

Cameron Robbins's Elemental Art Instruments at MONA Tasmania

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | JULY 05, 2016



Wind Funnel room Cameron Robbins (Born 1963, Melbourne, Australia, where he lives and works) Wall: Wind Funnel, 2016 Fibreglass, electric fan Floor: Anemograph XL, 2016 Timber, stainless steel, aluminium, bearings, carbon fibre, stone, electrical wiring, LED, optical glass

(PHOTO CREDIT: MONA/RÉMI CHAUVIN IMAGE COURTESY: MONA, MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART, HOBART, TASMANIA, AUSTRALIA)

RELATED

VENUES

Museum of Old and New Art-Hobart

“Field Lines,” at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Tasmania, is Australian artist Cameron Robbins’s first international solo show at a major museum. Based in the Melbourne suburb of Collingwood, Robbins uses structural devices or “instruments” to create amazing works of art from natural forces and the elements.

“When I was growing up we had a holiday house. I used to notice the sea changing things, and the way the wind would make a tree erode a certain bit of the cliff,” Robbins has said. “So I guess nowadays I’m trying to connect to landscape, and to the greater dynamic of the whole climate system, how patterns move through a particular location.”

Spanning more than three decades of Robbins’s multidisciplinary practice, “Field Lines” includes installations, sculpture and video, photography, and a collection of 16 monumental wind drawings. Seven new specially created, site-specific installations, many of which were created in response to the location of the museum, are among the highlights of the exhibition.

To find out more “Field Lines” and his fascinating practice, BLOUIN ARTINFO got in touch with Robbins and asked him a few questions.

“Field Lines” at Mona is a major exhibition of your practice, which encompasses, drawing, sound and video work, photography, installation, and sculpture. What does the exhibition reveal about the themes and motifs that drive and motivate your practice?

A lot of my work deals with actual sites and site responses, working with available energies like wind, ocean-waves, geomagnetism, landforms. I think Mona itself represents, among many things, a commitment to the site. The architecture and how the museum is embedded into the headland with exposed raw sandstone walls sets the scene for my own site based responses. Some of my new works for the exhibition actually respond to the site energies of geomagnetism and the tides. There is a large selection of the big wind drawings I did on-site with the installation Wind Section Instrumental in 2014.

You are perhaps best known for your drawings made using “instruments” that transcribe the patterns of the wind. What was the original inspiration for these works and what do you want to convey and express with them?

This work is based on interaction with natural forces and the elements, where I have tried to devise ways of producing a collaboration between person/nature. As much as we seem to create a separate human world, we are inescapably as much a part of nature as the galaxies, microbes and wind. Ideas of nature are always a product of culture, and it can be argued that culture arises from the natural world.

The Wind Drawing Machines are installed in different locations to collect wind energy and translate it into an abstract but communicative format of ink drawings on paper.

Physicists from the Bureau of Meteorology have described these wind drawings in mathematical language by as ‘phase-space diagrams’.

Rather than being ‘automatic’, the drawing machines are in fact drawing instruments. More like clarinets and pianos than compasses or set-squares, they must be played, maintained, and practiced to produce anything of interest.

The machine responds to wind speed and wind direction, and allows rain and sun to also play on the drawings. The principle employed here is that the wind direction orients a swiveling drawing board connected to a wind vane, while the wind speed drives a pen on a wire arm around in a cyclical motion. While it is a mechanical thing with axles, bearings, and pulley wheels, it also has inbuilt flexibility which allows it to respond to subtle and chaotic dynamics and to stray from any predetermined path.

I hope that the drawings reflect the spirit and dynamics of a particular place in the land and atmosphere – known as the ‘Genius Loci’. The constant variation and endless surprises that have kept me creating wind drawings

The exhibition includes seven new commissions, many of which respond to the physical world of Mona. Could you explain the new works?

Tide Lines responds and draws to the tides in the Derwent. I wanted to look at actual sea levels, but for a four month show, the tides are more exciting. I started my weather-drawing works in 1990 in a tidal boat-shed, and wanted to bring this dynamic into the Museum. So this massive instrument starts with a 14 metre long balance arm and 7 metre hydraulic system transcribing the tidal movements from river level up into the Museum level. It draws on a huge 3.2 metre diameter drum which revolves once every Lunar month - about 30 days.

With Loggerheads, we have opposing forces: creation and destruction, and drawing and erasing. An interesting thing is that it takes a lot of energy to erase something, whereas drawing is very simple (think of a texta on furniture, for instance). I just started doing drawings, then thought about erasing, to see how that feeds into the drawing in a visual way. But when I did it, it became a very interesting – like a political proposition. It’s basically an argument. The two things are at loggerheads: one wants to draw, one wants to erase. So, by the very fact of physics, the erasing process is very difficult. You have to have a big engine and heavy weight. It’s really quite brutal. But the interesting thing is that it still doesn’t erase properly. It’s very hard to erase, especially pencil on paper. But it’s very easy to draw lightly.

It does reflect that tension. Because we’ve got the solar power doing the drawing and then we’ve got mains electricity, which in Tasmania is coal, diesel and hydro, doing the erasing. But then when people see the work, they notice it’s about a relationship. People can see their own relationship in the machine. They say, ‘I’m the pencil but you come in and you’re always the eraser,’ and others say, ‘No, no, I’m the pencil. I’m creating and you’re destroying!’

Then we also have Wind Funnel, a 6.5 x 3 metre fibreglass Hyperbolic Cone (shape taken from a water vortex curve) which blows wind into the gallery to motivate some wind devices.

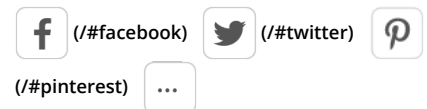
Also I created a large neon work, Mt Jim Field Outline, which hovers over a rock outcrop of basalt. The shape of this neon is directly transcribed from a field research project where I outlined a magnetic anomaly occurring on a remote mountain in NE Victoria, using compass, chalk, and long exposure photographs tracing a light around the anomaly.

Natural forces and natural phenomena are at the heart of your work. How did you become interested in these themes and how has your interaction and perception of them changed and developed over the course of your career?

In 1990 I worked with boats to make abstract 'automatic' drawings. I recorded the boats' responses to waves, wind and tides by directing them to draw on the walls of the boatshed via simple devices of wires, weights, and pulleys. Reading about Chaos Theory, fractals and the work of Benoît Mandelbrot, I 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 like a jazz improvisation.

I began 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 parameters; how the moon pulls the earth's orbit into a corkscrew; skeins of lines relating to the Poincaré maps of chaos theory, I discovered a joy in the resultant drawings. I had found a way of working with the world that reflected my observations and was my own thing. For me it also offered a nice side step over vexing issues like self-consciousness in art making.

[View Slideshow \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/photo-galleries/cameron-robbins-field-lines-at-mona-tasmania\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/photo-galleries/cameron-robbins-field-lines-at-mona-tasmania)



[Contemporary Arts \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts/contemporary-arts\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts/contemporary-arts) [News \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts/news-0\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts/news-0)

[Features \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts/features\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts/features) [Visual Arts \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/visual-arts)

[Cameron Robbins \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/cameron-robbins\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/cameron-robbins) [Field Lines \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/field-lines\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/field-lines) [MONA \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/mona\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/mona)

[Tasmania \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/tasmania\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/tasmania) [Hobart \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/hobart\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/hobart) [Nicholas Forrest \(http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/nicholas-forrest\)](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/tags/nicholas-forrest)
