Body as compass

Review: Climate Century: A Festival of Art for the 21st Century presented by Vitalstatistix

'Didactic' is the dirty word around here. And that's only a slight overstatement. The word's quasi-taboo status among the artists and organisers at Climate Century is part of the festival's devotion to refuting any misconception that climate change art is inherently polemical, instructional or, most grim of all, educational.

Rather, the works displayed at Hart's Mill and surrounds, amid the old union buildings (Paul Robeson once sang here, I'm told repeatedly by volunteers) and maritime infrastructure of Port Adelaide, are 'optimistic and speculative', a description used by James Dodd in the video diary accompanying the display of his ingenious 'radical watercraft', the *River Cycle*. Alternatively, Latai Taumoepeau's wildly impassioned video piece *Wardance of the Final Frontier* is, as she posits during a discussion panel, a rejection of 'linear narratives', instead 'deconstructing that and making it more abstract.'

Didacticism also couldn’t be further from the mind of dancer James Batchelor, creator of the exploratory and ontologically industrious performance piece *Deepspace*, a meditation on surveyance and a sensory investigation into environment. On the same panel he says, 'I'm not necessarily making a statement, but creating a landscape or environment where questions can be asked—and it's not crucial for me that people enter that questioning.'

Another central idea to Climate Century that draws it decisively away from any doctrine or dictum is that of mourning and commemoration. As curator Emma Webb says on the panel, 'The program offers reflections on a time when we failed to act. I feel like we've gone beyond educating people, and we are exploring things like grief and loss—as well as speculation and adaptation.'

At Climate Century, exposition and even example are scarce, as climate change(d) is explored with varying degrees of solemnity, poetic abstraction and disquieting visions of a volatile environmental future.

And threaded through everything, at least during the festival's second week that I attended, is an expansive musing over how climate change might intersect with, distort and evolve the human body—that which supposedly 'balks account'[i], as Whitman had it.

'We *are* the Pacific Ocean, not an island in it … The land, the body, the deep sea are inseparable'[ii]—Latai Taumoepeau

Taumoepeau, of Tongan heritage, is resigned to the fact that her ancestral land is likely to be under water in her lifetime. *Wardance of the Final Frontier*, however, homes in specifically on the relatively unknown resource exploitation that is deep sea mining. In early 2019 Canadian company Nautilus Minerals will commence mining in the waters of Papua New Guinea at depths of up to two kilometres.

It is a testament to the dizzying complexity and opacity of Taumoepeau's work that any description of it is unlikely to do it justice. This single-channel video animation, less than five minutes long, sees the ocean mustering itself into a humanoid figure: Taumoepeau wearing a costume made from recycled materials representing rock, shells and seaweed. This being charges along the ocean floor to meet a monstrous machine of mining. It then performs a war dance of the type delivered by the likes of the New Zealand, Tonga, Samoa or Fiji rugby teams before matches. The video concludes with creature and machine facing each other in a tense, somewhat bewildered standoff.

Taumoepeau describes her practice as 'Faiva'[iii], meaning 'performance of the body', and on the Sunday evening she danced in costume on the murky Port Adelaide sands nearby. Across each manifestation of *Wardance*, she employs the body not only as a ceremonial tool of confrontation with destructive machinery, but also as a kind of invocation of a higher, intangible force to combat environmental destruction (and it is important to note that Taumoepeau challenges the normally exclusively masculine nature of these war dances).

The (still non-didactic) message seems to be that the urgency of climate change warrants that aspects of indigenous heritage, such as specialist knowledge and spiritual connection with land and sea, join the front line of both prevention and subsequent adjustment and survival. Taumoepeau is soon to relocate to Tonga to train in traditional sea voyaging and celestial navigation in preparation for a submerged world.

'My body adapted in a noticeable way, I was swaying when I got back on land. I learned to find centre and balance in extreme instability on the ship'[iv]—James Batchelor

In 2016 at the invitation of scientists, James Batchelor spent two months at sea aboard the *RV Investigator* as it journeyed to Heard Island and McDonald Island in the southern Indian Ocean for research purposes.

Out of this transformative experience grew the dance work *Deepspace*, which was presented in two ways at Climate Century: with a video installation and the hour-long dance itself, performed with collaborator Amber McCartney. The video is a quiet but sonorous collage of Batchelor's experiments in physicality aboard the ship. At various points he contorts himself around the ship's structures, caresses railings and in some of the most arresting scenes, appears to be clinging on amid inclement conditions. Throughout, Batchelor presents a slow study of both his body and these white, clinical, functional boat parts.

The dance, performed across the dirty floor of the vast Hart's Mill Flour Shed, expands this inquiry. The performance is a wide-eyed exercise in knowledge gaining and understanding. The themes, as expressed by the angular bodies and gestures of Batchelor and McCartney, are of calibration, bodily mapping, of close observation. Throughout, limbs are lined up against limbs and bodies are used as units of measurement as the pair create their own geometric

language informed by both the terrain of the ship and Batchelor's developing sea legs.

In the extreme circumstances that Batchelor found himself on *RV Investigator* (and, curators might argue, as the consequences of climate change continue to unfold), the body becomes an alien, remarkable thing that requires a new blueprint, a new cartography, to preserve itself.

'I work with things intended for disparate purposes, and combine them for a new hybrid purpose'[v]—James Dodd

James Dodd's *River Cycle* imagines sustainable transit on water through the fusion of a bicycle with the familiar 'tinny', and by presenting the body as its own source of propulsion (which Dodd demonstrates on Saturday afternoon when he pedals out onto Port Adelaide River). A statement of self-reliance, Dodd's boat-bike is among the most positive works at Climate Century, with its gentle message that modification and adaptation of existing equipment and technology might be some kind of saviour as this climate century continues. Even that word 'cycle', with its suggestion of change, renewal and evolution, implies that the future can yet be managed.

Dodd's preoccupation with redeploying tools and devices in new contexts overlaps with the fourth and final piece on display during the second week of Climate Century, Emily Parsons-Lord's *Then Let Us Run (The Sky is Falling)*. With this large-scale installation the artist reappropriates, adapts and modifies a huge decommissioned US army parachute that was used in Afghanistan

and Iraq. It is set up as a kind of giant tent that we walk into to be confronted with noisy fans creating and dispersing mist throughout this makeshift structure. We become disembodied as white envelopes us—an invitation to envisage a time when the sky is no longer blue thanks to the drastic measure of Solar Radiation Management (high stratosphere aerosol dispersal to block out the sun's radiation and thus reduce the Earth's temperature).

In contrast to Batchelor and Taumoepeau's attentiveness to our physical forms, Parsons-Lord asks us to leave our bodies completely, our frames dissolving in this soup of atmosphere, technology and engineered cloud. The piece is an enervating reminder of the insignificance and potential ineffectiveness of the individual amid atmospheric, planetary, often invisible forces.

If this article feels like it has been heavy on the use of quotes, that's because Climate Century is not just an interaction with the artists' works—it also offers an experience of their personalities, foibles, vocabularies and conversation. The artists are visible and accessible as they flit around the sites during opening hours, talking with visitors and expounding on their practice (this is made easier by the fact that Climate Century, during this second week at least, was sadly quite poorly attended).

They also give workshops; Dodd, with a beautiful softness and humour, helps Louie, aged eight, build a kinetic sculpture; Taumoepeau runs us through

drills taken from a rugby training session; Batchelor demonstrates and illuminates the theory behind the compelling first section of *Deepspace*. This arts festival is nothing if not dialogic, as an event dissecting and mourning climate change must essentially be.

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Climate Century took place 8—25 November 2018 at Waterside, Hart's Mill and surrounds, Port Adelaide.

[i] Walt Whitman, 'I Sing the Body Electric', *Leaves of Grass*, 1867
[ii] Panel, *Unsettling the Frontier*, 16 November 2018
[iii] Artist statement
[iv] Op cit. Panel
[v] Interview with the author, 17 November 2018