

My Space Martin Boyce



Scottish artist Martin Boyce has just erected an enormous sculpture at RMIT, called *We Are Shipwrecked and Landlocked*. It is next to the Old Melbourne Gaol. The room-like site is perfect for Boyce, recently chosen to represent Scotland at the 2009 Venice Biennale: he is used to working with eerie public spaces such as disused playgrounds, drab parks, freeway underpasses and subways. Setting up the towering aluminium elements of the sculpture took place on a bleak Melbourne day. The art work, funded by the Kaldor Public Art Project, consists of a four-metre-high black "fence", three eight-metre white "trees", a coiled yellow hose, a drain and several rubbish-bin-shaped receptacles.

How did you come upon this place for your work?

I was here a year ago and we came to Melbourne and looked at some sites. We came across this one by chance: we were driving along the street and John (Kaldor) said: 'What's that space there?' Charlotte (Day, curator), who knows Melbourne better, explained. We came in to look at it and it was looking barren with a scrappy piece of grass on it. They've since put artificial grass on it: that's been lifted for this project. It appealed to me as an open space that is somewhere between a park

and a building site. Also it's central but open and public.

Did you know anything about the history of the site?

I didn't know anything about it until we came across it. Then it began to reveal itself. It is an incredible site. The great thing is the sculpture changes as you move around it.

So this is the first time you have seen the sculpture erected?

The scale is quite shocking. I had to work in this quite remote way. I worked on developing the ideas for it, with models and maquettes in a studio in Glasgow. Then the work was produced in Sydney, then brought down here. As soon as you go outside of the gallery or the museum space, then, really, scale becomes a very difficult thing to deal with. Not in a competitive sense — it is just that so the composition doesn't get lost, so it can hold its ground and relationship to the things around it. As soon as the first tree went up I felt quite confident that it was *not* going to get lost: it feels quite muscular, bold. These trees are based on abstract trees from 1925 made for an exhibition of decorative arts in Paris. I came across images of these trees and began to really explore their form and shape, then fragment and deconstruct them.

How did you envisage working with the space and how your piece would occupy it?

Because this site has such a rich and layered history, I didn't want to add any more to that, in terms of making it specifically about the fall. I was interested in bringing a little fragment of an imaginary landscape and shipwrecking it here. But it's not so much arriving here in a shipwrecked kind of way. It's that the landscape itself is shipwrecked in another place completely. So you have these two places collapsing into each other. Something's quite unreal about it. From a distance, it's very graphic and highly aestheticised. It has an artificial look, as if it's been dropped from the sky into this very historic site. This place, these objects: it's very difficult to attribute a time to them. It's like a drawing. Or a frozen moment in time. An abandoned moment — a process going on that has stopped.

What thoughts does the sculpture bring to you? You describe its elements as being a fence, trees, drain, hose and bins.

It is like a journey of climbing through or over a fence, going from one space into another. The fence becomes a threshold. It is in the centre of the courtyard so it is an object rather than a perimeter fence. If you look at the shape of the bins from

above, you can see they are the same shape as the leaf on the trees and the pattern built into the fence. So all the shapes come from the tree itself. In a way, a bin on that scale is an object that tells you that you are in a public space.

Do you often work on this scale?

This is by far the biggest project I've ever made. I can picture the model on my desk. Folding bits of paper was easier. It is very difficult to know if you are going to get it right. It was a great relief when the trees went up, they were just right. When you walk in here you can see it all clearly because it's so graphic, but as soon as you get up close to it, some of the elements become quite massive. You feel quite dwarfed by the trees.

What will happen to this sculpture?

These projects are made to last for the duration of the show (five weeks). Hopefully it will have a life afterwards — that's where the galleries come in. It would be great for it to have a home.

INTERVIEW: ANDREW STEPHENS
PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINGS

Martin Boyce's *We Are Shipwrecked and Landlocked*, a Kaldor Public Arts Project, is at the RMIT University Alumni Courtyard (enter from Russell Street, next to Old Melbourne Gaol) until November 30.