

# ELLA BARCLAY

STORY LUCY STRANGER



Playing upon our fascination with technology and its almost god-like mysticism, Ella Barclay creates immersive installations that reveal the chaotic wirings, network systems and social histories that underlie technology. Dense and abstract, her installations ask you to consider what is at play in our embedded fixation with technology.

**ENCOUNTERING ELLA BARCLAY'S** installations you are enveloped by enigmatic tones, flashing lights and, sometimes, rising steam. No it is not a *Dr Who* episode, but she'd be amused if you described it as that. Barclay engages with the familiar materials of technology – wiring, plastic, luminescent panelling and pulsing tones – to reconstruct it into something uncanny and unfamiliar.

#### What led you to practise art?

I've always wanted to be an artist in different capacities. When I was young I was inspired by the art around me but also film and understanding how things work, looking at the agency of artists. It is not necessarily an exact decision, it is more just the way you see the world and you process information. It's also about seeing your life as an exercise in creativity and in understanding and seeing the culture in things.

#### Who has influenced you?

There are artists whose works speak to my practice. Tony Oursler's assessment of the histories of media technology, and how he taps into how the early inventors of the telegraph or the telephone instigated the mysticism that is prescribed onto newer technologies. Also Simon Denny, for his exploration of the silicon aesthetic, the prototypes of the weird new machines, and the inherent dagginess of that is interesting.

Recently I've been interested by the work of British artist Suzanne Treister, in that she makes amazing giant drawings that map out the history of confrontation/computation, the histories that are lesser known, such as the role of women in the innovation of technology, which is undersold. By observing these it provides such a strong antidote to the idea of the programmer, or the clinical office space, and Silicon Valley that we know.

**Your approach to technology seems to engage with a post-Romanticism. Instead of idealising a spiritual connection with nature and a platonic state, it is with the machine or technology.**

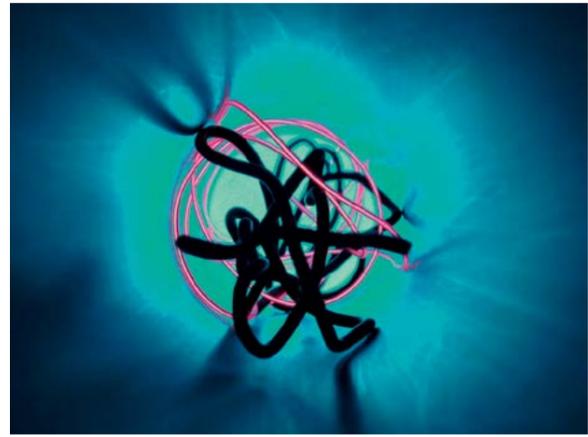
Definitely. It's a kind of techno-romanticism or dealing with this idea of a techno sublime. I'm not particularly interested in ideas of new technologies or innovation; it's more about our experience as we navigate this kind of landscape.

**What underlies this immersion of the figure into these chaotic technological settings?**

I've always been interested in this notion of immersion, which is a romantic term of losing yourself in the elements. That manifested for me at an early age through cinema and going to techno-squat parties – experiencing this kind of late night euphoric,



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03



05

bass music reverberating off everyone. It is both very high tech but also very visceral and slimy and steamy.

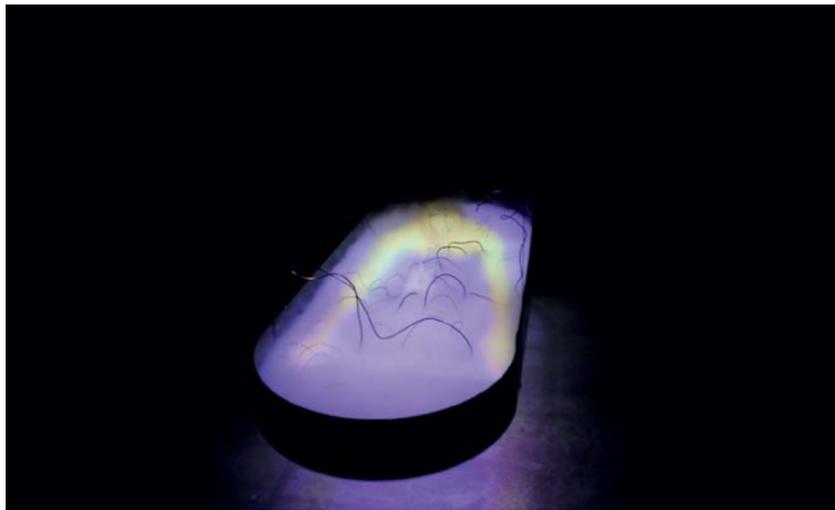
I worked in Taipei in 2011 with three Taiwanese artists, filming them in paint. I continued that in 'Ebb' (2012-13), where nine figures individually get into a bath of paint one after another and disappear beneath the surface. So it is kind of funny, kind of sad, at the very crux of that is this desire for immersion. The irony is by putting that in a tank that is water and mist, and the bottom of the tank has no bottom – it's clear – it is a totality of nothingness, the figure is dropping into nothing. This is this kind of threshold of the terrain of data, where do we go? What is existence?

#### How do you begin a work?

A lot of the time it is just an image in my mind. They say as a professional artist you can't wait around for divine inspiration and I do understand that, but it's always when you least expect it this image will appear and something in my heart goes "that's it". I'm always going off on little strands of ideas, finding out about new and old technologies that are lesser known. There are works in 'I had to do it' (2016) that are essentially just giant note-taking things that I have then scrunched up into balls. A lot of that is my thoughts and research for the show. My aesthetic is intuitive; I don't over-think how things look. It is that lack of perfectionism that as an aesthetic is important to the work because it reflects the haphazardness that exists in a lot of network architectures.

#### Your titles are poetic, pulling back to the human experience in contrast to the technological work it represents.

Yes, a lot are from literary influences, or lines from emails people have sent me. I have been inspired by English literature, I take a



04

very literary approach to sculpture in that I like using metaphors. And in the same way we analyse a poem and pull out a single sentence, I'd like people to pull out a single element and discuss those single elements. There is no one line, and if anything it's more interesting to find out what you can bring to my work than what I can say about it.

#### You work in a range of new media from light installation to video installation, electronics, looped sound and steaming cocktails. Do you embrace the theatrical?

Yes there is theatricality to it. I don't shy away from that. There is a whole sphere of art that would find that tacky, but in a way I embrace that. I do like that.

I think I aim for otherworldliness and whether that comes from an old or new technology that's kind of what I aim to do.

There is never this spectacle to the point where the person is like "I don't know how she has done that". If anyone looks they can figure it out, but it still causes a double take.

#### What is your approach to installations?

In making these I would like to think that I am making a visual environment where the viewer can graze their eyes over the different textures that I am creating. There is a politics with how people look at things – once people know what something is they move on. I have been bringing photography into my practice so you can be more didactic in terms of "look at this" and also bringing out some of the details of the work.

In 'I had to do it' your photographs present almost painterly details of the electronic wiring in the larger works. What led to this? Through making these installations I

started being drawn to smaller details of them. I think a lot of my work is about interiority and about the inside of things. So photographing within there you have these images that open up a whole world. The photographs in 'I had to do it' were influenced by a work from 'Our voices are muted as if we were speaking through felt' (2014), each pipe is lined with a channel of sound, luminescent panelling and wire, so while documenting that the camera was up in the tubes, and you get that vertigo experience. You are tunnelling towards something yet you are similarly tunnelling towards nothing as well. The photographs are a kind of invitation to meditate on smaller details of my work as opposed to the whole big work, as so much is going on.

#### What informed your creation of the unfamiliar, triangular sculptural forms?

I take a painterly approach to sculpture, the crumpled black plastic forms kind of look like computers, but they look more like a kid has scribbled what they think a computer is on a piece of paper and someone has recreated it in 3D form. On some levels it's about the aesthetic exploration of these things, instead of a direct point of criticism.

#### With the abstract sculptures, photographs and sound you turn the familiar into the unfamiliar ...

Yes, with the voices and song sounds that come out of the sculptures it is meant to be a multichannel cacophony so you can't really make out what is being sung, there are so many different layers of speech. The singing tones are potentially homage to the 300 years of women who contributed to computational history, whose stories are not well known.

#### Through breaking down the layers that have informed the cult and mysticism that surrounds technology, what do you hope to reveal about humanity?

We as humans have always wanted to make something outside of ourselves. "Techne" is

a word that can be translated to mean art, to mean craft and can be translated to mean technology depending on different readings of it. It is basically anything that is outside of ourselves, whereas "Episteme" is the root of epistemology – how we make order and sense in the mind. Since the birth of civilisation we have been obsessed with mark-making and making things exist outside of us. I think through these crappy materials that I am using, I hope to bring that forward. There is that messy freneticism that exists in all network architectures because a lot of the time it does happen haphazardly. ■

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- 01 Ella Barclay in her exhibition, I Had To Do It, UTS Gallery, Sydney, 2016, photographer Joy Lai
- 02 Mystic Heuristics III, That Which Cannot Not Be (detail), 2016, acrylic, neon, glass, enamel, copper, ink on cotton rag, photographer Koan Stevenson
- 03 Plastic environments imaginatively inhabited (Dopamine long morning bed head), 2016, colour print on Hahnemuhle, bespoke framing, 120cm diameter
- 04 Summoning the Nereid Nerdz (detail), 2015, looped video projected onto mist in a suspended acrylic tank with sound by Nick Wilsdon, photographer Ella Barclay
- 05 Summoning the Nereid Nerdz (detail), 2015, looped video projected onto mist in a suspended acrylic tank with sound by Nick Wilsdon, photographer Jamie North

Courtesy the artist and UTS Gallery, Sydney.