

Super Natural: Thoughts on The Foundry

By Kate Woodcroft

Caitlin Franzmann shares a studio at The Foundry with carpenters, street performers, a textile artist, a brick-maker, a priest, large trees, a wild horse, and many hundreds of bees. Located in a 19th century warehouse in Red Hill, Brisbane, The Foundry was once home to 'Artbusters', a public art company set up by artist John Underwood. In the 1980s, Artbusters was commissioned to produce 'Human Factor', a group of eighty-eight white figural sculptures for display throughout the Expo 88 site. These figures were conceived as broadly representative of 'everyday Australians'. They are literally white-washed and like many other nation-building creative projects they are a peaceful nursery rhyme¹ of white Australian life with shallow and limited representation of Indigenous people. Some of these figures are currently on permanent display around Brisbane's CBD and Southbank². Others have been sold to private collectors around Australia. At The Foundry today the remainder of these sculptures are in ruin.

In the first part of her film, *The Foundry*, Franzmann considers the intended and incidental symbolic life of these figures as they decay in the place of their making. A disembodied hand grips a snake emerging from the roots of a tree. The mirrored face of Janus, the Greek god of transitions is soon to be buried under the dust. A clergyman's hat fills with leaves. An anonymous hand reaches out toward the camera. The place is deserted but alive. The ngoanga (fig trees) cast leaves and shadows. A mirri (dingo) hybrid maps the place with sniffs and scrapes.

The sounds conjured and directed by artists Ross Manning and Dale Gorfinkel emphasise earthy and suspenseful rhythms. Manning sets off a spinning sine wave of wire that strikes a series of grandfather clock chimes and other found objects from the site. Gorfinkel controls a kind of bagpipe made using garden hose and a series of valves, producing the sound of deep vibratory releases of air. Like Franzmann, they seem to make chaotic, elemental phenomena sensible.

There are bees at work on a tray of honeycomb. They are ominous, productive and intensely collaborative. In British and Irish folklore of the 19th century bees are characterised as highly sensitive and censorious. They were thought to have a strong connection to the underworld and it was customary to 'tell the bees' of important incidents (births, deaths and marriages) to ensure their continued health and yield. That bees were the subject of veneration makes sense given it is commonly estimated that one third of our food is pollination dependent. By the grace of what other forces do we eat, drink, breathe, make, feel, hear?

The film proceeds into abstraction through the use of a vintage video mixer. Perhaps this is the fifth dimension of The Foundry, an exploratory portrait of what is beyond our perception. It is also a reflective surface that gives us time to consider the present or future. Worked into this section are visualisations of skulls, brains and firing synapses taken from David Suzuki's documentary, *The Brain: Our Universe Within* (1994). These shots suggest the layering and continuity of internal and external, past and future, terrestrial and extra-terrestrial.

The last scene shows four hooded figures turning a six-pointed cross. It is an 'Axis Mundi' or the 'navel of the world': a symbolic point of connection between earth, sky, and the four compass directions³. In its turning the cross also evokes eternal time-keeping, meditation and subconsciousness. Does this dark scene allege the increasing domination of humans over our environment? Or does it suggest the futility and insignificance of our life on earth? Or is it a psychoanalytic metaphor, suggesting the repressed horrors in our collective psyche?

The attention paid in *The Foundry* to the connections between history, neuroscience, the supernatural and the subconscious calls toward what is above and below and outside our control. The film represents forces rather than subjects. Perhaps in re-considering Expo 88 and the continued struggles wrought by dispossession and other forms of domination this re-orientation toward an economy of unwieldy forces might help guide us.

¹Pascoe, B. 2015. "Panara. The Grain Growers of Australia" In Long History, Deep Time: Deepening Histories of Place, edited by McGrath, A. and Jebb, 163-170. M.A. Canberra: ANU Press

²Some sculptures were also taken to Sydney to form the 'Great Australian Story Park'. For information about the sculptures in Brisbane see Foundation Expo 88 sculpture trail (<http://www.celebrate88.com/abouttrail.html>) and the Brisbane Poetry Map (<http://brisbanepoetrymap.com/>) for recent responses to some of these works.

³An Axis Mundi can be found in many spiritual traditions. It features heavily in shamanic practices and those with animist belief systems.



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