

Angelica Mesiti - NATURAL HISTORY

What strangeness, the way we are perched on the earth. We move from sensing we are part of a continuum to an insistence on the moment. And then to be overtaken by the past, whether caught by nostalgia or a desire to slow things down. How resilient then, the human capacity to let go of one experience and remain open to what is yet to come.

Angelica Mesiti's video pieces are poetic investigations of past events in a kind of soft wrestle with the passions of the moment. Her recent works, collected here as *Natural History*, offer fractured narratives summoned by a negotiation between primary experience and historical retelling. But this is clearly not documentary or straight storytelling. What you are viewing is edited down from a gorgeous visual array. The same difficult choices take place in her work as occur in good writing or the best painting. Images are shed and beautiful moments sacrificed for the strength of the completed piece.

I first noticed this departure from storytelling when viewing *Old Time*. Was I losing my capacity to comprehend the spoken word? Is it the rhyming stanzas, so dominant and punctuated that I responded to their rhythm rather than their content? Perhaps we have un-learned the spoken word, trained instead to gather information primarily from visual cues.

Consider the oral history form in Australia. There is the bedrock of Aboriginal experience, six hundred nations, and its continuing, fragmented veins of rich knowledge. Then Australia as colony. The yarn, a colonial import, prospered amidst land grabbing, droving and the gold rush. You can picture these stories knitted across Australia, a continuous twisted strand of wool, from rural pub to urban construction gang. Significantly, a newcomer to an area would adjust a story and drop elements of his own character into the retelling as a way of indirectly introducing himself to locals.ⁱ

Like the newcomer with his introductory yarn, Mesiti's works reflect on our current sense of place by using historical markers. She's not just pulling on one thread of story but addressing the multiplicity of events that inform our present. But let's spin it further – I see a connection here between the works in *Natural History* and a tendency the writer Nicolas Bourriaud has attributed to some recent art practice: 'Delay ... coexists with the immediate ... and with the anticipated, just as documentary coexists with fiction, not according to a principle of accumulation (postmodern baroqueism), but with the aim of revealing our present, in which temporalities and levels of reality are intertwined.'ⁱⁱ

How does the artist manage to traverse present and past? One of Mesiti's methods is to locate sites that contain histories deserving further inspection. Let me trace a few. There is the remarkable correlation in *Line of Lode* between local Indigenous knowledge and the seam of mineral deposit that defines Broken Hill. Or the trees that form the introduction to *Heritage Park*: two pines, one native and one introduced. These are the remains of the colonial homestead from early settlement. In the artist's own words, these trees 'act as markers for the original house but also their survival reminds us of a continuity that links the present to the past.'ⁱⁱⁱ Sound components also interlock past and present. The song at the beginning of *Line of Lode* is written by the artist but evocative of American folk ballad tradition. The work performed by the school band in *Heritage Park* is by Australian composer Percy Granger, pioneer of free music and collector of found birdsong, but here with an arrangement of an English folk tune.

Angelica Mesiti's selections are aesthetic, the works compelling without prior knowledge of these contexts. Careful choices deliberately shift the viewer between primary experience and historical re-telling. The winged children on bikes in *Line of Lode* are in the moment. No time to reflect. In *Rapture* the seduction of the present is absolute. The shared focus of the crowd enables this. In *Heritage Park*, the intimacy of the camera accentuates the primacy of each note played. But even when in the moment, the activity is mounted in a layer of contexts. The immediacy of a performance acts as a marker for the past. With its completion, it too folds into history.

The works in *Natural History* speaks to the plurality of human experience immersed over time in the one site. Where she can, Mesiti evokes specific stories but they're conveyed through the people and places that are witness to them. Where stories have been lost, the place remains as a talisman. And there is the possibility here, with our capacity to embrace the present through performance, that we might attempt to spin our own threads to the past.

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ⁱ Edwards, Ron *The Australian Yarn* University of Queensland Press (1996) p272

ⁱⁱ Bourriaud, Nicolas *Altermodern* catalogue text from Tate Modern exhibition (2009) p11

ⁱⁱⁱ conversation with the artist