

29 Sandy Bay Road

Review by Martyn Coutts

What is the role of the past in our lives? Surely the person in a photo 14 years old is gone – they have disappeared from view? how relevant is nostalgia of the past. It feels like voyeurism into someone else's life. It just so happens to be your own life – 14 years ago.

Luke Devine's exhibition opened last night at Off The Kerb Gallery in Melbourne. He is a very old friend of mine from my previous life in Hobart, Tasmania. He decided to reconstitute the loungeroom of our sharehouse (29 Sandy Bay Road) from the year 1997 in the gallery space, the main feature of which are ALL the photos from that house that were up in a photo wall.



I have felt churned up by the delving into a past life and I don't really have any reason why this is. As I look at these photographs I am reminded of feelings and moments but not of any great insight or vastly important experiences. Who are you if you don't have a memory?

We are an unbroken line from the time of our birth until the moment we are currently in, but i feel more and more that all you can do is to be present – be here.

That time in 1997 was so much about the building of self – who you are, who you want to be, what the past has brought you to. We had set about (we didn't know it at the time) the pathway of identity construction. We had done this by dropping out and not following a path. This was very important, crucial in fact. But now the idea of maintaining the construction of self is a tiring burden.

When I enter this cavalcade of the past, this room, this set of ideas (that Luke has resurrected), whilst it triggers in me nostalgia and further questions it is absolutely a construction. The idea of placing a couple of couches and tv set and a photo wall in a room, is as much an artificial construct, a simulacrum as the construction of self.

The way Luke has encouraged the addition of other time periods, other personas and other materials means there is a multilayered experience of the past and of nostalgia. As the actors who are playing the parts begin to bring some of themselves into the work, then the fabrication becomes more 'real' than the reality.

As we put up the photographs the night before the opening, Luke had said to me about a particular person in a photograph 'oh you hated her', which i couldn't remember and didn't feel anything remorseful about the situation. The past is long gone, if I were to meet this woman now I would be open and honest with her. If you can't recall the misdeeds of the past should you atone for them? (Isn't that what John Howard said about not saying sorry?)

What if your relationship with your past is one of indifference?

Standing in the gallery during the opening, not in period costume (we were instructed to come in 1997 garb), i realised that I needed to be me now – I cannot play the 1997 Martyn, someone else is already playing that person.

This scene is reminiscent of the classic moments from Seinfeld when in the 4th season Jerry and George write a 'sitcom about nothing', the joke being that this was exactly what Jerry and Larry David had done in the creation of the series. They then go through the process of casting for themselves. In many ways this was the height of popularist postmodernism, as the tv sitcom creators begin referencing themselves inside the show (it had been happening in the Simpsons for a few years, and had also happened once in The Fresh Prince of Bel Air when Will Smith said "Oh you know that guy, he's the guy that spins me above his head in the title sequence of the show"). This was then taken another step further when Larry David in his own show Curb Your Enthusiasm, in order to win back his wife contracted the Seinfeld actors to rewrite the ending of the show. Thus the show within a show within a show.

Another popular reference point for this sort of business is in the L-Word where main character Jenny writes a novel which is turned into a film about the lives of her friends in LA. The novel follows exactly the plotline of the tv series with the character names on slightly changed – Shane/Sean, Dana/Donna, Bett/Beth The amusing moment where Jenny ends up having a sexual relationship with her screen alter ego Jesse, in a way 'fucking herself' brings a narcissistic crescendo to that particular season of the show.

I saw a note that I had written 14 years ago at the opening – my handwriting looks EXACTLY as it does today – for a moment I thought it was something I had written to Luke recently. To look at the handwriting, even the tone of the note – dripping with sarcasm and self referential awareness it would appear as if nothing has changed, not a thing.

Some of the people on the photo wall materialise at the opening, invoking a school reunion type feeling of 'what do they look like?', 'who are they?', 'what do they do now?', feeling. Again the fatness, the loss of hair, the extra lines on their faces somehow to me was not connected to the people who existed in the photographs. In some ways it was like a bizarre and morbid raking over of coals, a necrotic gesture.

But I digress...at the end of the opening of Luke's show, in some ironic twist of fate Jethro (one of the other original flatmates), Luke and myself end up sitting on the couches by ourselves watching Larry Clarke's Kids saying the inevitable 'well its just us three again'.

The looping layers of existence and lived existence and re-lived existence, of actual media, of remembered moments, of forgotten relations and of revisionist histories is startling, mind boggling and intensely unsettling. The night after putting up the photo wall I couldn't sleep – haunted by obsolete media, shadowed by remembered conversations and revelations of unknown secrets. Perhaps I care more than I want to believe about my past – or is it not the actuality of the past but the mode of remembering (or not remembering) of it that is troubling...