

review / TIM NEES

Aaron Paterson, Sarosh Mulla, and Marian Macken

Drawing room

TOI MOROKI CENTRE OF CONTEMPORARY
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INTERSTICES 21

Based on the premise that architects do not make buildings, they instead make drawings, at its simplest interpretation this exhibition presents architectural drawing practices that do not lead to building. Three installations that can loosely be categorised by the term “drawing” exist in space without designing space, drawings in their own right, drawings that exist purely for their own art. This premise has a reliance, whether intentionally or not, on the host space, the quality of space and light and atmosphere in the rooms of the building that support and frame the drawings on display. In this case, the CoCA Building in Christchurch—a Brutalist gem by architects Minson Henning Hansen & Dines recently restored with nearly all of its original spaces and rigorous details intact—becomes a strong silent-type character in the visitor’s experience of the exhibition, its success lying in the interaction between the two. CoCA’s boldly hewn architecture, its materiality and atmosphere, lends vigour and robustness to the no-less-bold installation on display.

I visited the exhibition on three separate occasions and with each visit my response was more or less the same. Which is to say there was no diminishment of my experience through familiarity. There were instead variations of surprise, exploration, puzzlement, and the partial unpicking that leads not to an understanding but to a personal interpretation that included cataloguing all of the things from past experience that the work reminded me of. On each occasion my admiration for the conceiving and executing of these alternative drawing practices was reinforced, and my enjoyment of the work oscillated between the sensual and the cerebral, from the experiential dance—light, sound, and movement that entertains and leads the visitor to explore the gallery—to the implied narrative—a story that seems to contain all the familiar tropes of film noir, yet cannot finally be pinned down. Throughout there is an assured handling of line and detail, of light and shadow. Though mainly shadow. Shadow in atmosphere and in narrative. Does it make sense to say there is an assured handling of ambiguity? In the exhibition catalogue, Fritha Powell succinctly writes: “I am an emerging idea; you, yourself have created a version of me as you travel and traverse the gallery.”

We the visitor, however, cannot help but think we make an unreliable interpreter, that if we were called upon to articulate our thoughts we would falter, for surely

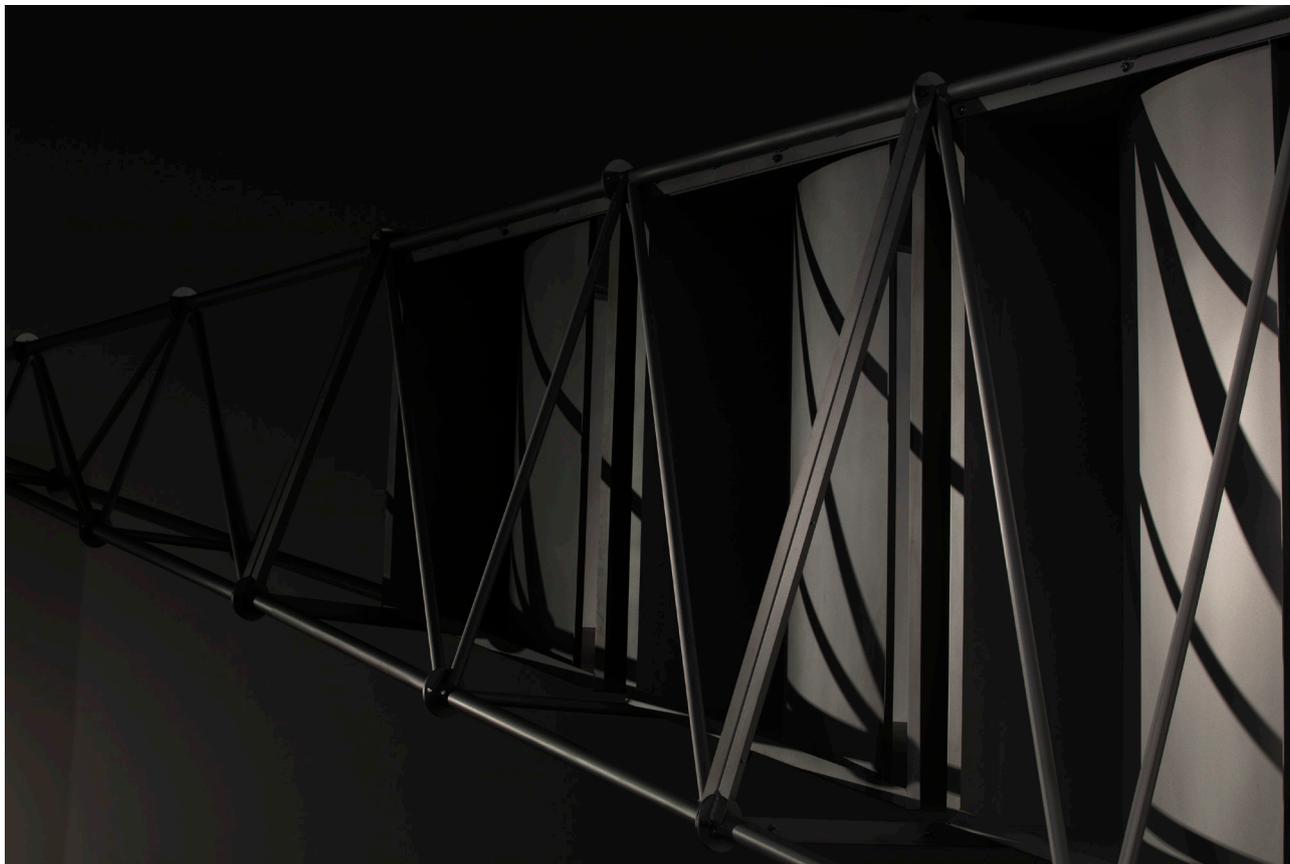


Fig. 1 *Drawing room*: Drawing machine. [Photograph by Simon Devitt (2020)]

there is an official version tethered to the drawings that will trump us. Anything we proffer will remain speculative. The anxiety of what we think we are supposed to think pushes what we actually think to the side and this is where the collaboration with the gallery's spaces becomes so deft, for the atmosphere arising from building and exhibition together is both fit and reassuring, prodding and comforting, emerging and confining ... in a good way. We can relax, enjoy, let go.

The largest and first gallery I enter after climbing the stairs has height and breadth and is almost misty with gloom. Particular lights flash and I hear a soft whirr along with the tinkling of upper register music, somehow watery, and because I'm looking through the darkness at a giant metal contraption that could be a piece of space junk, but which is moving, though moving slowly, I find the sounds otherworldly. The scale is important. A large arm (Fig. 1). Small wheels. And it is tethered. As it follows an arc across the room it inscribes, or imprints, a line. The wheels marking the floor, layer upon layer, back and forth. An impressive level of engineering to complete a simple task, perhaps, but it is not just engineering. It is a relic, a remnant, a prop. Which is why the shadow is so important, and the sound, and the points of light. The shadow is a cushion that encourages my mind to wander as I watch the pairs of wheels blind in their task. The atmosphere constructed quickly transports me to the lunar surface, to an abandoned oil field, to the perverseness of Archigram's *Walking Architecture*. This could be where Neil Armstrong and Ron Herron engage each other in conversation. The atmosphere resonates, though it could just be my mind, resonating, and the shadow thick in the room cloaks me with nostalgia.

I briefly wonder about Paterson, Mulla, and Macken's pretensions, whether they

see themselves as cutting edge artists or provocative set designers, though I realise that if they can combine all the qualities required to create memorable architecture and marry them ephemerally to an existing architectural space, and by so doing create a palpable murky energy as demonstrated in this exhibition, their skill as architects is unquestionable. Their ideas articulate. Their production values top shelf.

Attracted by light flickering in my peripheral vision, I turn and make my way to the smaller galleries fitted tightly behind the stair and beneath some mezzanine offices. My mind crouches as I leave the high space and enter the low. I discover a transparent screen with digital perspectives winding/unwinding. I circle around both sides, search for differences. I notice another screen with a headset and another drawing (Fig. 2). An assistant helps me put the headset on. I move, manipulate the images I see, and feel simultaneously expansive and claustrophobic, vertiginous. The images resemble the drawing beam. In VR, the past is still present. I search for differences but a cartesian grid holds it all together in a retro kind of way. I can still hear the soundtrack tinkling from the other room. I'm helpless to the creep of nostalgia; the works of Piranesi, Cedric Price, and Superstudio surface.

Fig. 2 *Drawing room*: Edge of shadow. [VR projection, photograph by John Collie (2020)]

In the final space, on the back wall, a film is screening (Fig. 3). An agitated woman paces through a commercial office of some kind. The props seem obvious yet



enigmatic, the action circuitous, the narrative open. The sound design emphasises the background sounds, heels clack, a plastic bottle drops to the floor. The camera zooms in too. I realise there are two different locations in the film, a kind of mirroring, a repetition, a circling. Everything is polished, elegant, unsettling. On the cusp. I'm sure I've seen an arthouse movie that looks like this and for not only that reason I'm impressed.

To call the exhibition “an alternative kind of architectural drawing” sidelines the other creative disciplines that have been engaged by its creators. Sound, sculpture, lighting, graphics, writing, film, and all of the art direction required for film—the ability and professionalism of the curators to bring all these things together is really quite astonishing. It is to their credit that placing their work in CoCA's spaces leads to neither subservience nor domination, but an appropriate pairing that makes the experience of the exhibition all the more stirring.



Fig. 3 *Penumbra*, short film, Brendan Donovan, Sarosh Mulla, and Aaron Paterson (2018). [Photograph by Simon Devitt (2020)]