

Cameron Robbins

By Kent Wilson

A conjurer of force and conductor of energy, Cameron Robbins harnesses his own wellspring of creative will to drive his expanding practice. With one eye on the heavens and the other on engineered constructions, he deftly weaves a web of the elemental and the instrumental. With a studio alive with production for upcoming outings in Berlin, Brighton (UK), Hobart and around Melbourne, Robbins is the fulcrum in a maelstrom of activities, ideas and a carefully balanced sense of chaos.



Untitled11

Wind Section, 2013–14, mixed media machine and paper; wind tower 850cm tall, paper roll 90 x 500cm, plinth 240 x 300cm; MONA Tasmania. Photo: Dr. Jon Tarry

Driven by a sense of momentum one could easily attribute to his kinetic sculptures, Robbins is focused on a series of projects that promise to expand his practice and bring his work to a rapidly growing and appreciative audience. Thanks to a recent Fellowship program developed with the Australia Council for the Arts, he has mapped out two years of research, development and exhibitions. “It’s a very busy time for me right now,” Robbins says when we begin our conversation. In the week he was awarded the Fellowship he also won a commission for a major work at the Yarra Ranges Museum in Lilydale, Victoria.

From his earliest efforts in 1990, working with boats to make abstract ‘automatic’ drawings, Robbins has partnered with the forces of nature to collaborate on his production. “I recorded the boats’ responses to waves, wind and tides by directing them to draw on the walls of the boatshed,” he explains, “via simple devices of wires, weights and pulleys”. Reading about mathematics and the work of Benoît Mandelbrot, Robbins says he “was drawn to the variations in natural energies and processes that he was describing. They struck me as an analogue to art-making: the way nature takes an energy and kind of riffs on it, developing endless variations a bit like a jazz improvisation.”

These early forays laid the terrain for Robbins’ future work and continue to provide the impetus for his trajectory forward. Working on a series of rotary wind-powered drawing machines that could “draw something like a planetary orbit, complete with non-repeating cycles and the capacity for flexibility within my parameters; skeins of lines relating to the Poincaré maps of chaos theory” he discovered a joy in the resultant drawings. “I had found a way of working with the world,” he explains, “that reflected my observations and was my own thing. For me it also offered a nice sidestep over vexing issues like self-consciousness in art making.”

Experimenting with his methods and the instruments he creates for this work, Robbins continues to refine his art through research and a focus on evidentiary diligence. The resulting outcome of this approach is a growing demand for his work and a global appreciation of his art. The latter sees him preparing for exhibitions in England and Germany, where he is sending a couple of water-based sound works and an indoor/outdoor wind drawing machine, respectively. The sound works, in an echo of his earliest beginnings, “use bubbles and vapour in an exploration of the Earth’s hydrological cycle”. Robbins notes that this “is part of the third iteration of GAUGE, a group installation and sound performance in Brighton in the south of England, devised by sound artists Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey”.

Recent incursions into northern Europe, in particular Norway and Germany, have seen Robbins become more comfortable with classification as an artist in the realm of Land Art. Uncomfortable with labels, “it is for others to decide where to place an artist’s work,” he says, Robbins finds some acceptance in this categorisation in this part of the world. He is keen to stress that terms like ‘environmental’ are often without the clarity we might assume are attributed to them. “Environment is a funny word, because although it has come to mean the natural world, it actually signifies just whatever is around you. I utilise my own made structures, mechanical systems and so on, and often work in the built environment.”

The thoughtfulness he brings to the context of his works is a clear extension of his focus on the networked relations of the materials he works with. Water sits at the core of much of his thinking, his process and his works. You can sense his deep-seated affinity for this material when he describes its elemental history. “Water,” he says, “can be created in interstellar space from hydrogen and oxygen in the shockwaves of exploding stars, where many of the heavier elements – gold, iron, uranium – and minerals are also created. From these metamorphosed star ashes, clouds of material eventually condense to form planets such as the Earth. This means that our drinking water is actually older than 4.5 billion years, which I enjoy thinking on.”

The largest project that Robbins is undertaking sees him preparing for an exhibition at MONA in Hobart. Scheduled for the second half of 2016, it will include “a large selection of drawings I made with the machine I had installed there for 18 months – ‘Wind Section Instrumental’ – and a permanent installation of that machine interacting with the Roy Grounds building, ‘Roundhouse’.”

Returning to sites of previous exhibitions or installations is a joy for Robbins, “a real luxury in a crazed world of continual one-offs”. A certain level of mutual respect and trust developed between the artist and the commissioner of repeat projects is rewarding. On this front, part of his foray back to Hobart involves him installing a site-specific sculpture through the roof of David Walsh’s house. “A large, complicated, twin-axis, wind-powered drawing machine,” Robbins explains, “right into one of the lounge rooms. Using wind speed and direction, it draws directly onto a big window.”

With these myriad projects underway Robbins finds himself sitting comfortably in the middle of the orbiting forces at play. Perhaps it is no surprise that he declares that “astronomy is a very strong interest and activity of mine and in making work I do keep in mind my version of how the universe works”. It’s not hard then to feel that he senses his own position in a harmony of orbiting activities swirling about him, as his work reflects his world and his world reflects his work.

EXHIBITION

Cameron Robbins | Field Lines

18 May – 29 August

Mona, TAS

www.cameronrobbins.com

Courtesy the artist, MONA, Hobart, City of Greater Dandenong, NKD, Norway, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney, courtesy of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Borough of Queenscliff

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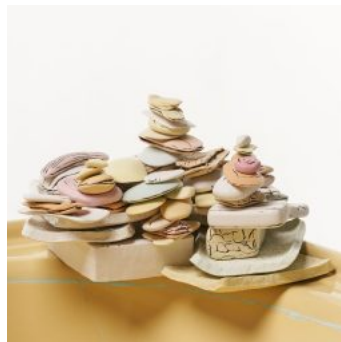
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