

ABBOTSLEIGH



# **Electricity**

**5 June to 13 July 2019**

An exhibition of drawing enhanced by a  
simple electric current.

Curated by Dr Maryanne Coutts Head of Drawing  
National Art School.

**Steven Cavanagh**

**Skelton&Conway**

**Maryanne Coutts**

**Ben Denham**

**Euan Heng**

**Paul Higgs**

**Gabriella Hirst**

**Lisa Jones**

**Alex Karakonji**

**Ken Smith**

# Introduction

Electricity is the invisible force that makes contemporary life smooth, easy and connected. It is hi-tech and shiny, bringing us bright lights and fast pace. It makes the city throb with collective life. Drawing, on the other hand, doesn't necessarily have that street cred. As an art making process its traditions tend to be seen as generating a less polished, slowly searching, more organic hum.

In the speed and hustle of an electric world, this tough and sensitive process has its own force that can be overlooked. While in recent years there has been a resurgence in thinking about and questioning the contemporary nature of drawing, certain qualities of drawing persist. For instance it is often thought of as a reduced or condensed language like line or tone, or as a way of thinking, recording, mapping, explaining or exploring; and that as an activity that prioritises process, it is often very personal and immediate. Within the technologies and resources that have evolved during the last couple of hundred years, those persistent qualities of drawing regenerate and emerge in new guises. As drawing grows into the potential of the 21st century, it continues to revel in those qualities while taking on, using and speaking about everything that our contemporary world has to offer.

There are many artists who take all they can get from the electric technology that enables complex, intense, immersive

perfection. Russian video artists, AES+F make multi-screen video works that, not only fully utilise the available tools, but in their precise polish reflect on the world that engenders this technology. On the other hand, Australian artist Joyce Hinterding makes drawings that are their own technology. By making drawings that are themselves conductors, she engages with and explores the nature of electricity often using graphite as a conductor<sup>1</sup>.

The artists in this show are not 'tech-head' artists revving their engines. Power or technology is not the conceptual driver and yet none of these works could be shown if Thomas Edison had not channelled electricity into a usable light bulb. Each has been driven by a distinctive, drawing-based practice to see what a tablet or a neon tube, a scanner, a jigsaw, a laser cutter or a video camera could do. As such, this is a drawing show where the diverse engagements with electricity help reveal the nature of drawing. Many of these drawings exist as an interface between human experience and technology. Between biological and mechanical, the city often emerges as a place of excitement and energy. At the same time, the technology used to aid the drawing focuses a lively spirit that animates the work. Drawing here is an immediate interface between the gritty actuality of inhabiting a body and the controlled order of functioning technology.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.haineshinterding.net/>

The evolution of technologies drives towards easier, faster, smoother, 'better'. Artists however, are perverse. The slower, rougher and more difficult way is often more interesting. It lets us pull things apart, be with the time of things and question them. The image of Gabriella Hirst, in a long dress at an easel on top of Caspar David Friedrich's windblown cliff, says it all.

It is a testament to this curiosity and the ingenuity and humour of artists that we appropriate electric tools that were designed for more 'practical' purposes, such as building, sewing and cooking, to make art. As Tango Conway and Amelia Skelton draw with materials and tools that are usually used for making cheese sandwiches, the usually parallel worlds of domesticity and culture collide. These artists use things that are meant for one thing to do something else (make art) and in the process the artists confront us with the absurd common ground of cheese on bread and ink on paper, where choosing to put ink on bread is not necessarily a decision driven by the imperative of efficiency.

Ben Denham's early performances<sup>2</sup> where he drew with extended artificial limbs or wrote words in different directions with his two hands and four pens at the same time, seem determined to make things – that are usually easy – as difficult as possible. But within this exaggerated activity he

exposes the subtlety and complexity of a simple activity. Hirst's video talks about this, while critiquing the romantic notion of an artist alone with untamed, electric harshness.

Hirst addresses the tradition of working *en plein air* that seeks some unmitigated direct translation between a human being and the landscape. For Hirst it is an impossible battle that she presents to us in all its drama. Ken Smith, on the other hand takes on the challenge with a quiet, persistent care. For him it is easier to work outside with a tablet rather than paint. It's much cleaner and requires less equipment. And yet, even with this willingness to adapt to more efficient methods, Smith's choice is to spend days making images that record the subtle changing of the atmosphere. He could take photographs, but in the difference lies the significance. A camera could never replace the slowness and care of his observation and the profound ways that this physical presence – hand and eye – translates into his drawings.

Paul Higgs' tablet drawings on the other hand, swing happily between photographic and hand-made marks. Their exuberance belies the consideration that delivers these lively drawings. He makes these as digital files and they bounce into the printed form begging questions about the materiality of thought. As drawings these are pure curiosity, playfully taking advantage of digital potential.

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<sup>2</sup> Works such as Pulling Strings (2004-2006) and Chopstick Technique(2002 -2011) are good examples and can be seen at <http://www.bendenham.com/category/mark-making/rewriting/>

It is paradoxical, then, that machines can help make visible what is not machine; thought, curiosity, feeling, being. I find Ben Denham's more recent drawing machine, on show here, powerful in this regard. Driven by the sound of his voice, the mechanical arms make images that seem to embody the physicality of that voice. While this work is a form of robotics, a field that many feel threatens to replace human labour, it makes drawings that are deeply and specifically human.

There is also a consistent reference to writing in Denham's work which is perhaps more explicit in the neon works of Steven Cavanagh and Euan Heng. I first saw Cavanagh's defiant work in the window of a gallery, engaging with the street as much as the art world. While I was impressed by the way it encapsulated so many implications of personal politics, it was the way that it so lithely stepped between writing and drawing that really drew me to it. The direct correspondence between drawing and handwriting – the personal idiosyncrasy of manual marks as well as the linear qualities of both writing and drawing – is used here to make a link between personal identity and public proclamation. The popular history of neon started as advertising; street signs made famous in New York's Times Square or Melbourne's Skipping Girl sign.

Heng's work also speaks of an intensely personal narrative, but in his case, the meaning emerges from a longstanding practice of narrative painting. Where Cavanagh's work comes to us fully public, boldly announcing private stories, Heng's brings the private poetry of his paintings into a media that is usually

public. As his electric lines evoke the wild animal that can be tamed, the image that can be language, the idea that can be a thing, he gives us a playful interaction between drawing, idea and beauty.

As Heng's lines evoke somewhere magical and cultivated, Lisa Jones's lines are derived from the actual places that have grown accidentally in the cities she walks through; her map-like drawings are grounding. As many of her drawings derive from cracks in the road as well as maps of those roads, the macro and micro are both in conflict and sliding along lines of chance synchronicity. She delineates a logic of spatial markers by burning the lines into felt just as her passage through familiar areas changes and modifies the places; wearing them down, breaking them up and scorching them into memory.

Walking through the city is a line drawing in itself, tracing the industrial, commercial and recreational paths that are woven through the urban environment. Alex Karakonji embeds us in this world as he wanders through the city. Quietly observing televisions through windows, traffic lights and fountains he traverses a familiar route between Sydney's Taylor Square and Circular Quay. Gradually changing each charcoal drawing by hand as he recorded the changes, he has enticed his marks to take us on his daily walk. Set in 'real time', we experience the narration in a way that belies the years that Karakonji took to draw it. The point of view that travels through the space puts us in his world, traveling as if in his head.

By giving us the view from his own eyes, Karakonji immerses us in a first person narrative. Accompanying him through the city we get a glimpse of who he is. Technology acts as a screen or membrane between the implied human physicality and the structured, manufactured world, generating – in this case – a discrete sense of voyeurism.

As an artist I am fascinated by this first person voice that many of these drawings have employed, be it Karakonji's voyeurism or Cavanagh's pink, the performed drawing or the careful touch of the hand or voice. My own work, which (often obsessively) records change, in this case emerges from daily practices of dressing up and drawing. In creating and erasing personas, it finds a place where ephemeral digital traces of my passing days play against the hard physicality of things and fabrics as they are worn down, burning personal history into them, like Jones's maps.

This tension between virtual and actual fascinates me and it is possibly the element of all these drawings that most excites me as I see drawing navigate the passage between experience and substance.

Each of the works explicitly engages with some tradition of drawing. For some it is the materials; charcoal, ink or paper. Line plays its part as exploration, as conduits and pathways or by forming written words. The practices of careful observation and mapping are ways that drawing engages with specific places and performance work speaks to the significance of the artists' processes as being fundamentally present in a drawing practice.

The work in this show was chosen for how it uses electricity to engage with drawing. Ostensibly, I asked what drawing has to say about electricity. However, the more that I have spent time with this work, the more I have felt the simple power of what electricity has to say about drawing.

Maryanne Coutts  
Head of Drawing, National Art School

# Steven Cavanagh

Angry White Man... just saying that is provocative and loaded.

Angry Gay White Man... angry about being vilified, discriminated against and now voted on seems perfectly reasonable.

I wanted to create a text-based work that asks us to reflect upon ourselves and be part of a conversation that is nuanced and difficult to explain. This work pushes against uncomfortable and cautious sex and gender politics.



*Angry White Man*, 2018  
Rose pink neon tube  
150 x 100 cm

# Maryanne Coutts

My drawing practice is an attempt to embody those fleeting days that carve out the shape of things, of life and stories. A major part of that is a project called Dress Code in which I make a drawing based on what I wear every day. As each day drops a small piece into the larger work, I find other works spin out of it. One of these is *Mirror Image*, a stop motion animation to which I contribute a frame a day so that the merging images collect into an ongoing narrative. I collect the drawings, I collect the days, I collect clothes and I collect a lot of second hand stuff that wears its days on its surface. The works here are excerpts from all these collections, pieced together to make objects that take on new lives and that stand in for self-portraits of varying kinds.



*Mirror Image*, 2016-2019  
Timber, mirror, animated  
drawing and fabric  
160 x 57 cm



# Ben Denham

Since 2014 I've been thinking about how materials used in automated manufacturing, such as high precision stepper motors and linear rails, might be re-imagined in visual art practice. I use these materials to explore the tension between imprecise corporeal control and the precision and repeatability that is afforded to us by robotic technologies. This tension has been brought into sharper relief in the series of works *Drawing Song* in which I control a drawing machine with a stereo audio signal. The left audio channel controls the x-axis while the right channel controls the y-axis of the machine. The machine plots the volume of the audio signal on each axis. I sing a constant note into two microphones assigned to the left and right audio channels respectively. I can then record and play back the vocal gestures that I use to make marks with this setup. While I have very limited control over the machine when I control it with my voice, this lack of control is complimented by the fact that I can reproduce the marks that I make fairly accurately by playing the recorded audio back through the machine.



*Drawing Song*, 2019  
Ink on paper, plywood, linear bearings,  
stepper motors, electronics  
Single channel video, stereo sound  
240 x 120 x 40 cm

# Euan Heng

*e, Elephant* is a single work that derives contextually from an earlier neon installation titled, *e is for elephant*. This initial installation was inspired by illustrations of a pleasure garden that decorated a set of Renaissance Majolica plates in the collection of the Duomo Museum in Florence. At that time, my first thoughts were to create my own pleasure garden, a wall drawing, envisaged as a single major work to cover the walls of the Spare Room of the Project Space at RMIT university in Melbourne. However, as the project gathered momentum it manifested as a set of neon works that would profit from the electric qualities of light by delineating and illuminating the flora that can be cultivated and the fauna that may inhabit such an imaginary garden. This motivation was also imbued by a parallel desire to retrieve the image and to harness it with an individual vision and experience of the world, somewhere between what is seen, known or felt and through making, transformed by imagination and hopefully, to arrive at a poetic dimension.



*e, Elephant*, 2010  
Neon tube  
Plinth and dome 100 x 26 x 8 cm, elephant  
59 x 49 cm

# Paul Higgs

My father was an electrician and his brother was a television engineer, so as a child the world of wiring, connecting and making things eventually light up fascinated me. I still think this way when making any visual image and so inevitably I found electricity to be a perfect drawing tool.

I made these works in response to the title 'Electricity' of this show. The name of the show made me think of drawing two opposite psychological spaces, one which is safe and one not. I call the first type Faraday Cages after the English scientist Michael Faraday's experiments in 1836 to block electromagnetic fields with cage-like continuous mesh conductive shields; interestingly, a space which, when inside, one is protected.

Alongside this kind of electric field as subject, is also the influence on my work of computer generated visualisations of the linear collisions of sub-atomic particles inside a closed chamber. This is another kind of contained cage, but this time a space which, if inside, one is not protected.



*Faraday Cages*  
Hahnemühle digital fine art inkjet paper  
Seven works 42 x 29.7 cm each

# Gabriella Hirst

For *Force Majeure*, I travelled to the island of Rügen, where Casper David Friedrich went to paint the sublime in the 1800s. Here I attempted to paint a storm while in the eye of one – a gesture both romantic and, inevitably, futile.



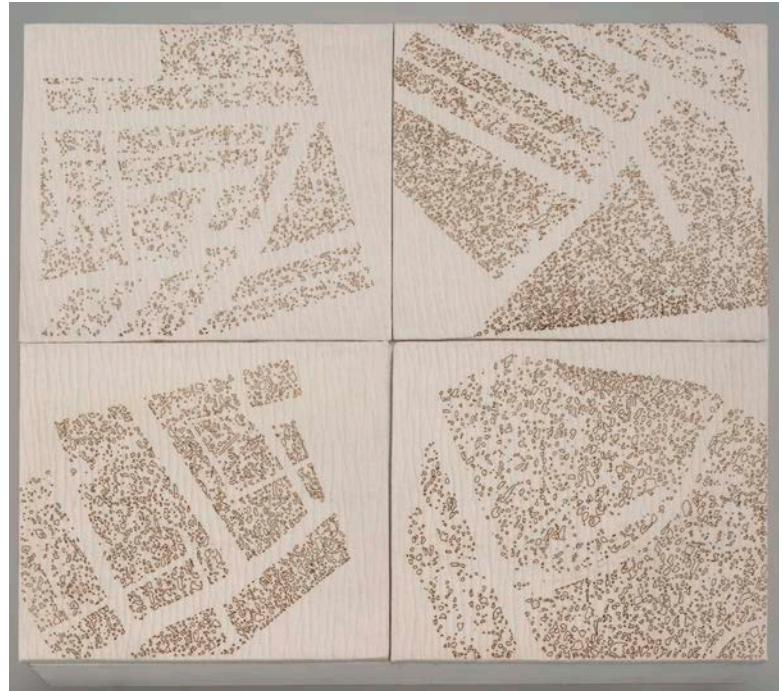
*Force Majeure*, 2015-16  
Single channel video with audio  
14 minutes 50 seconds

# Lisa Jones

The *Residual* series is an abstract response to my daily navigation of inner-city Sydney. It reconnects lived experiences of places with maps that plot the streetscapes. The geometric order of the streets is merged with topographic lines of contour to form a visual puzzle of paths, places and my own journey through the symbolic geometry of architecture and public space in the urban landscape.

My work explores the parallel impressions of maps, networks and systems with the random markings of nature's imprint on the built world. It reflects aspects of the systemisation of human beings; physiologically, intellectually, geophysically and juxtaposes these traces with environmental influences.

The tactility of the drawings is mechanical and yet also sculptural; the lines and textures are constructed using drawings and photographs taken from paving cracks and maps of my local area (both historic and contemporary). These are digitally collaged and then drawn with the laser – thus allowing the process of making to reveal the drawing. Physical traces, such as cuts and burns, left by the laser cutting machine are left as aspects of the artwork.

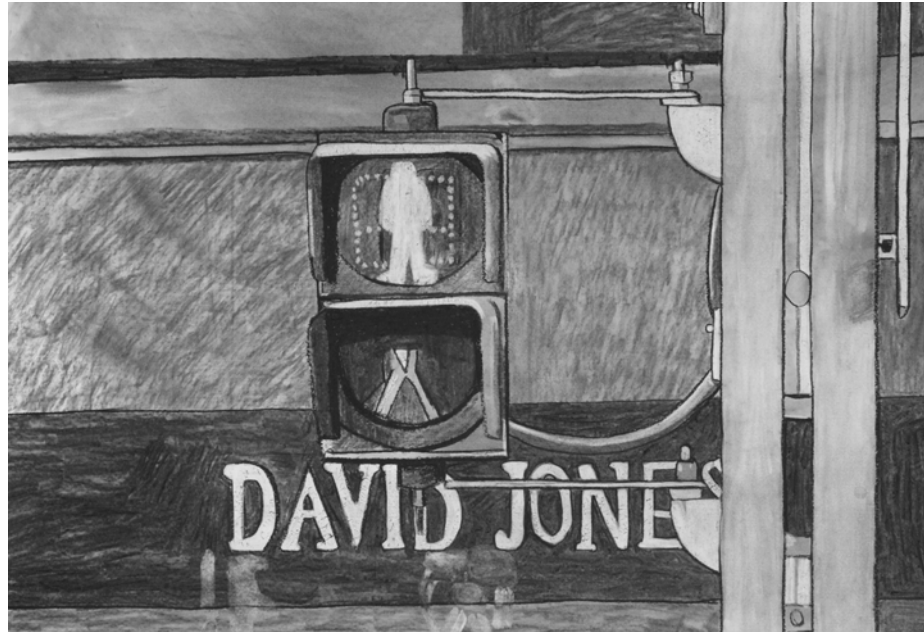


*Residual #7*, 2019  
Felt and burn marks  
20 x 108 x 112 cm

# Alex Karakonji

*The Flaneur* is an animation that I began in 2015 and finished towards the end of 2016. It depicts a loosely autobiographical walk from Taylor Square to Circular Quay. During that period I was studying my Master's degree at the National Art School and I was walking around Darlinghurst on a daily basis.

I have a great interest in watching and observing the ordinary, everyday things around me. The concept of the flaneur, to my delight, helped to theoretically frame my investigation into what Charles Baudelaire described as 'the epic side of actual life'. Originating in Paris during the 19th century, the term flaneur refers to a solitary person who aimlessly strolls around the city. *The Flaneur* is my attempt to capture the epic side of urban life as seen through the slightly distorted lens of a city-wandering artist.



*The Flaneur*, 2015-16  
Animated charcoal drawing  
7 min 16 secs

# Skelton&Conway

For Electricity at the Grace Cossington Smith Gallery, Skelton&Conway (Amelia Skelton and Tango Conway) perform the fourth iteration of their ongoing series titled *Lunch Special*. On the opening night the pair prepare, produce, package and display a series of five unique works. Through the lenses of printmaking, mark making and performance art, Skelton&Conway create a series of experimental works that combine the traditional mediums of ink with bread, butter and cheese. The use of a jaffle maker and vacuum seal device in the production of the works fuse the materials together and play an integral role in the performative process. Skelton&Conway inspect the process of commodifying and attributing value to contemporary art by using domestic tools and employing materials with 'best before' dates.

The resulting artworks will eventually evolve and degrade over time. Once the performance is finished and the works are displayed, they exist as a collectable product of performance art, disrupting conventional art market processes and the negotiation of value.



*Lunch Special 4*, 2019  
Bread, butter, cheese, ink and plastic in display case.  
25 x 25 cm each  
Single channel video, 5 minutes and 28 seconds

# Ken Smith

*6 days, 3 mornings, 3 afternoons*, 2019, is constructed from six archival pigment prints that were generated from a series of drawings made on an iPad tablet in a landscape setting close to where I live on the Mornington Peninsula in southern Victoria. On-site investigations of landscape subjects inevitably reveal the constant change that is inherent in the visible world. This awareness has formed a tradition of landscape representation that uses serial or multiple imagery and was probably begun by Pierre Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819). It was significantly extended by Claude Monet (1840-1926) and is continued by contemporary artists: Antonio Lopez Garcia (1936-), David Hockney (1937-) and Richard Misrach (1949-).

Drawing is for me is the best way of defining the essential in a subject, both the consistent and the contingent, and it is here that the portable digital tablet has real advantages. For its ability to save, file and copy visual information (endlessly) enables an underlying template drawing to be made and then used as the basis for many subsequent investigations of how light, colour, atmosphere and time reveal a landscape – for a landscape is not singular in manifestation, it is multiple.



*6 days, 3 mornings, 3 afternoons*, 2019  
Archival pigment prints  
53.8 x 152.4 cm



# Biographies

**Steven Cavanagh** is an artist, curator and educator who works with photomedia and more recently, installation and performance. His art practice explores the physical and psychological landscape of masculine identity, vulnerability and loss. His work is often politically provocative and personal, referencing lived experiences.

**Maryanne Coutts's** work is increasingly an exploration of the relationship between drawing and time which plays out in ritualistic daily projects, like *Dress Code*, where each day since 2013 she has made a drawing of what she wore that day. She is currently Head of Drawing at the National Art School in Sydney.

Represented by Australian Galleries Sydney and Melbourne

**Ben Denham** works with video and makes drawing machines that operate autonomously as part of larger material explorations or as a means to engage different parts of the body in the process of mark making. He is the recipient of grants from the Australia Council for the Arts and Create NSW.

**Euan Heng** was born in Scotland in 1945 and has lived in Australia since 1977. He studied at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee and RMIT University, Melbourne. Heng has exhibited extensively in Australia and abroad and his work is represented in major public and university museum collections in all states of Australia and in Scotland.

Represented by Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

**Paul Higgs** works primarily in collage and has exhibited extensively in Australia since the late 1970s. He studied painting at the Sutton College of Art and Winchester School of Art in the UK, before moving to Australia in 1977. His many awards include the Campbelltown Art Prize (1997). He is currently based in Austinmer, NSW.

Represented by Defiance Gallery, Newtown

**Gabriella Hirst** is a video and performance artist based in Sydney and London. She recently completed an MFA at the Slade School of Fine Art (London). She was granted the 2020 ACMI Ian Potter Moving Image Commission with ACMI and has exhibited in the Courtauld East Wing Biennale, London, Video Contemporary, Sydney and NEW16 at ACCA in Melbourne.

**Lisa Jones** is a British artist based in Sydney whose work includes drawing, sculpture and video. She has studied and exhibited extensively in both Australia and the UK was recently awarded a Copyright Agency CREATE Grant in collaboration with artist Julia Davis, for their project 'Waiting'. Currently lecturing in Drawing at the National Art School, between 2005-13 Jones was a director of the artist-run-initiative Peloton.

**Skelton&Conway** are an emerging collaborative duo who engage significantly with domestic vernacular, using its symbolism to communicate ideas universal and political. After meeting through their Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture in 2016 at the National Art School the pair have since undertaken a number of collaborative projects that span across installation, sculpture and performance, interrogating notions of value within the art world through humour and playfulness.

**Ken Smith** was born in Melbourne in 1951 and has undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications from the Victoria College of the Arts and a Master of Arts from Monash University. Since graduating he has held 14 solo exhibitions and has been included in 83 group exhibitions and has works in private and public collections in Australia and internationally.

Represented by Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne

Cover: Stephen Cavanagh, *Angry White Man*, 2018, Rose pink neon tube (detail)

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