

**Alex Kershaw**

Art and Australia, Volume 44 No.3 Autumn, page 449

A Lake Without Water

Artspace

27 October - 18 November

Petalody

GRANTPIRRIE

31 October - 25 November 2006

Dougal Phillips

As foolish as it would be to suggest that there is some basic recipe for 'good' art, allow me to step onto that landmine: an equal dose of the aesthetic and the conceptual is what's needed. At its core, Alex Kershaw's practice satisfies this need. Since the beginning, his photographic works have consistently operated in two registers. On one hand, he is focused on the aesthetic tropes of large-scale photography – the wide field, the high-resolution. On the other, we find a consistent exploration of a particular thematic territory.

In the tradition of Bernd and Hilla Becher's 'portraits' of industrial mills, water-towers and other structures, Kershaw's lens is impassive. It usually captures objects standing like sentries in the landscape, previously unseen or un-thought. In both of his latest series, Kershaw has introduced active human figures into his tableaux, and the conceptual depth that this has added to his oeuvre is welcome.

Indeed, it is the conceptual dimension that threads together Kershaw's carefully produced visual objects (photos, videos). All of his major works or series to date have dealt with two ideas – location and ritual. In both *A Lake Without Water* and *Petalody* these basic hooks have been expanded into two cleverly interwoven themes.

First, there is the theme of mapping. Kershaw has always been interested in the process of surveying: the technical process of figuring out where one is in relation to somewhere else – the making of a 'here' and 'there'. Procedures of location function in Kershaw's work as what can only be called a *leitmotif*, as a rich seam of imagery and language which the artist mines again and again, particularly in the *A Lake Without Water* works.

The second theme running through Kershaw's work is the idea of rituals of arrangement. This is where the poetic side of his practice shines through. In his earlier geodetic series, seen in the Project Space at the AGNSW, Kershaw sought out the surveying markers on hilltops around NSW. Rusting, ignored, unseen, the artist re-made the linkages between the markers by documenting them as icons against a variety of expansive vistas.

In the follow-up to this series, Kershaw looked further into the mythical and ritual properties that might be found in these ostensibly mundane objects. In carefully composed large-scale photographs, the artist dressed the geodetic markers in red wax and other materials, and surrounded them (in different pictures) with cakes, balloons,

or the carved watermelons of a Balinese funeral.

What is clear is that the focus here is on overlaying the twin themes of ritual and location to clever and strange visual effect. The two Kershaw shows running parallel attest to this. The more institutional work was shown at Artspace, with multiple videos arranged across a large darkened room. Meanwhile, at GRANTPIRRIE (Kershaw's commercial representative), the *Petalody* show revealed a new take on the same refrains with a surprising and touching domestic element.

*A Lake Without Water* is a series of video works set on Lake George and using many dimensions of the lake as subject. Essentially a hybrid series of video and performance, it was installed at Artspace in a single darkened room with multiple channels. Some works were projected directly on to the wall at a large scale, others appeared on horizontal surfaces or on tiny portable TVs. Among the works shown on the various channels were a group of men discarding maps down a hillside, aerial maps projected onto high tables, and a concert in a dry water tank, starring a single young trumpeter in a marching-band uniform.

The work grew out of the artist's relationship with a group of seasoned surveyors. Lake George played a major role in the early surveying of regional New South Wales, and remains a central node in the obscure world of surveying, on which we won't dwell too much. From this rather dry base, Kershaw found a rich culture of jargon and in-jokes which the surveyors use to fill in the gaps in their otherwise fastidious worklife.

The essence of *A Lake Without Water* is found in the surveyors at *play* rather than at work. As orange smoke wafts from an old chimney, the men wander around with yo-yos. They run down a hill, flinging their carefully plotted maps into the dirt. A local auctioneer/race-caller performs an odd little play out in the dust, in which he calls a race of the families inhabiting the rim of the lake, and then auctions off imaginary surveyor objects, such as POETS day, also know as Friday (Piss Off Early Tomorrow's Saturday), and 'paper roads', throughways marked on a map but not existing on the land. Although there were perhaps too many works in this show, the somewhat jumbled air should not detract from the feeling that Kershaw is a young artist with some major and *good* artworks ahead of him.

Over at GRANTPIRRIE, Kershaw had taken his running themes and, well, run with them, but to a fascinating and untapped new destination: Grandma's house. The *Petalody* show essentially brought the art of Ikebana (Japanese flower arranging) to bear on the whole of Grandma Kershaw's house, and on Grandma herself. The show consisted of a large number of smaller-scale photographs which captured arrangements the artist had made on the spot. A bowling ball doubles as a vase; a table is covered in a field of the late Grandpa's golf balls; a Ken Done bedspread covers a ladder; Grandma wields a Strelitzia like a metal detector. Again, my only critique of the show was the profusion of works – a little more economy would be desirable.

Along with this re-purposing of objects were some text-works produced from flower petals on a garage door, rendering Grandma-style phrases: 'You read things about kids', 'TV warming bones', and my favourite, 'Touch of diarrhea'. The most moving

example of adaptive re-use was the beautifully composed shot of Grandma's leg, varicose-blue, with a matching blue flower tucked neatly between her toes. Somehow, it worked as an aestheticisation of pure wisdom. Another standout was Grandma trapped within an extendable table, the image speaking volumes about the twin cocoons of old age and domesticity.

The pleasure generated by the destructive act of picking and shaping nature resounds in Kershaw's pleasure in arranging the matriarch in her own specimen box, and the poetry and new personal approach of this series expands Kershaw's body of work and bodes well for coming projects.