
Interview with David Boyce, a New-Zealand artist from Hong Kong

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By hongkongandme / March 15, 2014 / Artist, exhibition, Hong Kong, photography / Leave a comment

David Boyce is a Hong Kong based visual artist hailing from New Zealand. David completed an Honours Degree in History at Victoria University of Wellington. He has exhibited in New Zealand, Hong Kong, China and the USA. I meet him a few days before the opening of his exhibition 'From the Shoulders of Giants' held at Blindspot Gallery [1] in Hong Kong from 13 November to 21 December 2013. David Boyce tells Art Flow about photography, memory and how identity can inform one's work.



— David Boyce
Untitled 02: From
the Shoulders of
Giants, 2012 –
Pigment print, 45 x
30 cm – Edition of 8

Art Flow: Why did you choose photography as a medium?

David Boyce: It's not so much I chose photography. I think it chose me in a way. I joke that I'm a bit ADHD, which I am, a little bit, I think. I have always liked things being very immediate, and photography's perceived immediacy is what I think attracted me to it. And I say perceived deliberately, because it is really a perceived immediacy. It seduces you with the idea that things happen immediately, but it's like painting or drawing, it actually takes time to train yourself to use it properly.

I started taking photographs in the mid-seventies, when I was in my teens and it built up from there. When friends of mine were buying amplifiers and electric guitars and stuff like that, I was saving up to buy a good camera.

At the time I was involved in the punk scene in New Zealand, and as part of that a sort of filtered Dada, Fluxus movement that was seen then as avant-garde art. A lot of the people I knew, and would hang around with then, were also influenced by this. Photography went quite well with that. It wasn't painting, or drawing, or sculpture, it was something completely different, and more machine like in some ways. At the time I was also drawn into documentary work while also being really interested in the aesthetic of other things. So I suppose this sort of not having the patience for me to draw and paint is what took me into photography.

I read that in your work you look at identity, self-identity, memory and its perception.

I am really interested in memory. I'm not quite sure why. But possibly, or probably, because of my academic background. I did my degree in History. One of the things you learn when you study history is that there is no one true history. Histories are multi-faceted things and history depends on the observers who recorded the events and those who analyzed and interpreted them later. So everything is biased, filtered, and you have to learn how to read between and around those things. I also studied psychology and memory was also something I developed a strong interest in. There were two lecturers who were very involved in researching memory and did some very interesting experiments. They were investigating how memories can be manipulated and created.

There is recent research which points to memory being like a jpeg. A jpeg has a computer algorithm which compresses the image down by removing some information. And when you open it up again the same algorithm puts information in based on what colours, for example, are around. It extrapolates on what it thinks should be there. Memory apparently is somewhat similar in its function. So the question, as an artist, about what's real, what your mind has created and what's actually happened I find quite interesting.

There are experiments where people have implanted, for want of a better word, memories. I was involved at one university around a memory of being lost in a supermarket as a child. We were told to think about this as if it had happened to us. Weeks later we were asked if any of us had a memory about being lost in a supermarket. Then I remembered how when I was a little kid I got lost in the supermarket with my parents. And then you start to think back on things that you think remember and start questioning if they actually happened. Are memories actually recovered or are they created, or are they suggested? How is memory a social construct? I find this whole area interesting.

An earlier work I made, ... *a poorly remembered childhood* is about this and my memory of being a child growing up in Christchurch, a city which, physically and psychologically, doesn't really exist any longer in many ways since it suffered two severe earthquakes. The series was about my memories, (real or imagined), of being a child in the city. I went around whenever I visited and took photographs of things that had a resonance with me as something from my childhood. There is potentially more work for me to do on the project as some stage, but not at the moment. It's a bit kind of raw going back there, looking at a city that's not there anymore in so many ways.

So what about From the Shoulders of Giants?

Well, identity to me is very interesting. I come from New Zealand where the predominant culture is European, with growing influence from Maori and Pacific Islands culture. But I came to Hong Kong and went from being part of the majority to being part of the minority, which is a really interesting experience. I went from a culture where I understood everything, where, for example, I could read everything, to a culture with a different spoken and written language along with a whole raft of new and different social norms. So my identity as a person continues to change because of experience.

Also, and very important to me, is the fact that I'm very interested in my identity as an artist. I've also done collaborations with people in the past and I quite like doing collaborative works.

And collaboration has always been working in the same medium? With Hiram To for example?

With Hiram he had a definite, planned, concept he wanted to portray. So I worked with him to make that concept into a photograph. We worked through how it could be done and how we would do it. It was Hiram, Steffan who is also the person who designed my recent book, and myself. The three of us worked together to materialize the project.

And there is also the collaboration with Adrian Wong (shown in L.A, Hong Kong and Shanghai), that was probably the most collaborative thing I've ever done. It started off with an idea and then we both of us worked on it and at it. We had exchanges, 'disagreements' is not the right word.



— Adrian Wong's Troglodyte See The Light exhibition showing: 'Affective Portraits' by Adrian Wong with David Boyce



— David Boyce and Adrian Wong at Osage Gallery exhibition opening

Different points of view, directions.

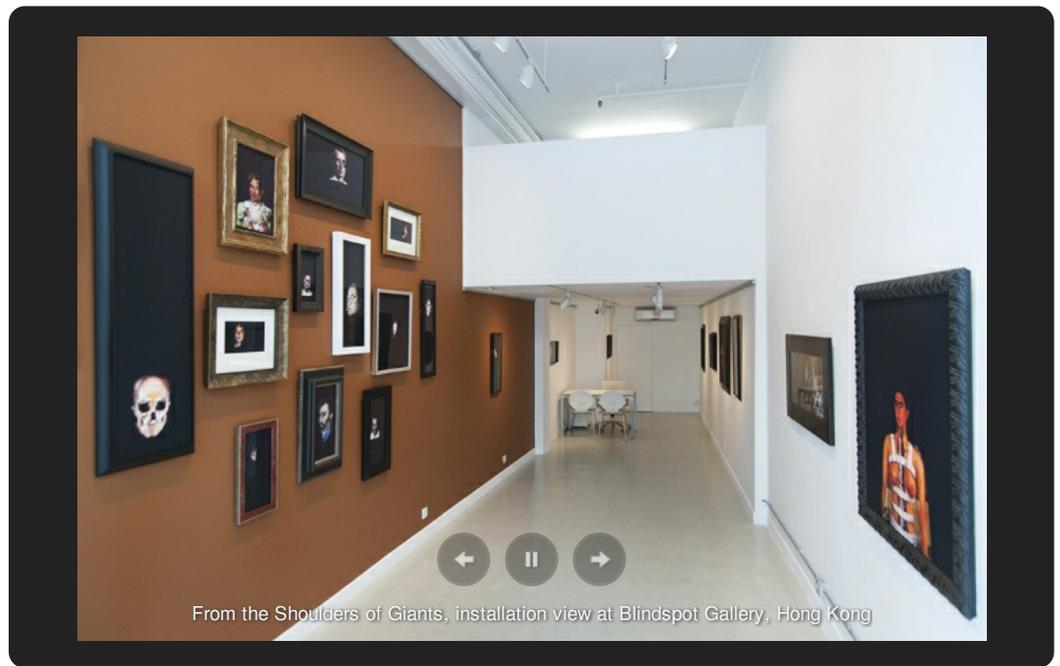
Yes, which, in the end, made the work a lot better because it made us both think about things. What I think what was really successful about that at the end of it is that sometimes it is hard to think what was my input and what was Adrian's input. This sort of thing of who came up with the idea of doing this or that. It came up quite organically.

It is more the discussion that brought this or that idea, it is not black and white. It comes from a dialogue.

And it came up with experimentation. We had ideas about doing some things which we worked on and then abandoned, but later maybe came back into other things. That was good.

Tell me more about the series From the Shoulder of Giants.

This new work looks at the influence that artists have on other artists. It also explores ideas about originality and copying. I am of the opinion that, really, nothing is truly original, that there are no completely original ideas. Everything builds off something that's gone beforehand. You can take ideas further or you can take ideas in a new direction, which some people would argue as being original. I am of the opinion that there has been nothing truly original in art since a cave man or a cave woman, research now suggests that cave paintings were made by women, blew pigment on their hand on the wall. It has all come about from there. So, everybody is building off from what has gone before.



You look at art history, you see somebody developing something from an idea and other people start developing that idea further and it goes on and goes on. And sometimes there are things which help that idea expand very quickly. Arguably the use of the camera obscura helped artists to work with perspective. There was a huge jump in the XVIth Century when painting went from being very flat to have a lot of depth and perspective. The argument is that people started using the Camera Obscura to make drawings, and that allowed them to develop perspective.

So, the work is about how we are all influenced and how we take that influence into ourselves and try and create something new or different from it.

It looks like to me you projected an image of a painting on you?

It could be!

It is photography but it looks like there are painting elements.

It involves a lot of things, projectors and make up and painting and photography, etchings and drawings and all sorts of things. Smoke and mirrors, magic and trickery. The work is pretty much what you see is what came out of the camera.

I don't talk a lot about the technique because I don't think the technique is an important part of the work. It was important to get it to where it is but it's not an important part of what the work is about. The final work for me is the important thing. But I do want to say a big thank you to the person who helped me realise these works, and that is Evangelo Costadimas.

Are all artists you've chosen European?

No, not at all. Coming as I do from New Zealand, a lot of the artists who have influenced me very early were European. I grew up with a very western facing society and culture. And some of the artists who are very important to me are artists that a lot of people wouldn't have heard of. They are New Zealand artists, and they influenced me very strongly when I started out, and some continue to do so. They are predominantly white and male. Unfortunately for the western artist the canons are predominantly white males.

But there are women in there and there are also some Japanese and Chinese artists. Japanese art was particularly interesting to me when I was younger. It was one of the few examples of art I got to see that wasn't European, or indigenous New Zealand art, Maori art, which was, and continues to be, quite interesting to me.

I come from a time when we were pretty much only exposed to the western art. As I got older I was exposed to, and learnt more about, other things, other schools of art. It is quite wonderful to see how much Maori and

Pacific Islands art is becoming part of the way New Zealand looks at itself and looks at its art. I really like how Maori and Pacific motifs and the concepts play a big part in a lot of contemporary New Zealand art.

There are also Chinese artists in there, South American artists, North American artists, European artists, all sorts of people who I admire, people who have affected me in one way or another or who were hammered into me when I was studying art at school.

How many works are there? Will there be more?

There are more than what's in the book and the show. I think there are now about 55 or 60 ones that I am happy with. I'm thinking about where I can take it next. Because part of the thing is sometimes, you are looking at works, the works I've used or either portraits or self-portraits or works that have been representational of that particular artist. There is the tradition, I suppose, of artists including a portrait of themselves in their own work. You see it a lot in older works where, for example, an artist has painted themselves into a crowd scene. That is something I have found very interesting. And is part of the background to these works.

It's interesting you are using portraits to re-create another self portrait. It is very subjective of the way we look and it is kind of part of you as well.

There are some people I would have loved to include in it but unfortunately from an aesthetic point of view the attempts to make an image didn't work. I consider myself to be a conceptual artist, but I am also very interested in the aesthetics of my work. I like things to look good. So there are some works I've done where the work is of an artist I particularly admire but it hasn't worked visually. It might be conceptually strong, but not visually, so I haven't included them. Maybe I will come across something, another self-portrait that works better, and I'll use that.

But I'm thinking about what I can do to extend the work.

In a way you could continue adding to the series or processing it in a different way.

I have thought about looking at iconographic works by artists and trying to do a similar thing with them. But unless I can find some way of doing it as another, more personally interesting take on them, I don't know if it's worth pushing that boat further out to sea. How many versions of *The Raft of the Medusa* do we want?

I know you have the residency coming up, are you thinking already of another project?

I'm playing around with a lot of ideas at the moment. For example, one idea that interests me is the whole process of cupping and the marks that it leaves on the people's skin. I thought this could be something interesting to do something with, purely from a visual point of view, but who knows if I will do anything with it.

I'm also interested in the abstraction of light, and I've been doing a project around that for a while now. It is a very ephemeral sort of thing, where I'm tweeting about the light that I see. Sometimes I do it once or twice a day, when I see something in the light that's interesting. Sometimes I might not do anything for a while.

Natural light?

It could be anything. If I see something that attracts my attention I'll tweet about it.

So, in relation to that, one of the things I'm going to be playing around with while I'm in Finland [*at the time of interview David was about to leave to Haukijärvi, Finland to do a residency*] is to make some cardboard boxes, kind of pinhole cameras really, but with various levels of opacity in them. I want to experiment with what light on a piece of film can do. This is one of the things I am thinking about at the moment.

There are other things as well, there are always. I have notebooks filled with ideas that I go back to. I tend to do work that is very research-based. Sometimes things develop quickly and sometimes slowly. Or sometimes they come quickly but they take a long time to complete like my childhood memories ones, the work about Christchurch. That idea came about very quickly but that work evolved over a period of six or seven years. Sometimes people tell me I think about things for too long before I do them but I do like to think about things. There is a wonderful zen quote about painting, something along the lines of 'You should consider your brushstrokes for a long time but execute them very quickly'.

I've been doing some work for a show in New Zealand. The show is called **Grottos, Shrines and Sacred**

Spaces [2]. The work I have made for this show is a departure from what I have done before in that it is a text based piece of work instead of being a photograph. I've ended up making an instruction about how to photograph the face of God without using a camera.

This is something I will be working on while I'm away, more text pieces. I'm influenced by the American artist Sol Lewitt who did pieces that were instructions on how to make wall drawings. When you bought one of his works you got a series of instructions that might say take a series of five colours, draw a straight line and make sure all the colours touch.

I was in New York just over a year ago, and I went to Dia Beacon. There was a group of Japanese researchers and artists who were starting to install a series of Sol LeWitt wall drawings. These works consist of a series of instructions on how to actually make the works. So, the instructions on how to make the work arguably are the work. When I went back recently the work had been finished. There were these rooms of quite large scale wall drawings which had been made from these instructions. Some might be different shapes to be repeated at different intervals, others, curves and different kinds of lines. The thing I like about the idea is they still leave much of the work up to the interpretation of whoever is making them. These people seemed very particular about lines being straight whereas if I had done it would have been more of a free hand. Which is what draws me to what will probably be one of my next projects, making works telling people how to make work because I would have been very interested to see what happens when somebody does something they're told to do.

Interview by Severine Levrel for Art Flow

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Stay in touch with David Boyce's work, explore his past projects and stay up to date with his upcoming projects by visiting his website: <http://davidboyce.net>

1 – Blindspot Gallery: <http://www.blindspotgallery.com> – 24-26A, Aberdeen Street, Central, Hong Kong

2 – Exhibition in New Zealand: *Grottos, Shrines and Sacred Spaces*, Thermostat Gallery, New Zealand – 7 & 8 December 2013- <http://www.thermostat.co.nz/exhibition/1031-2/>

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