Home Jaway

Over the past four years Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro have secured a string of traveling scholarships and overseas residencies that has allowed them to produce work from Sydney to Basel and from Japan to Nepal. Edward Colless tracked them down in Berlin and found a couple of nomads who admit to being just a bit homesick. Although for them, home is where the art is. Photography by Stephen Oxenbury.





Their vagabond, suitcase-bound way of life is all the more remarkable given the monumental ambition of their projects.

Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, Deceased Estate, 2004. Photographed by Christian Schnur, Lambda print, 125 x 161cm, edition of 10, installation of entire found detritus from artists warehouse courtesy the artists and gallery ARRY KELDOULLS SYDNEY

heir lifestyle, to many of us, is enviable. Since encountering each other in their last year of art school in the mid-1990s in Sydney, Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy have spent a large part of their professional careers on the

road. True, like many of us, they may have started off backpacking independently and doing piece work while travelling. That's not unusual. In the late '90s Healy hitchhiked around the UK, Iceland, China and Mongolia for eighteen months, hooking up with Cordeiro for six months during his year-long sojourn in Japan. But as an indicator of their highly successful – and, having officially begun in 2001, still young – collaboration, a host of travelling scholarships and studio residencies around the world have kept the duo on the move across continents for the past four to five years. The prestigious Helen Lempriere Travelling Arts Scholarship provided them with the opportunity to work throughout fourteen countries over a year, including staging an exhibition in Nepal. Now they're back in Berlin, on a Samstag scholarship.

And this vagabond, suitcase bound way of life is all the more remarkable given the monumental ambition of their projects: both the sheer size of the sculptures and also the scale of project management required to see each construction executed. It's not quite the sort of carefree and indulgently casual drifting associated with the hippie or bohemian leisure commonly granted to artists in the past, and which some artists - increasingly indistinguishable these days from Eurotrash tourists - still manage to enjoy. Instead, for Cordeiro and Healy travelling is a career necessity as they hunt for opportunities, sites and support. It's work - nice work, admittedly – and, while it might be sponsored to some extent, it's also risky and it's not entirely comfortable. Of course, the proliferation of international arts residency programs over the past decade or so has generated a population of subsidised career transients. The trend in urbane nomadism is a consequence of the globalised art market. At the upper end of the scale this may garner business class flights from one biennale to the next. In less luxurious circumstances it requires squatting in warehouses and digging through skips of hard rubbish for one's art materials.

What makes Cordeiro and Healy distinctive among this crowd is that they use their own nomadism for the subject as well as the substance of their art. This year, as an outcome of Healy's 2005 Australia Council residency at Berlin's Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, they disassembled a small and abandoned vintage 1960s caravan – which Healy had found parked in a suburb on the old border zone of former East and West Berlin - cutting it up with backhand and metal saws and stacking it into four identical rectangular piles on shipping palettes. Relocated to the Kunstlerhaus, Flatpack looks like a neat, postminimal installation. It seems to be a joke on **Don Judd's** minimalist boxes, reducing their pure gestalt form to a sandwich of detritus, or a confection of diverse materials like a dissected slab of layer cake. But the trailer trash of Flatpack has a poignant backstory. Until it was vacated (due to disrepair), this trailer home and its solitary occupant, an older woman, had barely budged from their parking spot in forty years. Think of the history that raged around this flimsy yet obstinate bit of shelter - think of it as a sort of defiant hermitage on a border crossing - and its artistic demolition feels like a desecration.

At a glance, the sculptural form of this pancake stack resembles the sedimentary layers of successive human occupation or industry that striate the cross section of an archaeological dig. But this is also, and literally, the housing of a single human life - an armature and relic - that's been surgically sectioned and compressed into the most economical mode of storage, trimmed to fit the palettes it sits on. Healy and Cordeiro liken this procedure to data compression, such as the jpeg format that allows complex visual information to be condensed or packed into simpler coded structures for transmission and then expanded. Back in 2003, with a team of 40 assistants, they carefully dismantled an entire Sydney suburban fibro bungalow that was scheduled for demolition and relocated its parts to the



harbourside Artspace gallery in Woolloomooloo. The impenetrably dense rectangular stack of planks, beams, metal sheets and bricks of *The Cordial Home Project* occupied the bare gallery space the way a massive sarcophagus squats in a sombre crypt, as if the matter of the house had been saved from disappearance and dispersal by being collapsed and compressed like a neutron star into its own tomb.

The jpeg provides a striking analogy for the sort of reduction that happens in both these cases, although the transport of the house and the caravan (along with the latter's ironic narrative of immobility) are along a one-way street. There is a trade off: to price their own work the artists had the house revalued by an estate agent who suggested that, while the materials were worth nothing, the site on which they sat as an artwork was worth almost a million dollars. But just as there's no value in buying such a work at that price, unless you're buying the land it occupies, there's no unpacking of this material that will return its original form. No return to form, and no redemption or resurrection. The original is decomposed and then recombined as a new value-added object but which, like the shredded human brain or nervous system in a cyborg, flickers with disconnected lingering sensations and spasmodic residual memories of its former life. If you believe in ghosts you may want to treat *The Cordial Home Project* and *Flatpack* with caution.

Perhaps with this sort of intuition in mind, Cordeiro and Healy's work has often drawn comparison with that of **Rachel Whiteread**, who is famous for her monumental casts of the empty interior space of domestic rooms. Whiteread used the doomed fabric of derelict buildings – walls, ceiling, floor

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This page: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *flatpack*, 2006. Entire caravan, euro pallets. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.

Oppostie page top and bottom: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *flatpack*, 2006. Entire caravan, euro pallets. COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELODUUS, SYDNEY.





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Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, Package Tour, 2003. Photographed by Liz Ham, Lambda print, 105 x 144cm, (framed), edition of 10. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.

- as formwork or moulds and then, when the cast was set, would flay this material from it like a dead skin or husk to reveal the ghostly negative of the space it had contained. However, the mute melancholy tone of these memorials to lost spaces, these fortifications of the void, is guite opposed to the exuberant humour with which Cordeiro and Healy displace and reconfigure their signs of transient occupation. Deceased Estate, for instance, is a pile of all the miscellaneous disused furniture, homewares and art materials that the artists found in a warehouse studio they squatted in, two years ago in Germany. True, the title invokes the solemn sentiment of custodial duty to an inheritance – even if that's the passing on of junk and litter from previous occupants. But tied up in a web of orange rope, this enormous cluster of dead leftovers is also a hilarious overstatement about good housekeeping and simultaneously, with a cruelly comic edge, is a caricature of the refugee family's bundle of possessions stacked on the back of a truck or cart in the form of a monstrous spiky seed pod conveying the genetic code of its owners. This is black comedy, and it's entwined in the ironic connotations of the caravan as well - on one hand as a luxury supplement to a comfortable middle class suburban household, and on the other identified with those who are dispossessed of homes or homelands: gypsies, circus troupes, the impoverished, exiled, expelled, the misfits. In a word, nomads.

But if nomadism is the fate of the outcast and the evicted, then there's no piety or homesickness in Cordeiro and Healy's image of it. Take the broadside joke of Package Tour, for Sydney's Sculpture by the Sea program of 2004, in which a centurion tank - its phallic gun barrel haughtily erect - takes up



residency on impossibly expensive real estate, and settles in with *ad hoc* home extensions of a verandah, backyard barbecue and garden plots. It would take an army to force this illegal occupant to leave the territory it has hijacked. And yet, the domestication of the tank is as disconcerting as the mysterious photos found in the ruins of Kabul showing that city's former rulers, the violently pious Taliban warriors, decked in flowers and make-up. This tank on the headland is an ambiguous thing. It may be an obsolete command post overrun by those it once subjugated ... or defended. It may be the result of squatters taking over a war relic left by an enemy in flight. It could be a hallucination. Or it might be a trap.

Keep in mind that this tank – like *The Cordial Home Project* – is in effect the nomad artists' cheeky invasion and occupation of prime real estate, at least for the duration of the show. Art offers Cordeiro and Healy a temporary home. "We are the wasp," says Healy, "that implants its eggs in a host insect." And Cordeiro adds, "Our art is about spaces of transit, where you cross between territories, or between life and death." Being this kind of artist is to find oneself inhabiting a false world, not quite real but not fully fantasy, and to find ways of living in that in-between state. Perhaps like the couple in the fake log cabin kit home Cordeiro and Healy installed in Sydney's Martin Plaza in 2003. Swathed in a sexual embrace, they seem to ignore the dead stares of the stuffed animals crowding around them, just as they don't notice our envious gaze in at them from the business of the street outside.

Works by Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy will appear in a group exhibition titled Strange Cargo at Newcastle Region Art Gallery from 20 October to 3 December, 2006

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This page: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *Tollgate*, 2004. 2 Giclee prints, 38 x 46cm, edition of 10. COURTESN THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.

Opposite page top and bottom: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, Maintenance, 2004. Photographed by Robert Firth, 3 Giclee prints, 71 x 94cm each, framed, edition of 10. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.





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