

To Hold Eternity in an Hour – Hardenvale Our Home in Absurdia

Naomi McCarthy

To see a World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour

Auguries of Innocence

BY WILLIAM BLAKE

If we each draw out our own embodied notions of home from the encasing architecture of our minds, tugging as we perform this action on the individual narrative threads in our personal psychologies and place what is revealed in the palm of our hand – what will we be looking at? Perhaps something as ephemeral as the curlicues of smoke above a campfire or in my case the curlicues of smoke from a Peter Stuyvesant cigarette as the lit end is twirled in the dark at bedtime to spell out the words: *I Love you*. Perhaps long-held notions of home are as impermeable as the lead used to line coffins to prevent any exchange between what is held within and what exists without. Do we hold fast to our memories of home because they make us strong or special or simply because they make us who we think we are – something to be fought for. Some of us hold memories of home that are joyful and affirming and some hold memories that include trauma and wounding. Most of us, if life is generous enough, receive as much damage as is required to create the flint that sparks the desire as adults to create a home that fits us.

Two years in gestation, *Hardenvale - Our Home in Absurdia*, is born of tripartite, inter-generational conversations between artists Todd Fuller, Kellie O’Dempsey and Catherine O’Donnell. Drawing, and in particular expanded drawing, is the language through which they collectively say to the world: this is how we see this thing we are each holding in the palm of our hand and examining – our homes in absurdia. This project draws on the artists own childhoods and adolescence in suburban and regional Australia, spanning three decades of Australian culture from the 60s and into the 90s - when the suburbs were functioning as a normative force by cloaking difference in sameness. Within *Hardenvale*, visitors will encounter evocations of emblematic memories from the artists lived histories. Archetypal references to outmoded gendered stereotypes, when mums were held responsible for cleaning houses - whether they did or didn’t; and dads poured over the race guide from their favourite chair; and the loyal family dog was always of a roust-a-about hound. Each artist has

used drawing as a kind of semaphore for the human condition of living on the periphery – geographically, psychologically and culturally.

Fuller grew up in regional NSW, lovingly cared for by a mum endlessly cleaning their family home in the mining community of Branxton. This obsessively organised homestead was both connected to and a shelter from a community in which Fuller was simultaneously celebrated and victimised as a closeted young man. O’Dempey’s home was a series of pubs in regional Victoria, owned by her family. Her spaces of domesticity were public bars and her extended family included hotel customers for whom she made cards and drew pictures of their lives - as she imagined them. Growing up in Green Valley, in South West Sydney, O’Donnell recounts being happy with her family and friends and being unaware of the politics around public housing estates. A place where people were deposited into this estate with only a handful of local amenities, a few overcrowded public schools and minimal or no local job opportunities. Quickly this place became recognised as somewhere you didn’t want to be.

Drawing on these histories, the artists have created the immersive installation, *Hardenvale – our Home in Absurdia*, a faithful three-dimensional rendition, in style and scale, of a 1960s fibro home. Although the materiality of the construction includes not only wood but also ephemeral materials like light projections, shadow play on semi-transparent and opaque fabric walls, a giant stack of packing cases and the shimmer of black plastic. *Hardenvale* intentionally unsettles the notion of a cultural norm and subtly, poetically and cumulatively destabilises our prejudices and preconceptions as we are seduced into dialogue with this collaborative artwork. In *Hardenvale – our Home in Absurdia*, the drawn traces and erasure of daily domestic rituals within the home are generative rather than reductive. A little bit of anxiety skitters around the edges of the installation, where lights flicker on and off and a race horse runs on the page. Scale is skewed - with life sized windows and too-small doorways acting as portals to other dimensions. We can’t help but look to locate our own reality within this out-of-kilter world.

Fuller’s hand drawn animation practice is a compelling balance between deft facility as a draughtsman and the aliveness of the loosely drawn line. Bringing a powerful sense of narrative to *Hardenvale*, his drawings reach towards and retreat from clean transcription to become aesthetically and emotionally complex readings of his family home and the town that surrounded it. Trapped somewhere between the tracery of the drawn line and the evidence of its erasure is the confessional, the biographical, the imagined and the mythic. Fuller’s practice bears careful witness and turns the specific into the archetypal, transcribing with fidelity particular cumulative details of a place, a person, an event, or perhaps a collective memory, translating them into hand drawn animations that hold universally recognizable truths within them.

O’Dempey’s practice of performance drawing is the most immediate and direct. It is created in the ‘now’ of the performed moment and recorded for projection. As her performances take place, each drawn mark gives birth to the next and the next. Her drawings are informed by an exquisitely honed sensitivity to the interior vibration of

her own body and the resonance of what is taking place around her - like a dancer who expresses their truth through gesture – O’Dempsey's drawn lines are a form of embodied visual language, created as she responds to her environment and translates ideas and emotions into actions. This interior sensibility is wedded to an incredible honed ability to read and respond to space. ‘Reading a room’ was a skill given to her during her childhood by her publican father who taught both Kellie and her younger sister how to see danger and how to keep themselves safe, particularly pertinent when their spaces of domesticity were a series of country pubs in regional Australia.

The most representational of the three drawers is O’Donnell with her elegant handling of architectural details drawn from modest housing sources. Doors and windows offer us a fissure into the interior, windows frame inky dark interiors that suggest much but reveal little. Leaving the story of the interior to our imagination, O’Donnell intentionally heightens the underlying beauty of the exterior through her loving attention to detail. Public housing becomes classically elegant under her skilful hand; refined aesthetic sensibility; and quiet insistence that the overlooked and often maligned is worthy of consideration and contemplation.

Indeed, held within the practice of each of the artists responsible for *Hardenvale* is something ineffable that makes the following statement ring true: we don’t what we are looking for but it is concurrently familiar and strange....uncanny even.

Hardenvale removes the barrier between the imagined and the real so that we don’t know if we are remembering or inventing that which we think we are witnessing. Capturing something essential from our collective memories of home in *Hardenvale* makes strange that which we thought we knew, the quotidian becomes the uncanny.

Hardenvale’s backyard, with its wall of packing boxes, light projections and collaborative tracery of chalk-drawn lines represents the mutability of our memories. Chalk drawn lines are vulnerable to erasure and just like memories are easily redrawn as they are pulled from our past and reshaped and informed by who we are in this moment. *Hardenvale’s* backyard represents the suburban backyard and the tumble-down beer garden of a disappearing era, evoking the anarchy and excitement of the streets, where unsupervised children were ruled by different codes of behaviour - that had to be learnt. Some memories tend to gather weight and potency as time rolls on and some fragments of memory float in and out of our peripheral vision like dust motes caught in a light beam. Some of the drawings that animate *Hardenvale* skitter and flicker across the built surface like fugitive memories, slightly out-of-focus and all the more potent for it.

The first iteration of *Hardenvale – Our Home In Absurdia*, at The National Art School will be drawn exclusively from the artists lived experiences translated through their artistic practices. Then, during the course of its touring life, *Hardenvale* will be made and remade with each new iteration drawing-in local content and narratives, including prosaically, a locally sourced ‘dad’s chair.’ Each community will add colour and weight to the exhibition which will become a platform for local voices both through the exhibition itself and through the accompanying public programs.

The beauty of *Hardenvale* is its expansiveness, expressing elements of human commonality through the specificity of the artists lived experiences growing up in landscapes they describe as living on the periphery. Whether we are looking, inward or outward, we, the audience are the activating agent in *Hardenvale* and it is our own memories of home that are instrumental in animating how the work unfolds around us. Each of us bringing the work to life coloured and informed by the nuances our own residual memories of home. Collectively and metaphorically we each hold infinity in the palm of our hand as we navigate *Hardenvale - our Homes in Absurdia*.