

COOL CHANGE CONTEMPORARY

3 - 24 AUGUST, 2019

TAMI XIANG

ESTHER MCDOWELL / YABINI KICKETT

TOM FREEMAN

LISA LIEBETRAU



**TAMI XIANG: PEASANTOGRAPHY –
LUCKY 88**
GALLERY 1

The *Peasantography* project is a series of works that addresses social issues in China caused by the household registration system (Hukou). The series includes the *Family Portrait*, *Lucky 88*, *Art Biennale of Left Behind Children* and *Migrant workers*. In 1955, the household registration system was introduced to classify all people in the whole country as either agricultural (rural) or non-agricultural (urban). These classifications differentiate the people's rights and privileges. The household registration system manages access to employment, education, housing, health care and even the right to move to another city.

In rural China, the elderly are experiencing a particular set of problems. Due to rapid urbanisation, they have sometimes lost touch with their home communities, and their families have moved to the cities. For example, in 2014 a pair of elderly people living alone in the rural area in *Kunming* died at home. It was not until the corridor reeked of rotting corpse that they were discovered by their neighbours. People in rural areas have low levels of education and lack the necessary survival skills for the modern world. As they get older, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to do high intensity, heavy, physical work and subsequently they lose their sources of income. Older people have an increased risk of disease, and because rural social insurance is not adequate, their lives become more and more difficult when faced with huge medical expenses.

The pension system provides very little. There is a great difference between urban and rural pensions, and the village pension funds are far from enough to support the basic needs of rural elderly. The elderly people in the countryside received, 55RMB (AU\$11) a month until very recently when the amount was increased to 88RMB (AU\$18). By comparison, urban people or those who work for the government can receive a far greater pension than the rural elderly.

When these groups of elderly were interviewed, they expressed high appreciation of the 88RMB from the government. These elderly people are aged around 65-90 years, and were born either before 1949 or during the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC). They have experienced all the political social and political movements such as The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) which caused more than 30 million people to die from starvation, The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) which caused chaos for the whole country with millions of people dying during the ten years of violence. In the interview, the old people remembered the days of hardship when they had to eat grass, tree bark and mud to survive. The reason they praised the Elderly Insurance Policy is that now they receive 88RMB extra in a peaceful era. Despite the fact that they still have to work until they are unable to, they do not question the inequality and disparity between the rural and urban pension.

*

In Chinese tradition, certain numbers are believed to be auspicious, especially the number eight. Number 88 symbolizes fortune and good luck in Chinese culture,



Tami Xiang, *Peasantography Lucky 88*, 2019, photographic print, 60 x 84 cm.



Tami Xiang, *Peasantography Lucky 88*, 2019, photographic print, 60 x 84 cm.

since the sound of the Chinese word for eight is similar to the Chinese word fā (發, which implies 發財, or wealth, in Mandarin). The shape of the Chinese character for 8 (八) implies that a person will have a great, wide future as the character starts narrow and becomes wider towards the lower half. For example, The Chinese government has been auctioning car license plate numbers containing the numeral 8 for tens of thousands of dollars. Supermarkets in China often include the number eight in their pricing. Hotels, real estate agents and other businesses are keen to capitalise on numbers that contain eight, taking advantage of the common belief in the number's auspiciousness.

Peasantography: Lucky 88 addresses the living situation of the Chinese farmers in the countryside. Tami Xiang invited a group of elderly farmers from one village to buy whatever they would like with 88 RMB, and photographed them with all the objects in front of a red background.

The *Peasanography - Lucky 88* project addresses the living situation of Chinese farmers in the countryside, who receive 88 RMB a month for survival after 60 years old. This artist invited a group of farmers from one village to buy whatever they would like to buy with 88 RMB and photographed them with the objects they purchased in front of a red background. This work highlights the divide between people from the countryside and those who live in urban areas, with the former not having the same access to public services such as pensions and medical services.

Tami Xiang is a Perth based Chinese-Australian artist and academic scholar. She received a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of Western Australia (UWA) and is currently undertaking a PhD by research at UWA. Her work has been exhibited in Australia, Mainland China, France, Taiwan and the U.S.

**ESTHER MCDOWELL /
YABINI KICKETT:
KALA KOORLINY – GOING HOME**
GALLERY 2

Q&A WITH ESTHER MCDOWELL / YABINI KICKETT

Cool Change: You have spoken about how in your work you are always dealing with homesickness, and the difficulty of moving through country given continual colonisation and environmental destruction of Bibulmun country. How would you describe how your artistic practice factors into negotiating homesickness?

Esther McDowell / Yabini Kickett: The work I've produced in this show initially wasn't intended for an audience. The dresses in particular were made for me, and were a process of healing, around feelings of homesickness and displacement within my own country. Simply put, on a larger scale, any of the work I make around endemic flora and the destruction of country is translatable to homesickness. As most of the subject matter I present is threatened, endangered or depleting, plant, animal life and landscapes.

CC: Many of your works incorporate materials you have found and collected from country, like the Marri leaves you have dyed into your linen dress works, for instance. Could you talk more on how this process of collection factors into your creative process, both practically and emotionally?

EM / YK: Growing up we spent a lot of time out bush. Some of my earliest memories were fungi and orchid

hunting as kids, so naturally these are things I'm very passionate about now. Sometimes, I'll set out looking for something in particular. Occasionally I'll pick things up, collecting them, deciding I'll use them down the track. Often, I'll stumble upon things that just happen to be sitting – waiting for me almost – a lot of my skulls and bird wings are found this way. I frequently relate flowers, places and animals to people around me, and take their presence as messages. Often they pop up right when I need them.

CC: This exhibition includes a body of work based on you and your families passage through Kata Mordo (the Darling Scarp) towards home. How did you go about translating this passage into a series of works? Could you discuss how you first started making linen shift dresses, and if you have any plans to further your experiments with wearable art?

EM / YK: These works were initially made for my own being - they weren't translated for an audience, let alone a white audience, this was how I wanted them to be made. I'd never made a dress before and guessed my way through the first pattern on a friends kitchen table, to my surprise it worked. Since then, I've done the same two piece pattern for all three. I wear dresses in that shape often, so did my Aunties and Nans, they're in a shape that is familiar and comforting to me.

For years, I have worn a locket with mardaa (red ceremonial ochre) from two important places to my family. This was one of my first conscious decisions to carry country with me. Since then I have thought about being more noticeable with it. Especially including the Carrolup styled salmon gums. These are trees and a style you don't get from anywhere else other than



Esther McDowell/Yabini Kickett, *Kata Lines (detail)*, 2019, soft pastel, gold ink and natural dye



Bibulmun/Noongar country. I would like to experiment more, but for now...I am happy with sticking to crooked home made textiles.

Esther McDowell/Yabini Kickett, *Kata Lines (detail)*, 2019, soft pastel, gold ink and natural dye

As a Ballardong woman residing on Wadjuk country, Yabini Kickett has been tackling the issue of homesickness for places she either cannot visit freely or places that no longer exist due to farming, destruction of bushland, climate change and continual colonisation of Bibulmun country. Over the past six-months, Yabini has been creating a collection of works as a means of bringing home with her. She has explored the creation of wearable art beginning in collection of materials from country and ending in three shift dresses. Alongside the clothing works, she has created a separate body of work centred on Kata Mordo (the Darling Scarp), the hills in which she and her family pass through to go home.

Esther McDowell / Yabini Kickett has been working as an independent artist after graduating from Duncraig Senior High School in 2015. As she is majorly self taught aside from her high school education, Esther primarily works in acrylic, gouache and general mixed media. In the past year however she found her practice expanding to textiles and printmaking. Through her art, Esther shares her love for endemic flora and landscapes within Bibulmun country as well as various uses for certain plants and animals. She depicts stories, places and people important to her. A lot of her inspiration comes from local environments, her mother's home and the deep connection to country. In the coming years Esther aims to partake in more residencies, to further evolve her arts practice, as well as partake in more exhibitions.

CARING ABOUT BRICKS

Is it a gesture of kindness, or aesthetic daydreaming, which compels Tom Freeman to collect stray bricks from the streets of Perth and rehome them? When I first see the bricks, on the dusty floorboards of his Fremantle studio, they're already somewhere between object and artwork. There are flat bricks with ceramic pieces looped through them. More commonly shaped bricks house constructions on top, or corners sanded down. One even has a series of tiny, hand-formed proto-bricks stacked up around it, a miniature wall partially enclosing an ex-wall component.

The works are minimal but not austere, playfully intentional, with pronounced impressions and traces of Tom's fingers. Ceramic and brick meet, interact, and depart. The interventions don't read as additions so much as armatures, prosthesis. This isn't the transformation of an object but a careful negotiation of congruent existences, an exercise in empathy.

But we'll return to empathy later.

The easiest comparison, the one that springs unbidden from memories of first-year art school, is to the readymade. Tom takes everyday un-thought objects and makes them art, brings them to our attention. But this impression is unsteady and unhelpful, and quickly crumbles. Viewing the bricks as found-objects, chosen for their potential to be art, avoids seeing them for what they are – bricks. And seeing them as bricks is essentially what Tom does. Maybe there's a sideways

glance at the readymade, in the light-hearted attitude Tom brings to building worlds of and for bricks, but it's not much more than an oblique gesture in that general direction.

Tom isn't re-contextualising the brick as an 'art object'. He's actually doing the opposite: the context, the imagined origins and potential futures of each brick, is what forms the locus of the works. The viewer is invited, through an emphasis on various materialities and relations, to attempt to piece together an understanding of where each brick has come from, what it is and what it might become. The brick, in Tom's hands, is a character in a story.

Tom thinks about how bricks exist, cares for them, and wants to understand their nature. This mirrors the ways we love characters in a story; Tom latches onto aspects of the bricks realness (colour, form, texture) whilst acknowledging that he can never truly know them, their backgrounds, their temporal extents.

And that's where empathy returns: as a consideration of the being of bricks.

In these works there is a tension between the brick as inanimate object, it's 'thingness', and the brick as a character in an imagined narrative. The former relies on inorganic materialities, understanding in the hands. The latter involves composing ceramic fictions, responding to the qualities of each brick in order to investigate their character. Tom employs a kind of tactile imagination in his work, which can't be reduced to simply elevating a humble object via artistic notice, but entails a sincere engagement with the existence of each brick. It's through the balance of 'object' and 'character' that the brick as artwork is animated.



Tom Freeman, *Bricks on bricks around brick*, 2019, found brick, mixed stoneware and earthenware clays, glazes, stains, 9 x 28 x 16 cm



Tom Freeman, *Four loops*, 2019, found brick, stoneware clays, glazes, stains, 14 x 23 x 26 cm

So if the bricks are characters, what is Tom's role in this story?

There's a philosophical tradition in which objects are only considered in relation to human perceivers, and never as beings in their own right.¹ An alternative approach is to think of objects as existing independently from human observation, as having their own stories and lives. This view aligns with object-oriented ontology, or flat ontology, central to which is the idea that all objects exist equally.² Tom's practice is concerned with objects. The literalness of the bricks, left largely unaltered, signals an acknowledgment of their existence beyond human access. Significant to object-oriented ontology is the notion that objects are both discrete and parts of wholes. Through Tom's material sensibilities, perching pieces on top of and around, floating off, resting on, the viewer sees each part in both its singleness and interconnectedness.

Acknowledging the importance of objects, the being of objects, requires a degree of care. Object-oriented ontology, in Tom's practice, is a kind of empathy for bricks, a sensitivity to the way they exist in both tangible and hidden ways. Perhaps this is why his process is poised between abstraction and fiction, brute fact (brick) and creative formation (ceramic). Maybe Tom's exhibition is an empathetic ontology, showcasing an array of concurrent existences.

Lydia Trethewey

¹Quentin Meillassoux terms this 'correlationism'. Meillassoux, Quentin. 2008. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. London: Continuum.

²Bogost, Ian. 2012. *Alien Phenomenology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Brick, presents a series of ceramic sculptures made using found commercial bricks that have been altered and added to with clays, glazes and various natural materials. Some works reference the local histories of these bricks while others are formal abstracted studies of brick features and architectural forms. Some are transformed into bodily figures while others are pure experimentations in materials and processes. With deliciously rough and muddy lumps of clay, Freeman embraces playful experimentation, trial and error, repeated disasters and the occasional mysterious creative win. The exhibition works with and transforms the gallery space through investigations of the existing architecture and its material history. Including site-specific wall paintings and structural interventions, the viewer is enveloped in an immersive and far reaching exploration of bricks and their place in our society and history.

Tom Freeman was born in Margaret River in 1985, and now lives and works in Fremantle. He completed his BA (Fine Art) at Curtin University in 2007 and has steadily maintained a ranging yet considered practice primarily across painting and sculpture. He's exhibited in WA at PICA, Fremantle Arts Centre, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, and Paper Mountain, as well as many now-defunct spaces including Palmcourt, Free Range, Museum of Natural Mystery, Venn Gallery, and OK Gallery. He's exhibited nationally at 55 Sydenham and Sydney Non Objective in NSW, as well as regular selection in a range of national art awards including the Churchie, Alice, Stringer, and Ramsay Art Prizes. Freeman's works are in the collections of Curtin University and University of WA, as well as Joondalup and Fremantle's City collections.

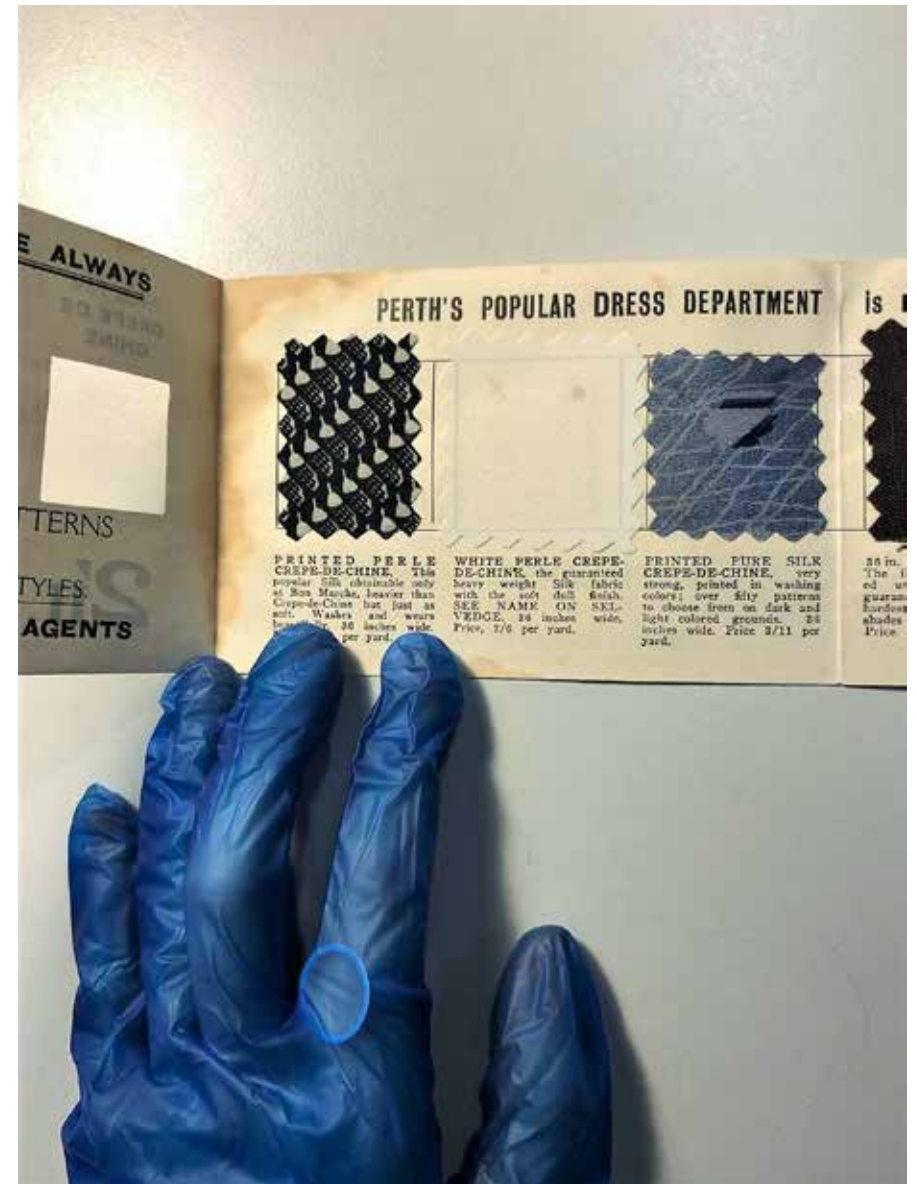
LISA LIEBETRAU: A FORM CLOSE TO THAT ORIGINALLY INTENDED

PROJECT SPACE

Artist in Residence, Lisa Liebetrau is developing a suite of new site-responsive artworks that engage with the history, physical space and idiosyncrasies of the Bon Marché Arcade, the home of artist-run initiative (ARI) Cool Change Contemporary. These works will be informed by archival ephemera accessed from the State Library of Western Australia and the City of Perth History Centre along with Liebetrau's personal observations while in residence. She aims to investigate and uncover the former lives of the building, specifically its role as a part of the quality fashion and drapery department store the "Perth Bon Marché" to reimagine past narratives in a bid to form relationships with the present.

During the residency, Liebetrau aims to reflect on how the transitory nature of artist-run initiatives cultivates the opportunity for marginal spaces and neglected buildings to breathe new life into them and allow their past to gain new visibility. These spaces often exist within physical environments that hold memory, elements of nostalgia and the traces of the past. Artist-run initiatives are transitory and are never completely bound to one space due to lease agreements, financial turmoil and changing circumstances. Similarly, in Perth, there is a link between the instability of businesses closing and opening, and the impermanence of artist-run initiatives as the city adapts to growth and changes in its economy. The Bon Marché department store in particular, is an example of this. In 1954, the store officially closed its Perth branch and was sold to David Jones for a period of time before eventually being demolished. The result of this closure meant that Bon Marché Arcade became a dead-end as it no longer served its purpose as a pathway to the department store and consequently pedestrian traffic dissipated.

The Bon Marché Arcade remains both significant and forgotten. While important to the historical fabric of Perth being prestigiously heritage listed, many rooms and levels are now overlooked and uninhabited. Cool Change Contemporary has presented a new opportunity for the building to foster a working community and be frequented once more. Through reflecting on and observing the existing written, oral and physical history of Bon Marché, Liebetrau hopes to contribute to this historical legacy and shed new light on what was as a way to celebrate what is.



Lisa Liebetrau, *Fabrics for summer at special prices*. Sample of fabrics, Ephemera Collection accessed at the J.S Battye Library of West Australian History, State Library of Western Australia, year unknown. Digital Image.



Receipt for Sale of Items to Mrs Prinsep of Busselton, 1918. Courtesy of City of Perth Cultural Collections.

Lisa Liebetrau is a multidisciplinary artist based in Perth, Western Australia. Liebetrau's practice investigates the architectural, historical and relational specificities of artist-run institutions through site-specific works that directly reference the site of exhibition. She often adopts an investigative approach and process to dig deeper, reconstruct and draw attention to the often overlooked narratives and distinctive histories that can be attributed to each built environment she encounters.

Since graduating in 2016 with a Bachelor of Fine Art (Honours) from Curtin University, Liebetrau has completed residencies at Another Project Space and Fremantle Arts Centre. In 2017, Liebetrau presented her first solo exhibition *A Temporary Arrangement* at Smart Casual and more recently was invited to produce a new site-specific work for the group show *BRB* earlier this year, also at Smart Casual in Fremantle.

Cool Change Contemporary acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, the traditional and rightful custodians of the land on which we operate. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

www.coolchange.net.au
hello@coolchange.net.au | 0484 500 838
1F Bon Marche Arcade Building
74-84 Barrack Street, Perth, WA, 6000
  @coolchangecontemporary