FORECAST: ELLA BARCLAY

Ahead of her new show at Sydney’s UTS Gallery, VULT caught up with Ella Barclay, an artist whose ambitious installations question the promises of technology and dissolve its most pernicious myths.

By Chloe Wolfson
What contemporary art were you interested in seeing?

I was privileged to have conversations with amazing galleries, museums and artist-run spaces and engage with many artists. Perhaps contrary to assumptions, I found London to be open and interested. I had some really smart writers and curators come to talk to me about my work, and artists from the Net Art movement in the 1990s who were hugely influential to me in terms of looking at how networks operate and how we relate to each other. While there was a show, Electronic SuperHighway, at Whitechapel Gallery that recently brought many of those artists into the fold, on the whole they have been excluded from recent art history. In the same era when Relational Aesthetics was being championed as a way to examine how art operates outside of the physical form that it embodies, more prophetic and interesting modes of art-making were occurring — artists playing around on the early internet, messing directly with real life organisations, whether it's toy companies, sending bogus faxes to the police, or hijacking payphones, but still doing it with a critical and cheeky avant-gardism that makes it entirely different to hacktivism, or any form of activism really. Their work was not about social justice, it was absurdist but used these mainstream forms of communication. So it was really great connecting with some of those people and a completely wild experience to have them bring their knowledge to my practice.

Tell us about your interest in the nostalgic and speculative aspects of technology.

Increasingly, I've found myself looking backwards, to the techno-utopian socialist objectives of the cybernetics movement from the mid-20th century through to the 1970s, and the belief that self-regulating systems could be devised that could lead to social cohesion, the relationship between the hippie movement and the singularity between LSD and mathematics. This, in so many ways, is the rhetoric that people still champion around Silicon Valley, but we know that Silicon Valley is now this hot mess of veiled commercial vested interests and smoke and mirrors.

Ella Barclay is best known for atmospheric installations that bring together the tangible and intangible. While her works could be seen to invert the cool, minimalist aesthetic of our cloud-storage age, bringing hypothetical computers to life via tangles of cords or images projected onto ethereal mist, Barclay is also interested in representing aspects of these installations through photography, reframing the works and refocusing the viewer's gaze.

Barclay's work embodies an honesty, playfulness and urgency, employing materials such as tubes lined with an electro-luminescent paneling patented by General Electric in 1935 as a car dashboard light, jars filled with magnets, ferro fluid, tiny television screens in baby oil, and an ongoing illuminated cocktail project called The Woozy Jacuzzi.

Her practice has seen plenty of odd moments. She has been mistaken for the creator of a blue movie while filming dancers moving in tubs of paint at a Taiwanese hot spring hotel and has accidentally scrambled her computer's hard drive while working with strong magnets. But for Barclay, the meditative experience that's a consequence of spending time with the completed works is its own reward.

Barclay's forthcoming exhibition at the UTS (University of Technology Sydney) Gallery will draw upon previous works, which employ video projections and mist, as well as a new series titled Mystic Heuristics. VAULT spoke with Barclay at her current residency space at Casula Powerhouse in Western Sydney, starting with a discussion about another recent residency at the Australia Council studio in London.

What was your time in London like?

Since at least the industrial revolution, London has been a very exciting place, particularly for the sort of work I'm interested in. It's home to some of the oldest museums in the world, many of which are science-based. I spent a lot of time at the Royal Institution of Great Britain looking at the collection of Michael Faraday, a monumental scientist of the early 19th century, particularly in the fields of electromagnetism and batteries. It's got his amazing glass and electrical experiments jammed into not-so-amazing display cabinets. It was really interesting to look at that, as this idea of the spectacle of scientific display is a trope I've
I've been looking at pre-digital technologies, and my works in the UTS show will almost exclusively use 20th century materials: things like electro-luminescent panelling, glass, neon, crappy aquarium equipment, and plastic. I'm still interested in newness, there's a constant fetishisation of the new, but also we live in an era of great acceleration, so to chase that means to chase a high that you're never going to get.

Anyone who knows me knows that I'm entranced by gadgets. But for me the real magic or spectacle is what I've developed from revisiting technologies and materials that seem like they don't have anything new to offer, like projecting video onto mist. That might not sound great but when you revisit technologies and materials that are almost archaic, they can genuinely give new insights into the capacity of video to make apparitions in three-dimensional shifting light.

**How Important Is The Installation Process?**

Really, it's about creating spaces that I love to be in. Busting a nut to suspend half a tonne of water in the gallery, filling it with questionably safe electronics and then hanging a projector over it (depicting) figures who have been swimming around in paint — (after) the stress of installing these crazy things, I'm tempted to flee outside to the bright light of day. But I'm setting up spaces that are intended to be quasi-transcendental. They're about sitting and spending time with the work. I hope viewers have meditative encounters, as if they've crawled into some strange mountain-side grotto. That's why in my work I've always tried to avoid specific, overtly direct focal points, so it's more about grazing your eyes across the textures and surfaces, establishing scenarios where a different set of aesthetic codes operate.

A lot of occultists deal with the supposedly shamanic acts of making or turning internal, shifting ideas and thoughts into physical or written form. For me, that threshold also exists in terms of turning ethereal data into physical objects. In this respect, a crappy $50 inkjet printer is something that conducts that magical act because it stands at the threshold between soft and hard copy. I think the reason we hate printers so much is because they're the imperfect custodians of that gateway somehow.

**In What Ways Are You Currently Experimenting With Photography?**

It's interesting, people might look at an installation for all of two seconds but if you take a photo of it you direct people to a more contemplative encounter. I'm moving towards setting the work up and taking photos of it, because it converts it into landscapes.

So many of my works are specifically for the space they're in and rarely do they work in another space. But spending time photographing the works and spending time with people around the work is very important. I don't know if that's edging into performance or not.

For me the work is a paradox of nothingness — this shapeless mess of misty images in half a tonne of water [suspended] from a ceiling is a heavy, contained experiment to address things that we believe can't be contained. The lack of order you see in some of my works is a kind of spontaneous fury of trying to make these installations work in the time that I have. I've never been interested in hiding the mechanics of what makes things work. There's nothing in my work that would cause people to wonder how I've done it but ideally the viewer would see through that and have some kind of transformative experience.

**Ella Barclay: I Had To Do It**

*View all from September 2 to October 23, 2016 and Light Geist at the Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth from September 2 to November 24, 2016.*

**Installation view:**

**ELLA BARCLAY**

Mystic Heuristics II, That Which Cannot Be, Philadelphia from September 2 to November 24, 2016. Barclay will also show as part of That Which Cannot Be at Vox Populi, Philadelphia from September 2 to October 23, 2016 and Light Geist at the Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth from September 2 to November 24, 2016.

*Photo: Koan Stevenson. Courtesy the artist.*