit, the tools were placed like classified groups of museum artefacts. At my second, they had been reassembled like an extinguished campfire site in the centre of the floor, the physical focal point for the Friday 17 June performance of the artwork, 'Chorale', by *The Monday Club*, with

Boyd on contrabass clarinet, Tony Gorman on alto clarinet, Stephen Morley on horn, Mary Rapp on cello.

'Breath' and 'Requiem', which make up the soundtrack to the installation, begin playing when you enter the space. At first the sounds are subtle, unexpected, seem imagined. But then, as you slowly become more aware and the volume increases, the sounds pull you into focusing on the sights of the installation. Featuring the pitched breath of air on contrabass clarinet, 'Breath', invokes the breath of life, the first breaths of a baby, the last breaths of the dying.

The awesome force of the fire, its frightening destructiveness as well as its ability to transform and create a certain beauty, is what engages our senses and emotions in this installation. Sheets of rusted corrugated iron, lying in clumps, are marked with mottled streaks and blobs of rust, weathered greys, charcoal blacks, ashen whitenesses. Aquamarine tinged fragments of melted glass. A cast iron stove, Metters Sydney, chimney intact but its heavy iron top has been violently buckled and twisted. Of all the fire's effects, I found the damage to the fuel stove particularly unsettling, perhaps because of its practical and symbolic functions of taming and containing fire for domestic survival (warmth, cooking etc). And the tools, despite their uncanny resemblance to their former selves, have been made useless for, as Clouston relates, when she attempted to 'resurrect' them, she found they no longer had any strength and simply gave way when any pressure was applied.

Still green, alive it seems, are two large bundles of straight thin willow branches. These were harvested from a tree which, after several attempts at eradication by park rangers (willows are regarded as noxious weeds), continues to sprout new growth in spring. Clouston has used the willow sticks to construct curved igloo shaped frames which suggest shelters, for human or non human, and remind of the willow's traditional multiple uses by humans, for example, in basket making. They introduce a human, living aspect to the installation and also protect the ashen, powdery remains of plaster sculptures (from the exhibition *Beaming* 2009), which have been painstakingly reassembled and were imbued with a fragile beauty by the fire.

In the second smaller room, there are two laptops. One shows the studio before the fire, and the other features the artists' newly launched website www.burraborang.org. So, with a click of the mouse, the viewer can see digital images of the original artworks whose burnt remains are part of this installation. On the wall, inkjet prints further document close-ups of the fire's aftermath – a pile of shivery grey layers of baked paper; a melted folded plastic downpipe that looks at first like a pelican's beak or skull; a burned wombat skull whose teeth have been fired to a deep indigo.

On the floor, a large metal filing cabinet for artworks is warped, twisted and barely recognisable, with its exposed drawers, remarkably, still filled with sheaves of papery ash. On top, a large bone 'palace' made of found kangaroo bones (from exhibition *Bone Town* 2004) has been reduced to a scattered mass of bone and ash. Nearby, in a drawer, there's a blue black sheet of paper with the fine deep black outline of a dog's paw preserved on it (the fire has accentuated the artist's drawing, black on black). On another piece of charcoal black paper you can see music notes, and yet another resembles a fragment of softest black velvet.

As you move through the installation, the prelude 'Breath' is replaced by 'Requiem', in which the notes of a single scale are laid over one another, and played at four different speeds, as Boyd says, 'slow and tumbling, layering, coming into and out of focus with one another'. This monastic, sombre piece, in memory of his mother's passing at the time of the fire, is both an affirmation of her love of music in life, and of life itself.

Dust inevitably poses the question, How would I feel and what would I do if this happened to me?

The scholar, Steven Connor, argues that the word, damage, 'has [the] possibility of survival in it' because it 'names not just the action of damaging, but what is left as witness to it'.¹ He says:

Damage: *dommage*. Something flickers in these two related but subtly differentiated words in English and French. Damage means injury, a wrong done to person or things ... In French, one says 'c'est dommage' familiarly to signify not only some loss or damage, but also one's pity or regret that it should have taken place. *Quel dommage*: what a pity, such a shame. Indeed shame is implicated ... it is a shame to harm things. *C'est dommage*; such a shame that things should come to harm. [so]... Even language, it seems, strives to repair the damage to which it attests.

To say that it is a shame that the artists lost so much in the fire would be to understate the enormity of that loss. What is intriguing is the way they have chosen to move on from it. If the cause of the fire was an 'act of God' (possibly a lightning strike or a spark from a rat-chewed electrical wire), their response as artists has been decidedly human, a deliberate act of engagement with the fragility of certainty and the transitoriness of life and things. We are invited to bear witness to both the fire and its effects, and their response in its aftermath.

Dust resonates on many levels – personal, local, global. With imagination and creativity, it seems to be saying, we can recreate, repair, rebuild. Given Alison

Clouston and Boyd's previous focus on using but not spoiling what the environment provides, *Dust* may also be asserting that it is in our interests to protect and preserve the environment from the kinds of damage that may spoil it for future generations.

In the Australian bush, fire is both destroyer and, paradoxically, a creative force – germinating seeds and sparking new growth. Similarly, in *Dust* the artists have salvaged the beauty of what the fire damaged and distorted, but could not destroy. The sculpture and sound installation has a movingly resonant beauty. It speaks of loss, but also of resilience and acceptance, and equates these with resourcefulness, the pleasure of making things, the observation and appreciation of beauty – and opportunity – in even the most damaged and distorted of things. As Clouston observes, 'Sadness and beauty are so close'.

Reviewed by Annee Lawrence

200 Belmont Street, Alexandria NSW 2015

Ph: 9557 0766

Email: anneelawrence@gmail.com

¹ Steven Connor, *Damage*, a talk given on 6 April 2005 to accompany the exhibition of works by Christian Marclay, Barbican Art Gallery, London. www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/damage/ Accessed 20 June 2011.