On the day of my visit the rain seemed fitting, adding to the watery environment at the regenerated wetland just east of the town of Denmark in Western Australia. This is the site of the installation Ornitarium.

Ornitarium is one component of the work produced for an IASKA Speed – Art Out of Place residency project. The project was staged in collaboration with local organisations: Denmark Arts Council, Green Skills, and the Centre for Sustainable Living. In nine short weeks three artists from the Colorado artists’ collective M12 – Richard Saxton, David Wyrick and Kirsten Gerdes Stoltz – with the brief to make locally meaningful art, took up residence, engaged with the local community, researched local history, toured the area, selected a specific site and built a bird hide on it.

M12’s madat operandi varied from the standard ‘community workshop/regional’ residency model. While consulting with the local community, crucially the artists kept complete artistic control. Utilising fully the expertise of the guest artists, the community’s stories were filtered through the artists’ viewpoint, were distilled and re-articulated, bringing another voice to local stories.

Ornitarium, Saxton reveals, ‘is an invented wood that makes sense’. When broken into its two root concepts and translated, it reads ‘bird house’.

Spartan, poised and unpretentious, the ‘bird house’ engages a simpatico aesthetic union of materials and site. Constructed using borrowed tools and from locally sourced timber, the predominant feature of the structure is a double-layered, wooden-slatted wall that faces the water. A strength of this work is its attention to detail in construction: in the building of the wall; the apt selection of the size, colour and spacing of the wooden slats, with the edges of wood precisely aligned and carefully attached with countersunk screws – all convey a sense of care and respect for the work and the site.

Built on the edge of the winter waterline, the smell of the mud as I make my way towards the structure reiterates its in-between placement. Gaps amongst the slats and a cavity between the two faces give the viewer a strong sense of porosity; of a flow of elements through the wall.

Saxton states that an interest of the project is ‘... duality, [investigating] a balance between being set in nature and being itself ... letting the wetlands in to be part of the structure ... [an interest in] the built and the natural and where they come together’. The wooden wall is the obvious interface of water and land or, as the artist states, ‘... between a natural space and a social space’.

A continuum of permeability may be read in these qualities of the work, from the rigid into the amorphous, and through to the intangible. There is no roof. The structure is open to the sky, and slim horizontal windows offer a panoramic scene of the landscape, framing a transcendent view on this rainy day.

Behind the wall is a platform, on which four cubes, each carved from a single piece of Red Gum, have been positioned for seating. These entities, objects of handcrafted sculptural integrity, demand attention and admiration. But materials are not limited to the wooden nor techniques to the handcrafted. Refreshingly, the use of materials appears to be non-hierarchical. Beyond wood, the handrail is made from common metal pipe, the side walls from nylon shade-cloth attached with standard fixtures, and a galvanised metal box (for retaining data collected by visitors) is placed at the back of the plywood platform. These everyday commercial materials are all handled with equal integrity.

Inherent in such a work as Ornitarium are the artists’ interests in a dialogue with a perceptual and phenomenological process of seeing and experiencing in relation to the human body and the corresponding body of the sculpture. As this component of the project is handed over to the community, Saxton states:

The Ornitarium is designed with a number of functions immediately available: a space for looking at and studying birds; a gathering place during a bushwalk; a place to spend the night; a quiet spot for contemplation, a sandwich or a quick nap. It has been our intention to make a structure that is useful and adaptable over time so that it will fit the needs of the community and the wetlands site.

At the wetlands temporal extremes are modestly played out. Gnatled freshwater paperbarks, although only three metres tall, can be over seven hundred years old. In contrast, one can observe the annual cycles of water rising and receding, of birds hatching and migratory birds arriving and departing. And so it is, with tacit subtlety, Ornitarium reminds me that I am bound up, in time, with place and others in a merger of very complicated and very simple ways.

1. All quotes by Richard Saxton are taken from a talk given at the opening of M12: Ornitarium, 28 July 2011.

M12’s Ornitarium was installed at Wetlands Education Centre, Denmark WA, 28 July 2011. As one of the sixteen statewide IASKA Speed projects, components from Ornitarium and companion work produced specifically for exhibition will be part of a group exhibition, Speed: Art Out of Place, at the Fremantle Arts Centre, 4 February to 11 March 2012, a part of the visual arts program for the Perth International Festival 2012.


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