

Glen Clarke

Catalogue Text

A History of Violence

There is an impressive complexity of paper and pattern that constitute the work of Australian artist Glen Clarke. As a heady cocktail of politics, economics and aesthetics are neatly folded into each of the origami styled cannon of his works; in order to create these symmetrical configurations of banknotes and thread. That when pinned together, layer upon layer, note upon note; become the intricate detail for a much larger mosaic styled image. Which from a measured distance prove utterly compelling. And when given to examining Clarke's works with a forensic eye, they read like the DNA for a coded reality of a greater set of truths. That are as destabilising as they might well appear decorative.

For Clarke detail is as much about the universe, as it is the anatomical elements holding all things together. Which he explains as a calculated appraisal of the "spaces once occupied" by material form. "I was trying to determine and promote an awareness of our own physical relationship to other objects in space. I need to know how one relates to other objects physically. One's own human scale up against a new modern tall building." As he positively attempts "to understand the relationship between objects. It soon became evident that in a three-dimensional world, the positive form of an object was no longer important but of greater significance was our relationship to other objects, or more importantly, the space between objects." And of how such architectonic details can be unsettled entirely by the intervention of the actions of wars. Permitting the devastation and damage of landscapes under occupation. Where we might all concentrate entirely on the actions of the populous, as they seek to defend themselves from the bombardment of battle; Clarke as ethnographer draws attention to how such devastation can transform the solemnity and silence of a landscape beyond repair.

Interested in a lunar landscape of man-made 'voids', 'craters' and 'explosions', that have been fashioned by internal and external wars historically; Clarke is absorbed by how such critical conditions come to alter space entirely. Domestic, social, political, space is the favoured currency of conflict. In which countries create their own refugees, and a growing state of unease allows for a temporary infrastructure that serves to promote one set of ideas over another. Thus such a history of violence, regional and international, constitutes an archive of misshapen memories that alters the lives of the living. And for Clarke one of the major fallouts of regional wars are the discarded shells that settle uneasily into the earth, and can overtime disappear into the landscape like a mechanised disease set to eradicate humanity entirely. As these UXO's or 'unexploded ordnance' mark a historical period for Clarke in the Indochina region; where Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are stitched together as countries riddled by unrest and ravaged by war.

Unearthing the minutest of details, that act as the catalyst for Clarke's work; he sees such mechanised devices, exploded and in a state of rest; as the trigger for a series of life

changing 'big bangs' that go on to affect thousands upon thousands of individual atoms and atmospheres thereafter. And for Clarke damage is as enduring as love. "Within an Australian context these simple elements, act as metaphors for human entities, personal lives and the greater cosmos. This research investigates the molecular structure of things; this DNA building block methodology of constructing artwork unashamedly exploits repetition and *reductio-ad-absurdum* as an acceptable, comfortable and familiar aesthetic."

For Venice Clarke envisages introducing a work born of *Project Renew* that he has been actively involved with since 2000. Artist as humanitarian, Clarke intends to draw attention to the impossible politics of conflict and their repercussions upon the lives of the individual. "Between 2000 and 2008 in Quang Bing District, Central Vietnam, it was not uncommon to get two or three friends together and go out diffusing unexploded ordinances, or UXO's. Scrap metal in those days was worth \$0.16 per kilogram, a lot of money in that part of the world." And such collateral damage has led to Clarke's critical involvement with the non-for-profit organisation that has harnessed an incredible turn-around of the number of new casualties from historical hostilities.

Furnished by a critical swell of positive statistics, Clarke confirms his dogged determination for much more. "I will continue to work with Project Renew and MAG in assisting and encouraging awareness throughout these remote regions in an attempt to improve or save the lives of children, and just as importantly, bringing about exposure in venues in the West such as this forum in Venice at Palazzo Mora." For Venice Clarke talks entirely of the space, negotiating everything in terms of his forensic interest in the situation and circumstances that have allowed him to transpose a critical and well researched work onto the biennale stage.

Rajesh Punj, December 2014

Glen Clarke

Longer Essay

A History of Violence

There is an impressive complexity of paper and pattern that constitute the work of Australian artist Glen Clarke. As a heady cocktail of politics, economics and aesthetics are neatly folded into each of the origami styled cannon of his works; in order to create these symmetrical configurations of banknotes and thread. That when pinned together, layer upon layer, note upon note; become the intricate detail for a much larger mosaic styled image. Which from a measured distance prove utterly compelling. And when given to examining Clarke's works with a forensic eye, they read like the DNA for a coded reality of a greater set of truths. That are as destabilising as they might well appear decorative.

For Clarke detail is as much about the universe, as it is the anatomical elements holding all things together. Which he explains as a calculated appraisal of the "spaces once occupied" by material form. "I was trying to determine and promote an awareness of our own physical relationship to other objects in space. I need to know how one relates to other objects physically. One's own human scale up against a new modern tall building." As he positively attempts "to understand the relationship between objects. It soon became evident that in a three-dimensional world, the positive form of an object was no longer important but of greater significance was our relationship to other objects, or more importantly, the space between objects." And of how such architectonic details can be unsettled entirely by the intervention of the actions of wars. Permitting the devastation and damage of landscapes under occupation. Where we might all concentrate entirely on the actions of the populous, as they seek to defend themselves from the bombardment of battle; Clarke as ethnographer draws attention to how such devastation can transform the solemnity and silence of a landscape beyond repair.

Interested in a lunar landscape of man-made 'voids', 'craters' and 'explosions', that have been fashioned by internal and external wars historically; Clarke is absorbed by how such critical conditions come to alter space entirely. Domestic, social, political, space is the favoured currency of conflict. In which countries create their own refugees, and a growing state of unease allows for a temporary infrastructure that serves to promote one set of ideas over another. Thus such a history of violence, regional and international, constitutes an archive of misshapen memories that alters the lives of the living. And for Clarke one of the major fallouts of regional wars are the discarded shells that settle uneasily into the earth, and can overtime disappear into the landscape like a mechanised disease set to eradicate humanity entirely. As these UXO's or 'unexploded ordnance' mark a historical period for Clarke in the Indochina region; where Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are stitched together as countries riddled by unrest and ravaged by war.

Unearthing the minutest of details, that act as the catalyst for Clarke's work; he sees such mechanised devices, exploded and in a state of rest; as the trigger for a series of life

changing 'big bangs' that go on to affect thousands upon thousands of individual atoms and atmospheres thereafter. And for Clarke damage is as enduring as love. "Within an Australian context these simple elements, act as metaphors for human entities, personal lives and the greater cosmos. This research investigates the molecular structure of things; this DNA building block methodology of constructing artwork unashamedly exploits repetition and *reductio-ad-absurdum* as an acceptable, comfortable and familiar aesthetic."

Seminal works include *American Crater in Hanoi #4 - Cluster* 2006, made up of hundreds of carefully folded US and Vietnamese bank notes that in their origami state appear as short sleeved shirts, one above the other. Robustly held together by an impossibly complex pattern of horizontal and vertical coloured thread, that reads like the blood lines that bind these two countries together. The shirt, the most basic of metaphors for man appears here to represent the lives lost, during the protracted war in Vietnam. And tellingly there are no victors, no prevailing power; as the balance of the work appears to lie in each needing the other. Another work in the series is *American Crater in Hanoi #6* 2006, in which folded US, Laos, Cambodian and Vietnamese banknotes have all been meticulously folded to create a dense landscape of uniform shirts, that evenly hang around the outer edges of what must be a cratered styled space. The simplicity with which Clarke represents humanity, in these logo sized shirts, against this cross hatched black hole filled background, where some of the shirts have been removed entirely, suggests as much about what is there, as what has been removed entirely.

For Clarke "the first crater works *American Crater Near Hanoi #1* and *American Crater Near Hanoi #2* resulted from many years of documenting 'negative space' throughout Vietnam and the border region with Laos PDR also known as The Ho Chi Minh Trail. Photographing bomb craters, filming-videoing bomb craters, sound recording bomb craters, grid and bathymetry measurement and mapping of bomb craters and casting the negative spaces of bomb craters all led to the construction of bomb craters with origami folded shirts. The shirts were figurative and possessed a soul like single entity status." Another work from the series *American Crater in Hanoi #8* 129 2006; of American, Laos, Cambodian and Vietnamese banknotes, suggests a bomb has recently imploded within the work itself; as shirts lay strewn over the threaded landscape, with coffee cup sized craters punctuating the disarray.

As gratifying, are Clarke's artworks from 2008, in which he patterns his folded banknotes into a two-dimensional image that requires of his audience a wit and wisdom to appreciate the minute elements detail for detail. Works in the visual motifs of common currency are entirely superseded by the weapons of war. In *Nothing-ing Shadow 9MM* 2008 and *The Nothing-ing Shadow Blackhawk* 2008, Clarke has again cleverly drawn together all of the green coloured American banknotes into the distinctive symbols of war; a 'revolver', a 'blackhawk helicopter', 'a battle tank'. All of which are intentionally set against the more neutral Vietnamese and Cambodian banknotes.

“Often people think I am anti-American through my continued use of US \$1.00 notes. This is not at all true, I use the greenback because it is the world measure. All currencies are weighted against the Greenback. It is not the use of US \$ spent on war, it is how much money globally spent on war. The point is where do we prioritise?” The politics of which suggests a great deal, whilst visually propositioning a new way of looking. “Speaking of *The Nothing-ing* works, I have a deep fascination for Metaphysics and Martin Heidegger’ concept of The Nothing-ing. Is this a type of anatomical or cerebral imaginary space perhaps like that of the soul? The Nothing-ing works are more concerned with emptiness or the incomplete, things that are missing something. Such things as flags with the emblem removed. Sovereign states in transition or sovereign states without sovereignty.”

Another work that is equally troubling as much as it is an aesthetic triumph, is *Boy Bomb* 2008, in which Clarke concentrates entirely on US dollars, to create a free flowing bomb that sits between his signature skin of a layer of taut thread that horizontally and vertically penetrates the work entirely. Clarke explains he “always wanted ‘Boy Bomb’ to be erect, stoic, defiant, a little bit arrogant, maybe Napoleonic or Churchillesque, but behind the façade, it’s all a bit immature really. I agree that it could be considered iconic in its pose heavily laden with symbolism. I have also constructed a partner work *Fatman*, both works at this stage will be at Palazzo Mora in Venice.” As each folded note makes up for the blades and bulk of this explosive vessel.

Possibly the most ambitious of Clarke’s works from recent years is #42 - #45, *A Trembling Quiet*, 2006, predating the majority of the works mentioned, is of a technically impressive landscape of origamied banknote shirts and thread, that appears as a vast puppeteered work of an amassed assemblage of shirts, that for an audience read like a tidal wave of coloured elements suspended in space. And for the artist is representative of a specific region in North-Eastern Laos, (*Thuong Na Di*); where the landscape has been cultivated by a history of violence. In situ the work is remarkable for its complex fragility; as in reality it refers to a more barbaric, much less systematic culling of one people by another. Composed of twenty-five thousand shirts pinned into place by a choreographed cradle of supporting thread; Clarke virtuoso work plays politics with the identity of one note over another. As visually the aggressor overshadows entirely those resisting an incursion of any kind.

“Their social and political weight is what it is, 9,260 Vietnamese shirts and some 400 US shirts, the currencies were chosen for many reasons, the most apparent question being ‘what price war?’ what value a life?’ This is not a series of attacks upon imperialistic aggressors or the might of one Nation over another. It is simply a Formalist Sculpture of positive and negative space with many possible layers of interpretation.”

Influenced by a rich tradition of Australian landscape art, originally undertaken by naturalists William Piguenit, John Glover, Phillip Wolfhagen, and developed more recently

in the tempestuous works of Peter Booth. Clarke's landscapes differ entirely from his precursors; who for the majority rendered an idyllic scene in ink and watercolour from a distance. In and of the landscape, his is an ethnographic investigation of the earth itself. In an attempt to understand the anatomical makeup of the environment, in places less picturesque and more politically unstable. Tellingly painter or protagonist, Clarke still processes to belonging to Australia's tradition of landscape painting. "I have been a landscape artist for as long as I can remember", "I believe (my work) is 'landscape' but on another dimension". And confirms "my *approach to nature as a subject* is that I need to know where I fit in the overall scheme of things. Where is my place-position within the landscape or within the cosmos? One needs to know his or her place."

For the *Fictional Cosmologies and Molecular Landscapes* series 2014, Clarke creates another well versed cosmological body of works that are as much about human relationships, as they are determined by our ecological and environmental responsibilities. Eloquently citing how "the correct distance between objects is critical, whether that distance is physical, cultural or emotional. Two objects too close to each other become one; two objects too far apart no longer relate to each other". For Clarke clearly has a deep intuition for the balance of things; as the details of each of his works are cradled by a vast phantasmagoria of coloured objects and ideas. For his recent solo show at Despard Gallery, Australia, Clarke produced a whole series of elegantly constructed paper collages that, for the sum of their individual parts, make for a compelling collage of the machine objects of war. For Clarke the "*Fictional Cosmologies and Molecular Landscape*" series, is about relationships. Physical distance, is as you say anatomical material distance, time and space. Cultural is a distance or difference in thinking and approach, style, flavour, significance and methodology."

Specifically *The Sufi's say each of us is a planet spinning in ecstasy* 2014, is a work that is as picturesque as it proves problematic. For each of the minute motifs of colour composed into this larger kaleidoscopic pattern of objectified space, is in fact made up of a vast repetition of mechanised killing machines that enable the repeated history of modern conflicts between countries. And such amassed detail intentionally subverts our attention from the overall picture, for an uneasy understanding of the cost of conflict.

Are you insane man, this is suicide to go in there 2014, is another work of the series that has hundreds of minutely colours ground vehicles and distinctive aircraft turning sharply towards the nucleolus of the piece. A turquoise antitank aircraft hangs over a yellow warship that points directly into the field of vision of a military helicopter. As the devil lies in the detail, this vast cylindrical swarm of minute warcraft appears impressive; yet the reality of such circumstances might prove much more explosive.

Europe 2014 has the outline of modern warcraft all heading from the left to the centre and into the right hand side of the collage. Into a layered bed of floral patterned banknotes or possibly regimented stamps. That are representative of the currencies of the countries directly involved in the conflicts Clarke wished to draw our attention to. A work that proves

incredibly poignant for the manner in which a country's symbolic posterity is here eclipsed by the invasive armoury of modern war.

For Venice Clarke envisages introducing a work born of *Project Renew* that he has been actively involved with since 2000. Artist as humanitarian, Clarke intends to draw attention to the impossible politics of conflict and their repercussions upon the lives of the individual. "Between 2000 and 2008 in Quang Bing District, Central Vietnam, it was not uncommon to get two or three friends together and go out diffusing unexploded ordinances, or UXO's. Scrap metal in those days was worth \$0.16 per kilogram, a lot of money in that part of the world." And "Quite often these friends or opportunists would not come home. Similarly in Laos PDR, working with MAG, (Mines Advisory Group), I discovered children in remote regions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail could acquire, very cheaply, a rudimentary metal detector, designed with a shortened arm/handle for use by children around 8, 10, or 12 years old. Farming is difficult in these remote areas, the land is saturated with unexploded ordinances and anything could be just below the surface." And the circumstances of such collateral damage has led to Clarke's critical involvement with the non-for-profit organisation that has harnessed an incredible turn-around of the numbers of new casualties from historical hostilities.

"Last year alone Project RENEW disposed of more than 7,000 items of ordnance, safely removed from people's gardens, rice fields, plantations and road sides". Furnished by a swell of positive statistics, Clarke confirms his dogged determination for much more. "I will continue to work with Project Renew and MAG in assisting and encouraging awareness throughout these remote regions in an attempt to improve or save the lives of children, and just as importantly, bringing about exposure in venues in the West such as this forum in Venice at Palazzo Mora."

For Venice Clarke talks entirely of the space, negotiating everything in terms of his forensic interest in the situation and circumstances that have allowed him to transpose a critical and well researched work onto the biennale stage. "The work I have planned for Venice will be non-confrontational." And "on this occasion I do not want to be a 'downer' with 'in your face' overtly political hegemony and polemics and have therefore decided on a more convention look of three or four framed works on a wall. These framed works are whimsical but heavily loaded." Works that are likely to have as detailed in their constitutional parts, as are the groundswell of casualties his works attempt to represent.

Rajesh Punj, December 2014