

C-Block: Drawings by Catherine O'Donnell

Catherine O'Donnell creates charcoal drawings with a strong emphasis on geometric form; resulting in sophisticated renditions of the everyday environment. O'Donnell's highly refined drawings craft an exquisite mise-en-scene in which everyday buildings are architecturally valorised.

O'Donnell was inspired to document elements of the school environment following a recent residency at Nepean High School, as part of a Penrith Performing & Visual Arts: Artists in Schools project. Subsequently, this series of drawings place a familiar setting under scrutiny; the schoolyard surroundings are put under close examination to reveal a familiar, yet often overlooked, setting.

Habitual exposure to locations that are commonplace has a tendency to hamper clear observation. Familiar settings become invisible, unnoticed backdrops to routine events. O'Donnell's detailed renditions of the everyday environment invite a reconsideration of these otherwise mundane buildings as key settings in the construction of our cultural identity. Built in 1963, Nepean High School is representative of the many educational institutions that were built during a time of rapid urban development. To take a lingering inspection of these institutional buildings is to revisit our own experiences of similar sites.

Light and shadow become tools with which to represent presence and absence. The evident exclusion of people from the setting is replaced by more discrete signs of habitation. The ubiquitous information signs, boxes of papers, stacks of books, open windows and partially drawn blinds suggest the existence of recent or pending activity. These settings are devoid of people but not devoid of human activity and, as such, are suggestive of multiple narratives.

The title, Inclosed Land 2011, was chosen from the official Department of Education sign routinely affixed to the exterior wall of Government schools. Such a sign simultaneously implies a sense of isolated seclusion behind the veiled wall of glass, while also referencing a connection between this site and other educational institutions. Away from the formal entrance, the serviceable nature of large institutions is observed in Shared Zone 2011. A focus on positive and negative space, and the recurring pattern inherent to brick structures, becomes a prime target for O'Donnell's artistic intervention and exploration of formal composition.

By Dr Shirley Daborn
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