

Black boxes and Interlopers

An essay accompanying *Dreamz*, Curated by Liam Garstang

SCA Gallery, Sydney College of the Arts, Thursday 13 March – Saturday 12 April 2025

Artists: Lionel Bawden, Liam Garstang, David Haines, Jan Guy, Madeleine Kelly, Audrey Newton, Julie Rrap, Tim Silver and Justin Tredall

Dreams are one of the final few realms of the human body that still resist explanation. This exhibition, *Dreamz*, proposes art as perhaps the closest thing we have to making this elusive theatre of the mind tangible. At the threshold, **Lionel Bawden's** *Inheritance* repurposes the mattress that belonged to his parents, who both passed away in the past year. Worn and achingly precious, this mattress is excavated of its soft interior and filled with a kind of mirage.

Not simply a testament to the cities that can be built and rebuilt in our dreams, *Inheritance* recalls the image of the French castle of Mont-Saint-Michel on the battered lid of a round sewing tin that Bawden's mother kept at home. Its architecture has been tenderly recreated from wooden materials salvaged from his parents' old tools and boxes. The refashioning of these everyday artefacts in dreams is an act of care and sustenance, tending to that which is lost and making it anew. The making of Bawden's work is also a devotional act that echoes the legend of the real castle's construction. It's said that the archangel Michael appears to the bishop in a series of dreams, urging him to build a sanctuary on the island of Mont Tombe. In this, the quiet sorrow and whimsy of *Inheritance* is tethered to collective histories and interconnected dreams. These are not merely fanciful imaginings, but gateways to understanding the past and grappling with grief.

Bawden's installation has its double in **Tim Silver's** sculpture on the other side of the partition wall, depicting two figures of compressed ash, fixed in a moment just before an embrace. They are monuments to lovers or companions whose bond remains unbroken by time or death, evoking those lost under ash from the eruption of Mt Vesuvius over Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy. In the wake of fires and floods ripping across the globe today, these figures are emblems of eternal rest, where struggle is eclipsed by stillness, and rupture makes way for the earthly dignity of decay.

And yet dreams are inevitably solitary places. Silver used the same model for both figures, suggesting that they may not be two individuals, but two sides of the self. Above them, a huge page is lined with cryptic cursive, recalling the technique of automatic writing often used to assess the subconscious. Titled *With the ink of a ghost*, Silver's drawing captures the impulse to record and order the chaotic flow of our thoughts, memories and emotions, as if the very act of remembering is inseparable from the fear of forgetting.

Justin Tredall's works often imagine memory and language as a branching, botanical kind of mapping, delicately propagating the names of contemporary artists, historical activists, rivers, dates, and train stations. Here and there connections appear and clusters emerge in flurries of free association. His work *Happenings* is a plane of serpentine lines, sparsely punctuated with names and mirroring the way information pulses through our consciousness. These lines look like divots on a mattress, the site where memories are made, remade, and sometimes forgotten through repetition and rest. The work also reads like a woozy microchip, planting the idea that memory is stored data that is recalled and accessed at will and at random.

Jan Guy's *Dream machine* insinuates that the brain and its dreaming centre is a big processing unit, firing chemicals and snapping synapses. Her ceramic tubes are materially interconnected, with the positive protrusions of one form plucked from the negative holes of another, stuffed with bound pillows and thread that pours out onto the floor. The sculptures threaten to begin breathing or churning. Their forms suggest the organic, complex throes of a dream, where objects morph and meaning fluctuates in unsettling ways. Atop an adjacent table, *Ntye's Blooms* is a cluster of ceramic elements that look like strange seed pods bursting with neural ribbons, alive with an almost sentient energy. Tangling and unfurling, these dream machines are not precise little circuit boards, but instead a throng of epiphanies and mysteries.

While Guy imagines the inner workings of dreams, **Julie Rrap** is content to observe from a distance. Her video installation *Remaking the World: Artists' Dreaming* depicts a row of her peers lying down in crisp white sheets, moving mountains with their minds. Her work posits that the act of sleeping and the act of creation are innately intertwined. Seeing the artists from above and sleeping side-by-side brings to mind Kanye West's infamous wax reincarnation of Vincent Desiderio's painting *Sleep*, substituting friends and artists with the rich and famous. Whether anonymous or parasocially unmistakable, these individuals are alike in dreaming. They are part of a shared dreamscape, tying together the intimate and often lonely act of creation with a larger, communal experience.

Madeleine Kelly's paintings synthesise the rational and the fantastical in a way that renders the familiar subtly strange. This blending does not position nature as subordinate or mechanised, but instead highlights the wonder and mystery of a simple encounter between a human and horse, or a tiger moth alighting on a pumpkin flower. They appear as puzzles, with an Escher-like, architectural quality to each composition, evoking something both grounded and otherworldly. These animals are not simply representations of nature; they are part of a mythic narrative that Kelly constructs, speaking to the natural world's hidden forces and the stories we project onto it.

The moth reappears as a brief flash in **Liam Garstang**'s video work *The Road*, seeming to flit through multiple works across the exhibition. While the artist probes blindly into the dark, we are thrust into the role of the dreamer, able to see pitch-black paddocks and deserted roads through the eerie green of night vision technology. Recalling military operations and the atmospheric dread of found-footage horror films, Garstang's video works embody the circular logic of nightmares. Either pursued or the pursuer in *Untitled (POV)*, we are locked in an endless and futile search, stalking through a first-person shooter game or waiting for the jump-scare. Only *The Fallow* breaks this tension, training its lens on two horses, eyes glinting a gothic green. After years on the fallow paddocks of Garstang's late grandfather's farm, these horses still have yet to be named, standing as emblems of the untamed regions of the mind where memories linger after they have been left behind or forgotten.

The darker parts of our subconscious are also present in **Audrey Newton**'s installation *Trying to Find Hard Evidence for Something That Isn't Solid*, which seems to hold contradictions on an even keel. Her stacked forms exude a childlike wonder, inviting you to reach or crawl through the perfect circle and be transported to a different place. At the same time, her pairing of pearls and rivulets of velvet contained within polished black mirrored surfaces are suggestive of the sexual ripples that echo through the subconscious. Pearls themselves are objects of contradiction — on the one hand luxurious and coveted, and on the other, the product of a natural revulsion, formed through the slow engulfing of an intruding body. The decaying twin of this black box sits underneath, with latex forming a blistered, protective layer over a glass cube, acting as an obscuring membrane that distorts, repulses and draws you in.

The concept of the black box is nestled throughout *Dreamz* a system with concealed inner workings, interpreted only through what goes in and what comes out the other side. It is buried in **David Haines**' diptych of a dream, which is part image, part scent, part text. Haines' work describes a vivid and shifting experience of smells and messengers from the afterlife. He recounts the presence of the dead amongst the living as almost unremarkable, something he "didn't question at all", inviting us to accept the mysterious inner logic of a dream. His description also draws our attention to an ethereal photograph of a bush landscape, grafted together with a square of heavily perfumed paper. He is haunted by the camera failing to capture Mt. Tomah in the distance, an immovable mountain that somehow slips beyond the camera's grasp. And yet each imperfect tool of remembrance is also a perfect reflection of the fugitive nature of dreams, where our senses are no longer bound by rules. — **Alanna Irwin, March 2025**