

The Rhizomatic Art of Kurt Brereton

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Orpheus Enters in Mangroves, mixed media and photographic projection studio installation, 2005

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“The wisdom of the plants: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else – with the wind, an animal, human beings ... Follow the plants: you start by delimiting a first line consisting of circles of convergence around successive singularities; then you see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish themselves, with new points located outside the limits and in other directions.”

(Deleuze & Guatarri, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 11)

Artist and teacher Kurt Brereton’s creative output grows like a wild ginger plant. He will stage a show of animations one moment, a performance the next, followed by an exhibition of paintings alongside a sculpture display. Branching off at another angle he produces a bilingual graphics and text book on Japan or Taiwan. His art may seem to be chaotic in format, yet it has a consistent thread or logic running throughout. It speaks of disappearances as much as presences. It does so, not in the way Warhol did, with his silk screen multiples referring to the disappearing original, nor as the Post-Object Conceptualists did drawing attention to the vanishing art object. Brereton’s art speaks of the disappearance of place – as it brings together time and space in a variety of specific cultural sites. In his various productions, this Australian coastal-dweller conjures up sublime beaches, wetlands, mangroves and escarpments.

Brereton shows them facing the stresses and strains of our current environmental crisis. Global warming, late-stage capitalist greed (our desire outweighing our respect for our surrounds), or an indifference to local ecologies all come in for scrutiny. Brereton’s focus is on his direct lived experiences in his own backyard. While it has a hefty measure of political

awareness and at times controversy emanating from it, Brereton's art is firmly against taking a polemical or high moral ground position. Yet clearly there is also a self-awareness of its own position within contemporary art history in both formal post-aesthetic and critical terms. Although anchored to its figurative depictions of natural forms, each image assemblage actively questions Modernist pictorial landscape traditions. In this sense, Brereton's various productions remain strongly conceptual. This is post-modern in the sense that these *art machines* are events (be they assemblages, paintings, videos, events, publications or performances) composed of a multiplicity of forces in motion that deliver up to us offerings about art as much as life.

Brereton's art-making practice does not stop at the aesthetic representation of natural life forms (from the estuarine littoral zone or Pacific Island reef), it is also about the way we make rhizomatic connections and interact with our surroundings. This creative methodology takes as its model the organic rhizome—that underground lateral-growing stem, often thickened and tuber-shaped, growth shooting from nodes. Brereton grew up on a sleepy beach on the far north coast of New South Wales amongst a host of various rhizomatic life forms be they forests of mangroves, stands of pandanus palms or armies of soldier crabs. Nothing moved in a straight line since all dramas took the advancing sideways route of the mud crab. Views were broken up by the falling diagonal fingers of the Pandanus tree's forked roots. Brereton likes to say that he didn't know what a tap root was until he hit Sydney to go to art school in the mid 1970s.

As a young artist, Brereton's exhibition career began in the early 1980s, when the Sydney art world, in which he was then actively involved, was gripped by an influx of international philosophies, among them the post-structural ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Brereton was instantly attracted to their writings, particularly *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Anti-Oedipus*, and he saw that their concept of performing 'rhizomatic' machines matched the way he was already operating artistically. Here was a dynamic model for creating that foregrounded the body as much as the mind. Brereton's fascination with art had always been concerned with the libidinal materiality of paint, mud, sand or water and how we grow from our productions. How our sense of being and ways of seeing *belong to country* as much as to imported ideas.

Deleuze and Guattari had brought the notion of the rhizome to the fore in order to question hierarchical information systems, and to propose a revolution based on this non-linear form of growth and political action. This struck such a strong chord in Brereton who as an artist was forced to forge his own crazy-pattern path through the various fundamentalist orders from the left and right. This need to question narrow conservative thinking continue even more so today he feels than back in the more liberal post-punk days of the early 1980s.

When Deleuze and Guattari spoke of the rhizome as a model for a new way of operating, they referred to it in 'organic' terms: the rhizome is a swarm of bees, rats, ants, weeds—with multiplicities and performances. A painting for Brereton is also a performance map of signs. Therefore each painting is also a rhizome in that a "map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification."

Brereton argues that by operating laterally (map like) across a range of analog and digital media, he is defying the usual conventions of orthodox art practice that prefers an artist to focus on one clearly marked line of endeavour – in a tap root fashion. Brereton performs not only across media and job descriptions, his rhizomatic approach decrees that within one so called ‘work’ (a term he dislikes since there is no discrete whole to be had) there might be two or three different media components at play. In a single ‘event’ or ‘outgrowth’ rather than ‘work’ then, one might expect to find things made by hand, alongside something which is digitally-produced. He might then use wood and metal side by side with spray paint or packaging cardboard from a rubbish bin. These ‘fragments’ are his attempt to mirror the second and third degree nature of his daily life. “We live nowadays on a variety of different ‘plateaux’ or planes in any given moment—all of which are connected by a mass of roots, leads, cables and lines across time and space.”

To avoid giving a false sense of heterogeneity, Brereton prefers to use various low-tech production methods. For instance, he makes a stamp from a lino-cut, any dumb object or a rapid cut paper stencil and then places it within a bigger painted image, thus breaking up the whole and puncturing the smooth seamless surface and the neat frame. “Stamps for me are mobile signs ... they are images that serve as mementos or souvenirs; they also make up an alphabet that I add to constantly. I have hundreds of them ... anything can become a stamp, even an idea. I like the printing and stamping process, it gives you a direct immediate graphic aspect. It instantly registers as a sign ... it is analogical or iconic and so second-degree in its abstractness.” Boxes of stamps lie around the studio like graphic thesaurus waiting to be drawn into some new play. Each box is a kind of “body or organs” that can perform various functions. As I look around Brereton’s studio I am reminded of a pictographic version of the old letterpress days of printing using cast lead metal characters.

Generating art by employing signs as role playing characters avoids the trap of delivering a one-sided singular view of the world. “Everybody has their own perspective, there are an infinite number of realities ... I am railing against vertical narrow thinking that tend towards monotheistic, universal and binary equations that always threaten to hammer us into simplistic outcomes.”

While Brereton has operated for over thirty years with the notion of a rhizomatic art practice but it wasn’t until his *Rhizomorphosis: The Morphology of Mangroves* touring exhibition (2001) that he overtly showcased the principle in a solo exhibition. While this exhibition engaged with the metaphor of the mangroves—its plant life, its geography and fauna — Brereton’s vision is certainly not limited by the Australian shores. While he may draw on themes of say the Illawarra region in which he lives today, his broader perspective has been a global one. A regular visitor to Taiwan, Korea, Thailand and Japan for more than a decade now, Brereton is currently Adjunct Professor at University of Technology, Sydney and University of the Sunshine Coast where he supervises international postgraduate creative arts students, mostly from Asia. Until recently, Brereton’s work was better known in Taiwan than in Australia. “In Australia I have tended to move fast while staying low to the ground”, Brereton laughs. “My art has not been commercially focused



Rhizophora (Against Straight Line Thinking), acrylic and coffee on paper, 90" x 60", 2004

which is understandable, given its lack of singularity. Although in the last few years I have produced smaller domestic-sized paintings that have been selling well through commercial galleries."

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Brereton also sees his academic life, primarily in multi-disciplinary creative arts, as a significant part of his overall social and cultural contribution. His connection to different cultures has a long and strong history, including teaching at Tranby Aboriginal College in Glebe during the mid 1980s and gaining his doctorate on the invention of the famous tourist site of Ayers Rock (as opposed to Uluru) as an advertising icon. In 1989 Brereton took academic leave and lived in Thailand and Indonesia conducting research into the politics of tourist imagery. In 2005, Brereton gained critical acclaim for his bilingual book *Hyper-Taiwan: Art, Design, Culture* in which we are taken on a scooter ride through the post-modern world of a country that is more virtual than actual.

In an attempt to follow Brereton's rhizomatic methodology in this brief introduction, I have snapped off various following *tubers* of his practice following exhibitions broadly connected with ecological concerns held over the last few years. The following paintings in this exhibition should be read as bulb-like productions that will surely lead us in strange new directions. Brereton's exhibitions reminds us that there is no beginning or end, only interruptions.

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Reference: Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p12