

Cameron Robbins - foreword

I feel very certain about the existence of randomness and chance in our universe. No one thing can be exactly the same. Yes, as humans we are all made up of the same stuff. Our biological formula follows a pre-existent pattern; eyes, legs, hearts etc. What we choose to do with this however, is not pre-determined. Similarly, in the work of Cameron Robbins we see that nature and the weather consist of predetermined patterns, yet when the variables inherent in artistic practice are introduced, the result is impossible to predict.

Obviously, I am not the only one that recognises a confused and contradictory duality where chance is concerned in nature and art. Google any philosophy on chance, and most likely you'll end up with the opposing argument before you even get what you were looking for in the first place.

Take the following for example. Einstein famously said;

"God does not play dice with the universe".

Right, thank you Einstein, that is conclusive and makes perfect sense. This metaphorical 'god' does not allow for the existence of chance. That is a bit worrying.

Then google tells me that Aristotle, the Ancient Greek philosopher, was on the same wave length back then, claiming that there was no place for chance in physics or even metaphysics. Now I'm really worried that what I wanted to say about Robbins' work wont hold up.

Hang on, Aristotle is backtracking. Apparently;

"Nor is there any definite cause for an accident, but only chance." (Metaphysics, Book V, 1025a25).

Okay, that's more like it.

At this point things appear in my favour but I'm sure that if I continue I'll find myself in trouble again. I really have no choice but to go back to the basics, rid my mind of philosophical theories, and ask quite simply; what can Robbins' work tell me about chance and randomness in nature and art?

Firstly, Robbins illustrates that nature is profoundly sophisticated. We, however, when faced with this, know no limits of foolery; after all the inventor of dynamite blew himself up with the stuff by accident. Even better, it turns out that the only reason dancers keep their upper bodies and arms rigid during Irish jigging is because somewhere along the way someone lost the manual for the upper half of the body. Honestly, that's true, it has been proved. Clearly we are the ones losing key parts of the equation, while nature watches on mocking us.

At the core of Robbins' work is the notion of analysing sites and contexts, using their natural energy to produce art works. Robbins does not attempt to control these energies, but

instead to record them in the most creative and interactive of ways. He ultimately illustrates, I believe anyway, that within natural laws there is very little inherent undefined probability or chance but that following this, randomness clearly exists.

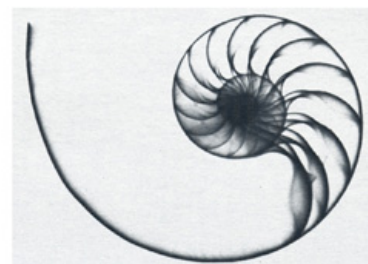
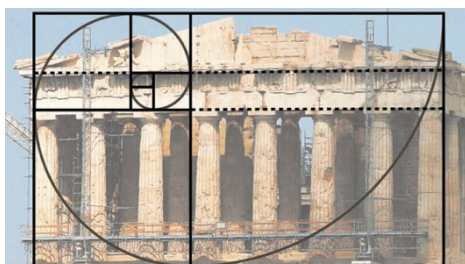
In this exhibition at MONA you will see Robbins' *Wind Section Instrumental*, a nine-metre tall tower which, connected to a pen and paper will turn the wind patterns into drawings. The wind vane rotates the canvas so that the paper spins with the direction of the wind, the anemometer drives a series of pulleys and then that drives the pen around according to the speed of the wind.

Here, I must admit, I am wary of chance. If there is no wind, or not enough, there will be very little drawing. I've checked the forecast, but with weather prediction being one of the most famously disappointing sciences I have to say I'm not convinced. Do me a favour though and let's leave that aside for the moment. Instead let's focus on the drawings from Robbins' previous similar experiments.

These drawings, on display in the main gallery of the exhibition, bear remarkable similarities to what is known as The Golden Spiral. In mathematics, this logarithmic spiral has a growth ratio of ϕ , the Golden Ratio. Simply explained, this spiral can repeat itself, within itself, using the same ratio, endlessly. For centuries artists have employed The Golden Ratio in the hope of achieving ultimate proportional aesthetic beauty. It was used, amongst various other examples, when the Ancient Greeks designed the Parthenon, in Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and in the work of many modernist painters, including Juan Gris.

The most important thing to know is that the Golden Spiral is found in the planet's most natural sources; flowers, shells, tree branches, hurricanes, faces and even animal fighting patterns. Take, for this example, the shell. Within a shells surface one can trace repeated patterns using the golden ratio. It is, I point out, no small 'chance' that Robbins' wind drawings, no matter the forecast, carry very similar aesthetic patterns. It just proves that no matter how that wind might feel to us when we stand on the roof top, whether it knocks us over, or we barely feel it, nature's inherent patterns are already decided, or at least they are far beyond our control.

Images eg.





Yet when we look at these drawings together as a whole, each differ entirely from each other. Here comes that duality I mentioned earlier. No one drawing can be the same, just like no one human can be the same, luckily, otherwise we really wouldn't have much to show you.

The practice of exposing chance in art is no new phenomenon and is one I have always been fascinated by. In Marcel Duchamp's *3 Standard Stoppages* from 1913, the artist developed a way to test the metric system along side the notion that chance does not exist. By dropping three pieces of string, each 1-metre long, from 1-metre high onto a stretched canvas, and recording the different ways in which they landed, Duchamp presented a new kind of metric system. Each canvas recorded the same dimension of course, but gave it 'a new look'. A kind of 'look' that was totally reliant on chance. This is what Robbins is so brilliant at doing. He shows us firstly, nature's inherent patterns, but then how his involvement with this results in a beauty abundant with randomness. His own version of 'weathered chance'.



Robbins' practice is not limited to drawing. He also works with sound, amongst other things. In 2010 he installed *Sea Songs of the Subconscious* in the village of Kou on Teshima island in Japan. On the pier, a set of tuned organ pipes, attached to an upturned fishing boat, played a bass F minor chord according to the pattern of the waves. Slightly weary of whether this work was going to support my theory or not I watched the results on YouTube. Sigh of

relief. Even to my untrained ear I could hear a repeated pattern every time the waves came in. Yet the interval between those waves was clearly varying, not to mention the force at which they came in. Translate that into a new kind of music, the result sounded completely random.

Robbins has developed many ways to record nature. In *Sea Flux*, a new work Robbins has designed for MONA, a tidal monitor located in the River Derwent is connected to a hydraulic piston that replicates the tidal patterns. This is linked to a drawing device in the gallery which moves according to those patterns, drawing directly onto paper that is fixed to a motor-controlled cylinder. The cylinder turns 10 metres of paper once every lunar month, which is 29.3 days on average. I'm confident now that these drawings will be both predictable and surprising.

The sixteenth-century English poet Sir Thomas Wyatt, wrote a sonnet, *Whoso List to Hunt*, in which he likens the impossibility of a task ahead to a man's attempt to catch the wind. 'Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind'. When I heard this line, I thought of Robbins' instruments and how he has indeed managed to 'hold the wind'.

It is not in Cameron's practice to roll over and accept that nature will always follow a pre-determined route. Nor is it his practice to try to control that route. He balances his work within the contradictory notions of chance, perhaps raising more questions than he attempts to answer, like every good artist should. He plays the most pivotal role is representing nature's inherent beauty but unpredictability, all the while hoping (or maybe even praying) that from May to August this year, the wind will choose to blow and that chance will be in his favour.