Beyond the Gallery: Voices from Together Dreaming, FCA Gallery, University of Wollongong

A popular idea in the western art world is that art is unique in that it has the ability to exist only for itself, independent of any other purpose. The traditional gallery space; the white room, exists to isolate works of art, disconnecting them from the happenings of daily life. When an object is placed within the context of this ‘white box’, it becomes ‘art’, its own unique entity. In indigenous cultures in North America, there are no words to express the afore mentioned idea of ‘art’. This is because you cannot separate ‘art’ out from the rest of life. Where the western world seeks to understand the world by categorizing and isolating different aspects of life, the Indigenous world allows for everything to be intrinsically connected. Time does not run in a line but is cyclical like the earth’s natural cycles. Thus the act of creativity permeates all aspects of the day to day. For many native people, creative expression has been found in weaving a basket in which to store food, or in telling stories to pass on valuable lessons to the next generation. Thus, when many indigenous artists paint a canvas, it becomes not just a painting, but also a way to continue cultural practices into the present. Thus, it is not just art, but instead a manifestation of multiple aspects of lived experiences.

When visiting the Boolarng Nangami Together Dreaming exhibition at Wollongong University, I found that the works could not be contained by the ‘western white box’. All of the work spoke strongly of life outside of the gallery space. The exhibition was a collection of work from nine different Aboriginal artists who all work out of the Aboriginal Art and Culture Studio in Gerringong, New South Whales. The work consisted of paintings and functional objects including basketry, bark vessels, and a didgeridoo. The basketry, suspended from the ceiling at different heights, brought the weavings to life. They became floating sculptures, transcending their status as static objects. In western eyes, outside of the gallery space, they would be seen as craft, or utilitarian objects, yet when placed in the gallery, they become sculpture. However through native eyes, they are all of these. The baskets cannot be limited to their final form, but are created out of knowledge of the plants, processes, and weaving techniques passed down for thousands of years.
The final product is the woven basket suspended in the gallery space, but the artwork is in the never-ending processes, which created it.

When I visited the Gerringong studio space, I spoke with one of the exhibiting artists, Bonny Brennan Foley. She took time to show me every plant material and how it is used in her basketry. She also told me stories of how the center has taken special trips to other areas to search and harvest certain plants. One of her favorite objects to make is what she calls ‘onion fish’, fish shaped baskets that you can hang in your kitchen and keep onions in. These fish are examples of how culture is constantly evolving and how traditional art forms are constantly adapting to the modern world.

Another artist whose work reflects this is Steven Russell. Steven Russel is from the Bidigal people. His work spans from detailed realistic, large scaled renderings of scenes from his childhood, to bright acrylic canvases depicting Bidigal traditions in day-to-day life. He illustrates the land and water with vibrant organic waving layers of color. The land in his work is never unoccupied, the details he paints in tell of stories of how his people interact with their surroundings. There is a story of day-to-day life behind each painting. In one painting entitled ‘Georges River’, there are paths of footprints through green vegetation. It is an abstracted birds-eye-view, which circulates the eye around in the path of the traveler’s footprints. He explained to me that in order to make a boomerang, his people followed paths to mangrove swamps and harvested mangrove wood. This wood is strong and has natural bends in it so it is already shaped like a boomerang. Another painting of his entitled ‘Fishing my Country’ looks abstract at first with a multi layered blue amoebic shape dominating the canvas. When you look closer, there are two groups of people representing the Tharwal and the Bidigal people. They are distinguished by the patterns of body paint. He explained that the work was about the ways his people hunted and the foods that were important to them. His work honors ancient tradition while employing a distinct contemporary, abstracted style. His use of bright oranges, blues, and greens echo aesthetics of modern day advertising and graphic design.

Thus this work, from a western point of view, creates a stimulating gallery experience with sculptural objects and paintings that offer a fresh approach to modern art. However, when one
speaks to the artists, and learns of their stories, it is apparent that this work is not just ‘art for arts sake’ and cannot be defined by the white space of the gallery. Rather, it is inseparable from the day-to-day life of its creators. It speaks of how everything in life is intertwined, and how creative human expression cannot be isolated into the category of art, but rather is found within every single human experience.

Kristen Dorsey
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