

Shan Turner-Carroll: Relics





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9 to 30 November 2017



'One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.'

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1980

Any practitioner of photography with an interest in the history of the medium would be familiar with French philosopher Roland Barthes opening lines in *Camera Lucida*. Photography provides us with a magical ability to see the past through the eyes of others. In addition to this, we may preserve and share contemporary ephemera with audiences far and wide, the camera acting as a stand in witness for our physical selves.

As part of my research for this exhibition. I spent some time considering multidisciplinary artist Shan Turner-Carroll's performance work *Sun Moon Walk*, 2015. In this durational piece, the artist walked for 24 hours tracking the movement of both astronomical bodies through the reflective surface of a large circular mirror he held. I considered the importance of the sun for photography; safe navigation and above all, for life as we know it. Turner-Carroll's work stirred in me the feelings of awe and insignificance I experience when staring at a bright full moon waxing in the night. *I am looking at an astro body more than four billion years old that 'looked' at the Emperor and every living thing on Earth and will continue to do so long after humans cease to exist.*

Whilst it is poetic to think of the moon as a lens, I was subsequently reminded of a truth long known to photographers; unlike the moon, the lens is not impartial to its subject. The lens is controlled by the photographer. He or she decides what is worthy of being preserved through a photograph, how far subject matter may stray from mimesis and when positioned in proximity to a conscious subject, the lens can encourage performance. Such is the case with Turner-Carroll's utilisation of photography throughout his artistic practice.

Working across mediums including painting, sculpture, performance and film, the artist has continued to incorporate still photography throughout his career as both a means and end. Photographs such as *Hair Jacket*,

2015 *The Traveller*, 2015 and *Sun and Moon Walk* capture and preserve the immediacy of performative gestures, making them accessible to a wider audience. Whilst *Hattie* and *The Burning* from the series *Hattie and Nellie*, 2014 offer a more formal visual narrative akin to cinematic tableau, all sculptural and performative elements building towards a final two-dimensional output.

Exploring Turner-Carroll's use of the lens is but one way to navigate this exhibition. The artist has himself said the photographs are not necessarily *the work* but an aspect of the work. They are one of many different means of access. Just as photographs offer us a window into other worlds he states,

'By presenting part of the sculptural element [in the gallery] it allows another entry point to the work. It is something more than a window, it is a clue, a remnant, a relic that joins the two worlds.'

Casuarina Bird

Curatorial Assistant, Australian Centre for Photography

November 2017



'Life is a peephole, a single tiny entry onto a vastness...'

— Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* 2001

At the entrance to this exhibition are photographs that function as visual symbols of Turner-Carroll's rites of passage undertaken during his Master of Philosophy (Fine Art). Traditionally, rites of passage refer to the many ceremonies and rituals practised during transitional phases of life.

According to the artist, *the act of going on a journey or undergoing a rite is to learn something about oneself and about the world. To uncover something that is already there, hidden or obscured.* Art making parallels this process through the stages of inquiry, construction and output. In a globalised industrialised world increasingly out of touch with ancestral traditions, artistic practice can offer meaning where there was confusion.

The Cubby/Cave, 2015-2016 was constructed in the canopy of a fallen tree on Turner-Carroll's rural New South Wales property. Its organic design mimics the characteristics of the natural and makeshift recycled materials used. What began as an ode to childhood and a bonding ritual between father, son and cousin, came to symbolise the beginning of a journey of discovery. A sacred chrysalis to transition inwards and ready oneself for change.

The Raft, 2016 symbolically and functionally enables the journey. It represents the voyage of separation as Turner-Carroll traversed both geographic and psychological terrain. The circular shape of the photograph suggests a ship's porthole and provides audiences a glimpse of the journey. Night sky is reflected through the branches of trees and a mirror image of the raft is seen in the still water further reinforcing a simultaneous parallel between the physical journey and that inwards.

Nearby, *Sacred Markers*, 2015 show primordial Native American lands in Arizona, New Mexico, which Turner-Carroll visited as part of his residency abroad. Circles this time suggest telescopic peepholes homing in on navigational signposts. The presentation of such ancient land with its fossils and mountains gestures us to consider our own mortality and the relics we leave behind, both from the decay of our physical bodies and the things we create in our lifetime. Like the rock formations in Monument

Valley, our psyches too, record the passing of time. They are reciprocals littered with the memories of experience, both personal and collective and through exploring this labyrinth of relics we may come to understand ourselves more deeply.

The completion of the rite of passage is marked by *The Return Threshold*, 2015-2016, another sculptural structure created in situ on Turner-Carroll's property. Much like the rock formations of *Sacred Markers*, the sculpture appears to emerge from the earth, a result of the natural force of tectonic plates shifting below or perhaps schemas reorganising themselves in the artist's mind. *The Return Threshold* represents the third and final phase of transition as referenced in Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, 1960 and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand faces*, 2008. It is necessary that the traveller close the circle, finish the task and re-enter their previous world. On entering their community as a new member of society, they will take on a new role within the group.

It is fitting then, to include a very recent example of Turner-Carroll's evolving practice. In a shift away from formal representation and the refined craftsmanship found elsewhere in the exhibition, *Wandering Boots*, 2017 embodies a low fi approach to sculpture. The boots are custom made for the artist to meander slowly through landscapes with an elevated point of view. In lieu of expensive technologies like a GoPro or Steadicam, Turner-Carroll has instead carved a space for his iPhone on one boot which records movements from the point of view of his feet. An analogue camera and flash is mounted on the adjacent boot. The work responds to the immediacy of performance and is a testament to Turner- Carroll's resourcefulness and humour.



Unlike Turner-Carroll's many autobiographical works seen throughout this exhibition, the series *Hattie and Nellie*, 2014 focuses on the lives of others. The series was commissioned for the exhibition *Ash Island and its Transformations*, at the Lock Up Gallery, Newcastle in 2015. A project that explored the legacy of the Scott sisters, two of 19th century Australia's most prominent natural history illustrators. Helena (1832-1910) and Harriet (1830-1907) lived on Ash Island from the 1846-65, working closely with their father on researching and illustrating his book *Australian Lepidoptera and their Transformations drawn from the life by Harriet and Helena Scott; with descriptions, general and systematics*, by A.W. Scott, 1864.

Turner-Carroll's fictionalised visual narrative, postulates about the inner lives of the girls capturing candid moments and cinematic episodes. The Scott sisters are seen wearing period costumes painstakingly adorned with sticks, bark and tree seeds that replicate the natural specimens they would have encountered in the field. Two photographs are matted in a similar style to Cameo photographs of the mid 19th century commonly found on *cartes de visite*. The style of photograph owing its name to the engraved gems mounted in jewellery which saw a resurgence of popularity during the Georgian and Victorian periods. *Moth Hands*, 2014 is a poetic nod to the stunning illustrations produced by the Scott sisters while *Camouflage Hands*, 2014 exemplifies Turner-Carroll's skill as a craftsman.

At a time in Australia when women were unable to pursue careers in the fields of natural history collection and illustration, it is significant that the full title of the 1864 publication credits the contributions of Helena and Harriet Scott. Upon reviewing the publication in 1851, natural historian William Swainson publicly remarked that *these drawings are equal to any I have ever seen by modern artists*.



'The passage of the mythological hero may incidentally be over ground, but fundamentally it is inward.'

—Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2008

During Turner-Carroll's time in *The Cubby/Cave*, 2015-2016 he undertook a highly personal ritual act that involved cutting off his long hair and beard. In many Buddhist cultures the shaving of one's hair is a sacred act in the process of becoming a monk or nun. This tradition references Siddhārtha Gautama, who was said to cut off his hair as a renouncement of all his worldly goods and self-obsessed ego during his path to becoming the enlightened Buddha. For Turner-Carroll, performing the act in the Cubby/Cave in the presence of his family enabled him to relinquish his childhood and former self, another step in his rite of passage. The artist then spent three months sewing *The Hair Jacket*, 2015 which became the basis for a series of performative photographs. *The Hair Jacket* acts as a symbolic garment that enables Turner-Carroll's private ritual to be observed by a gallery audience.

Travelling Jacket, 2015 is another example of Turner-Carroll's skilful melding of textiles and sculpture. It is made from both found and constructed materials including cloth created from leaves collected around his homeland. Epitomising self-sustainability and self-sufficiency, it is a portable shelter designed to carry everything one needs to survive on a journey. From a vertical garden of edible foods to the utensils needed to prepare and cook them, it also contains gifts from friends and family which act as protective talismans.

Exploring another type of portable shelter is the installation of the same name. Using an industrial, waterproof material, the artist has forged a makeshift dwelling that dismantles formal conventions of photography, including its propensity to act as a two-dimensional window. The partially obscured rural image recalls Turner-Carroll's travels in Burma (Myanmar) where he traced his family history. It also evokes the theme of migration. Turner-Carroll's parents were both born in Australia but grew up in Papua New Guinea, his father is of mixed Burmese decent. The artist takes his name from the Shan tribal people of Burma.

Sun Moon Walk, 2015 is a final farewell to New York where Turner-Carroll was on residency for a year and a poetic ode to the circumnavigation of the inner journey. The photograph depicts the artist reflecting the sun rising with a large circular mirror. It is but a fragment of a 24-hour performative work that saw Turner-Carroll 'hold the sun and moon in his hands' as he walked from Bed-Stuy Brooklyn through Manhattan to the west side of the island and back again. The physical endurance required to complete the work necessitated a slowing down of breath, movement and thought, not dissimilar to acts of meditation. Like previous works such as *The Cubby/Cave*, 2015, the project invited an active, participatory audience with friends supporting the artist along his journey.



Children are inherently creative. They can weave the most elaborate and fantastical narratives and create complex games from rudimentary materials. Growing up on a property in rural New South Wales, Shan Turner-Carroll learnt to read the natural signs of the land and engaged in art making from a young age. Like the bower birds found in the bush surrounding his home, collecting was instinct and art making his intuitive language. In his adult years he refined his arts practice through tertiary studies.

The sculptural series *Crowns*, 2013 and its photographic counterpart *Primal Crowns*, 2013 is the earliest example of Turner-Carroll's work in this exhibition. It is also a stunning presentation of the artist's intuitive art making skills. The crowns are crafted using a combination of natural elements and found objects, some sentimental, some found immediately on hand. For example, the dyes used to colour fabrics are based on ordinary pantry staples. Turner-Carroll's early resourcefulness now a firmly embedded strategy in his methodology.

Each crown was made for a member of the artist's family and has elements that relate specifically to that person. On his father's crown are three baby teeth from himself, his brother and sister. His nephew's crown has wooden toys, his sister's old teacups and his brother's crown has spices commonly used in Myanmar cooking. Old curtains, a wedding dress, mosquito nets that hung over beds and carpets from his grandmother's house were all utilised in the hand-made costumes that form part of the visual narrative.

Traditionally, crowns represent immortality – the triumph of life over death – either because the wearer is believed to ascend to glory in the afterlife or because their memory will live on in future. It matters not from what they are constructed, be it precious materials, ephemeral flora representing continuing cycles of life, or in this case, relics of family histories mixed with makeshift elements. Intention is paramount.

Like the barnacles that grow slowly on a ship, there is a gentle ripple of post-colonial discourse also present in Turner-Carroll's crowns. Small clues to his Anglo-Burmese background and strong family ties to Papua New Guinean culture are collected and deposited with care.

This exhibition invites audiences to examine the breadth of Turner-Carroll's practice in its various incantations. Beginning with *Wandering Boots*, 2017 and ending with *Crowns*, 2013 visitors may find themselves quietly reflecting on their own journey inwards as they navigate the ebbs and flows of the artist's pilgrimage of self-discovery.

'Each time I begin a work, it is the start of a new journey. Nevertheless, I see that I don't have to make work about a journey because the journey is inherent in the act of art making, it is a given in itself. The act of creating is to participate in a passage of discovery.'

—Shan Turner-Carroll, *Rites of Passage: The Lost Art of Being Human* 2016

About the artist

Shan Turner-Carroll (b. AUS 1987) is a regionally based Australian artist of Burmese descent whose practice responds to both site and situation specificity, and integrates mediums including photography, sculpture, performance and film. His subjects include both human and non-human nature, alternative forms of social exchange and consider interactions between art, the artist and the viewer. The artist's thought-provoking and skilfully crafted works frequently question current modes of living and explore alternative methodologies and modes of education.

His multidisciplinary practice perforates the boundaries historical and behavioral conventions have erected between art and life to question how creative expression can find meaning within contemporary, industrial, globalised culture.

Turner-Carroll's material language proceeds from the ritual of art making and its transformative agency and awards he has received include The Dr. Harold Schenberg Scholarship 2013, The Nick Waterlow OAM Highly Commended Award 2013, The Jennie Thomas Travelling Art Scholarship 2012 and The Margaret Olley Memorial Scholarship 2015. In 2016 he completed an MFA with The University of Newcastle where he also studied on exchange with Parsons School of design, The New School, NY.

This year Turner-Carroll is a finalist in the NSW Visual Arts Emerging Fellowship offered by the NSW Government through Create NSW. He will be presenting work in association with the Fellowship at Artspace, Sydney in the same month.

Turner-Carroll has exhibited throughout Australia, as well as in New York, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Myanmar. His work is in both public and private collections.

In 2016 Shan was curated into The Auckland Festival of Photography and completed a three-month artist in resident program with LungA School, Iceland.

<https://shanturnercarroll.com/>



Exhibition artworks

The Cubby Cave, 2015-2016

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
108 x 156 cm

The Raft, 2016

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
100 x 100 cm
Courtesy Caroline McMillen

Sacred Marker Belly of the Beast,
2015

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
40 x 40 cm
Courtesy Vanessa Crooks

Sacred Marker 2, 2015

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
100 x 100 cm
Courtesy Belinda Crooks

The Return Threshold, 2015-2016

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
108 x 156 cm
(Illustrated page 7)

Wandering boots, 2017

Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Travelling Jacket, 2015

Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Moth Hands

From the series *Hattie and Nellie*,
2014
Digital inkjet print on archival rag
90 x 68 cm
Courtesy Gerry Bobsien

Nellie

From the series *Hattie and Nellie*,
2014

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
117 x 170 cm
Courtesy Belinda Howden

Camouflage Hands

From the series *Hattie and Nellie*,
2014

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
90 x 68 cm
(Illustrated page 10)

The Burning

From the series *Hattie and Nellie*,
2014

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
117 x 170 cm

Hattie

From the series *Hattie and Nellie*,
2014

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
117 x 170 cm

Hattie and Nellie Chrysalis, 2014

Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Hair Jacket, 2015

Digital inkjet print on archival rag
80 x 120 cm
Courtesy Sheena Roberts
(Illustrated page 12)

The Traveller, 2015
Digital inkjet print on archival rag
80 x 120 cm
Courtesy Morgan Read

Hair Jacket, 2015
Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Sun and Moon Walk 1, 2015
Digital inkjet print on archival rag
92 x W 132 cm
Courtesy Kate Pauwels
Courtesy Michael Rundle
(Illustrated page 4)

Shelter, 2017
Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Lija's Crown
From the series *Crowns*, 2013
Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Sara's Crown
From the series *Crowns*, 2013
Sculpture
Dimensions variable
(Illustrated page 15)

Monique's Crown
From the series *Crowns*, 2013
Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Zion's Crown
From the series *Crowns*, 2013
Sculpture, Dimensions variable

Self portrait
From the series *Primal Crown*,
2013,
Digital inkjet print on archival rag
115 x 85 cm

Shan's Crown
From the series *Crowns*, 2013
Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Roger's Crown
From the series *Crowns*, 2013
Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Nigel's Crown
From the series *Crowns*, 2013
Sculpture
Dimensions variable

Secret 1, 2017
Video
Approx. two mins

Grace Cossington Smith Gallery and Abbotsleigh are pleased to partner with The Australian Centre for Photography to present the captivating works of photographer and multidisciplinary artist Shan Turner-Carroll.

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