

Beyond the Great Divide: Curator's Essay

Nicholas Tsoutas

Luke Roberts has constantly pushed the boundaries of art beyond its limits as he has speculated critically and aesthetically across the complex questions of his Catholic upbringing different notions of spirituality and the profound basis of our very existence, as well the changing and controversial issues surrounding sexuality, identity, gender and queerness along with the political moral foundations of what is socially acceptable in relation to the philosophical foundations of who we are and what we are. 'Beyond the Great Divide' interrogates the things that separate us, and divide us into socially definable categories, but more significantly 'Beyond the Great Divide' is a metaphor for liberation and an existence beyond the liminal moments of being human and of humanity into a cosmos and a universality beyond materiality and beyond this planet. Luke Roberts the artist opens up possibilities for us to experience a reality and a knowledge outside ourselves.

'Beyond the Great Divide' for Luke Roberts suggests a profound awareness that something exists somewhere else, beyond this place and beyond this existence. For Luke that something else lay beyond Alpha, the place of his birth, and beyond Yeppoon and Rockhampton, the places of his early childhood and his early Catholic education. The 'beyond' represented a different desire and a different yearning, a different sexuality and a different universe, and speaks of leaving, and of a certain need to disconnect from those all too familiar places, and a certain need to reconnect elsewhere. That elsewhere was not singular, but multiple, which led him to Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Amsterdam, New York, Texas, and Rome (and more). No matter how deeply affected by where he came from, the place that he left, his curiosity exceeded that place. His desire for a deeper intrinsic knowledge enabled him to undertake a meditative albeit eccentric journey away from home. He recreated himself and affected his art along the way in a constantly evolving liminal space, that was always seductive whilst precarious and uncertain, but always thriving on ideas of difference and

revealing that knowledge is not necessarily bound to or limited to a particular place. It's almost as if Roberts deliberately located himself between spaces, and on the borders where things change or transition between one state of being into another state of being, without necessarily knowing or being sure what that other state of being was or how secure it left him. What he did know however was that something *must* exist on the other side, whether that side be found in different material and cultural conditions or indeed in a spiritual existence that did not rely upon anything of this Earth. His journey of displacement led him far from Alpha deep into the cosmos. In a way, Roberts' divine creation, Her Divine Holiness Pope Alice, functions as an interdimensional metaphor for a knowledge that exists somewhere else, perhaps infinite, beyond this time and perhaps all time, but definitely not from this Earth. Roberts for his part is her humble and faithful servant and ambassador, who connects Her Divine Holiness's cosmic knowledge to this planet, as curator of Her Divine Holiness's Cosmic Wunderkammer. Roberts has that uncanny ability that transcends or is free of fear. It reveals the processes of knowing that are connected with the ways of being that exceed the limits and conventions and borders of closed social and cultural as well as artistic paradigms and constructs. Sensing a world beyond itself, and beyond himself, and connecting with the mysteries of the cosmos provides Roberts with a spiritual energy derived from such knowledge. It informs his art, and gives meaning to his being inside the contemporary of contemporary art.

His leaving however can also be considered as a means of finding a way home. Departing and returning are inextricably linked, and interdependent; they are the two sides of the same coin, and cannot exist without each other. Place and displacement are part of the same narrative. Whilst the title, 'Beyond the Great Divide' clearly suggests an awareness of something other, something beyond this place, it's also an articulate reference for a perspective located from this place of departure, which in Roberts's case is Alpha, and the region around Rockhampton. This vantage point allowed Roberts the realisation of that need for and the profound value for the experiences of connection. This duality seems ever present throughout his work, and is foregrounded in this exhibition 'Beyond

the Great Divide,' as he has never broken with or rejected his past or the place he came from, but emphatically serves as a statement that he is neither confined or determined by it. Roberts' practice strongly suggests that he inhabits this duality with a strident but critical comfort, as it allows him to be present in his engagement and representation of his sense of place, whilst contextualising that sense by actively engaging and participating not only with a global dialogue on art but extends this duality beyond his material existence on this planet into spiritual questions around the infinity of the cosmos. For Roberts, it is like being both outside and inside at the same time. Being present in the narratives of Alpha and Central Queensland, whilst also engaging with the global outer, but extending that outer beyond this place, this globe, this universe and into spaceless space. 'These endless fields of gems' as he would have it, as if looking back at that place from the perspective of global otherness or indeed from the universe in outer space, Alpha can only appear very different, and that remains very evident in this exhibition. What's interesting of course is that Roberts' critical aesthetic problematises the place of his past by conceptually creating a more complex narrative that engages the place of his past by infusing it and including it with traces of the multiple places of his present. Roberts' interventions with place suggest an active engagement with place, into and with an expanded and expanding field of knowledge and experience even beyond the material representations of art. Roberts places himself at the very centre of troubled narratives such as is demonstrated in *The Spearing* (2009), by critically inverting the power relations of colonial history as an emphatic statement of decolonisation.

Her Divine Holiness, Pope Alice, did not visit Lake Galilee by accident. Roberts has constantly asserted and always given critical attention to Central Queensland in his practice; it's visible in his aesthetic, but not necessarily the aesthetic of conventional art history, and it's almost as if he is writing or exposing another subliminal history, as can be seen in the photographic diptych, *Apparition* (2009). The question of place is of critical importance to Roberts, but his understanding of place has changed significantly and radically for his understanding of place is not defined or measured by history or specific local

culture but more actively through a process of renewal derived through new and different ideas, different energies and more often than not higher extraterrestrial energies as a means of social engagement through his art. Departure or leaving for Roberts serves as a paradox for finding a way, his way home. This return perhaps suggests that he never left in the first place, despite the rumors, and his finding a way home in this exhibition reaffirms the significance of place in Roberts' art, but what we see is mediated through the different experiences and knowledge and a profound notion of expectations for a changed future. By confronting the 'Wicked Witches of the West' Roberts has created his own West. In the artworks *My West (Father and Son)* and *My West (Mother and Son)* (both 2009) he honours his family connections and celebrates his quest for an ideal Heartland, acknowledging as Dorothy appreciates in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), when clicking her red shoes together, 'There's no place like home.'

Interview with Luke Roberts conducted by Nicholas Tsoutas, May 2024

Nicholas Tsoutas: Perhaps home is a good place to begin with. The title of the exhibition, 'Beyond the Great Divide,' seems most appropriate. It speaks of home, and more specifically of your home in Alpha, as well as an awareness of otherness and what lies beyond. Why is this place important to you, and why does this place resonate so profoundly in your work? No matter where your life and art adventures have taken you, your art seems to suggest a constant return.

Luke Roberts: The words 'Beyond the Great Divide' have many meanings in the context of my exhibition title; firstly, locating my birthplace of Alpha, the Gateway to the Outback, in a fork of the Great Dividing Range in Central Western Queensland. The location of my birthplace and childhood experiences, the constraints and yearning that come from living in an isolated and regional location, and a sense of being marginalised, helped create a rich inner life, which later highlighted the considerable tension between the pressure to conform and a deep desire for liberation and freedom of thought.

Other meanings for the title are to do with longing and aspiration, both geographically and socially, as well as politically and religiously. 'Beyond the Great Divide' indicates there is a Great Divide and there is a Beyond.

My affections have often been very divided, and I've been involved in some very strong love-hate relationships with place and society, with politics and religion. Now I feel much more at peace with myself and the transforming world we live in. 'Beyond the Great Divide' speaks of the determined aim to rise above restrictions and take an aerial view beyond terrestrial divisions and into the spiritual realm.

Songs play a significant role for most of us in our aspirations, longings and personal history. *Tar and Cement* (1966), the first song I bought, was delivered on vinyl on what was known as a single in the 1960s. I bought this at Palings in East Street, Rockhampton, whilst at boarding school. The song sums up my life's journey to a degree and was prescient in some way: *'As I grew older / I had to roam far from my family / far from my home / Into the city where lives can be spent lost in the shadows of tar and cement / Into the city where I had my eye on all of the treasures that money can buy.'*

It spoke to me of the lure of the Eastern side of the Great Divide where one could have a career as an artist that wasn't possible otherwise on the western side of the Great Dividing Range in those days. To want to be an artist in the 1960s and 70s was a dream like flying to the moon. Even on the eastern side of the Range, very few could attain such dizzying heights. In an autobiographical sense the Jacques Brel song *My Childhood* (1967) locates me on the Western side of the Great Divide. Here I celebrate my childhood adventures dressed as a Native American, dreaming of summer: *'so I could play half-nude on a pony of gold / never taking a rest / I'd ride out to save / my warriors, my West.'*

I see myself as a trailblazer, a pioneer, like my ancestors. HDH Pope Alice assures me, 'Planet Earth is the cosmological equivalent of a provincial town.'

NT: Your art practice constantly references many international and Australian artists, for example Andy Warhol, Frida Kahlo, Diego Velazquez, Francisco Goya,

Francis Bacon, Renee Magritte, Tom Roberts, Harriet Jane Neville-Rolfe, Ian Fairweather and more feature in this exhibition. As you are aware the idea of appropriation heavily influenced Australian artists throughout the 1980s and into the 2000s, suggesting that Australian culture is a mimetic culture. Your practice however whilst on the surface appears to be consistent with the ideas of appropriation, your approach to referencing goes beyond appropriation into other critical spaces that deal with the idea of place, marginality and distance from perceived centres. It seems to me you are reclaiming energy by reversing the centre periphery debates from the perspective of the periphery. By acknowledging Alpha both geographically and spiritually as your creative centre, your art functions as if reorienting our gaze and re-empowering the idea of Alpha as your source of creative thinking.

LR: Yes, there is a mimetic aspect to Australian culture. We were told our output was inferior. We didn't have the great museums and collections we didn't have the great ancient histories attached to the landscape, at least not in the non-Indigenous world. Apart from Indigenous cultures we still are a young country and that has both advantages and disadvantages. My plan has been to turn my perceived disadvantages into advantages. At the same time there is the desire to connect to be involved, accepted, without selling one's soul and giving in to the dominant, imperial cultures. In some ways this gives a unique freedom of expression although you can only get so far without the walls coming down. The dominant culture holds all the cards regarding high visibility. My objective is to analyse and comment on the dominant culture and if that opens up avenues all fine and good, if it doesn't, I still have my work such as *Mars Rusting* (2018).

Caravaggio is a great example of what an artist can be up against. In *Medusa* (2013), I've exaggerated his version of *Medusa* (1597), which may have been a self-portrait. There is a cultural smugness that we are free of the Vatican and its Inquisition and Propaganda Machinery. The joke is we aren't. The media and cultural tzars and apparatchiks play the same power games these days. Rather than burn people alive, ridicule and Totsweigtaktik are used.

Warhol was allowed through the gates as he celebrated American culture in a way that hadn't been done before and there was a certain decadence that the powers-that-be wished to foster. America had become a dominant global force and its cultural influence could be weaponized.

Were we to roll over or make a stand, here 'camping out at the arse-end of the World'?

In some ways Australian culture could be considered a drag culture. We take on the identity of others to empower ourselves, to belong and to also criticise and analyse. We mimic to both learn from, and to distance ourselves from. We have been a bit of 'the Emperor's naked' kind of culture and yet we still keep imitating the dominant cultures and making our own versions of the model. One of my favourite expressions is that Australia is still making itself up. I enjoy, what to me is a pun on 'make-up' in this statement.

Cultural imperialism always has particular effects on the dominated. Underneath there is the yearning for liberation and the need to release resentment via humour and parody.

One could say I've colonised artworks and personas, making them my own, examining them, as part of analyzing myself and others whilst investigating cultural milestones through this means.

On stage at a convention at de Monfort University, in Leicester in the UK, dressed as Frida Kahlo, I asked the artist Orlan if she thought surgery was addictive. When the convenor Nicholas Zurbrugg translated my question into French, Orlan reacted as though she'd been insulted. David Medalla, a witness to the event, described my voice on this occasion as that of a **brazen** Australian housewife, thereby favourably comparing my Frida to Dame Edna Everage, a housewife superstar causing havoc in the UK at the time. I greatly admired Barry Humphries' part in dismantling the Cultural Cringe that the British Empire had imposed upon us here. He went to the Rome of the Empire (London) and held a mirror up to the audiences. His weapon was humour and his characters were terrifying to come in close contact with. His humour was withering and accurate.

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Uluru, Pope Alice chose it as her earthly heartland, at least that is where she 'touched down' long ago in Gondwanaland having bounced from Alice Springs. 'Be in this world, but not of it.' Be from that place but not of that place.

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Before I went to take up a residency at MoMA PS1 in New York in 1996, I wondered if the post-modern idea of the end of Centre and Periphery had reached that mega metropolis. A year later, before I returned home, Central Park was festooned with banners proclaiming, 'New York, The Centre of the World.' 9/11 may have put an end to that claim and broadened the playing field as we do inhabit a much-changed world now and a very different New York.

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We grew up here in Oz under the Cultural Cringe, whereby our cultural output was deemed inferior and a bland reflection of European culture in particular, until World War II, when the American cultural ascendancy occurred and not only did Coca-Cola become king but paintings of it became desirable and attracted hefty prices. It wasn't until the 1980s that Australia began to be recognised as a destination driven to a great degree by increased interest in Aboriginal culture and contemporary art and the movie *Crocodile Dundee* (1986). In 1984 I witnessed koala backpacks as fashion items in that Couturier's Zenith of High Fashion, Paris. Much to my surprise French youth yearned to visit Australia and wondered why I had left the Tourist Dreamland of Sun and Sand.

The last exhibition I installed in Amsterdam was titled 'Plan 9.' It was taken from that Golden Turkey film *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959), a second-rate Hollywood production by Ed Wood. Evil aliens attack Earth and set their terrible Plan 9 into action. As the aliens resurrect the dead of the Earth, the lives of the living are in danger.

We embraced the first-class second-rate films of John Waters as his Baltimore reminded us of our Brisbane in parts and we loved the maladroitness and

outrageousness of his kitschy, camp productions and were titillated by the appalling antics of Divine, all of which gave some substance to the idea of BrisVegas.

The lurid tell-all book *Hollywood Babylon* (1959) also drew our attention to Kenneth Anger and I'll never forget 'The Night Anger Came to Brisbane,' which was my title for the screening of his films at an inner city basement theatre in which Kenneth Anger himself was present. Later I made *Tilting at Waterfalls* (2012) in the Tivoli Gardens of the Villa d'Este outside Rome as a response to his *Eaux d'artifice* (1953).

We were made to feel second-rate, and we took it on, and to some extent that is still being imposed, often from within. We are shaking it off. Drag Queens may be seen as second-rate females. We aspired to be the first-rate of the second-rate. Kitsch, Camp, Trash were the books I sought after in the 1970s and Andy Warhol was the king of these. He was the pope of pop but also the 'canoniser' of these second-rate productions and conditions. He celebrated the previously uncelebrated. This is something of what I do in my own work, celebrate the previously uncelebrated.

My first major exhibition celebrated kitsch, camp, queer and the regional. An elaborate wall work installation consisting of plastic flowers, cheap wall vases, kewpie dolls and other mass-produced items hovering above boxes of SURF detergent was titled *The Birth of Venus at Yeppoon* (1982). The boxes had swans on them, one of which was black and a nod to Ern Malley. Had the Institute of Modern Art been located in Sydney or Melbourne this exhibition would have caused outrage in 1982. We [regional artists] can't compete as we are a sub-culture. We don't have the population. We don't have the media machinery behind us. We can't compete at that level, so we subvert.

NT: It is evident that your family is of crucial importance to you, as is evident in a number of works in this exhibition. Why does family inspire your imagination and influence the way you have included them into your practice?

LR: I am the prayer of my ancestors fully realised and largely agree with Billy Carson and his inspirer Bruce Lipton here in their research on epigenetic memory.ⁱ We all represent the answered prayers of our ancestors one way or another. We carry our ancestors within us. Family is precious, without them you have little grounding and history. Family is our first contact with other humans and forms the basis of our relationships. Family is the microcosm of the human macrocosm. We have epigenetic memories in our RNA or ribonucleic acid.ⁱⁱ

Breakfast, Alpha (2002) reminds me of the Sunday lunches, which were called dinner, that our grandparents shared with us when we visited their property. Granny warmed the plates on the big wood-fired range in the kitchen. We'd say grace and Grandad always carved the roast. Each of us sat to attention and was very mindful of our manners and only spoke if spoken to. Dinner was in the middle of the day and the evening meal was called tea or supper and still is. The old ways and values persist longer in the countryside or did until television and the internet invaded. Queensland of course is mostly countryside and therefore holds a special place in the national imagination. Its difference is something I've come to embrace rather than reject and coming to terms with this difference was part of the dynamic of going away to boarding school at a young age and then later travelling further afield.

NT: More particularly it seems that your family's inclusion is inclined towards a theatrical spectacle, and a certain performativity in how you staged, dressed them up and created a tableau, in an almost ritualistic fashion that crosses religious and cultural boundaries, as well as reminiscent of childlike imagination, or symbolic experiences that had and or recreated, as if it provides freedom to travel in your mind, and back and forth in time.

LR: What constitutes a family is being challenged these days and we are involved in an ongoing human drama, whether we like it or not. Most of us are familiar with the Shakespearean quote, 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players;' but do we think about it in any depth? This isn't to belittle the serious connections between individual family members or to simply say we are merely actors, but each of us has a role to play and we either write

that role for ourselves or it will be written for us. There is a precious unique bond within family, but there is also bondage if you don't stand up for yourself. Many people never escape the bondage of family and live their lives without ever taking risks and enjoying the freedom of self-empowerment.

We pay a price by being true to ourselves or attempting to discover who we are. Family can get in the way of our desires. In some ways we are all archetypes. We have our champions and our nemeses within family as in the greater world. We can create our own concept of family and of course create our own family or create a circle of close friends that may replace family. Each of us is more than meets the eye. Each of us has a secret inner life, yearnings and dreams. Each of us see each other in different ways and it can be quite sobering to hear how we are perceived by others. As Pope Alice says, 'You can choose your friends, but not your sisters.'

NT: We have had many conversations in developing 'Beyond the Great Divide', which is in itself a humorous title given the breadth of your concerns in this exhibition, and I have always found you to be genuinely interested in the idea of humour both in your art and in your life, sometimes overtly belly laughter funny and others darkly absurdly funny. The idea of the absurd, or at least absurdist notions of humor seem to inform both your work and your perception of what we mean by reality. Is this idea of humor a strategy for dealing with reality, and is it peculiar to Central Queensland as a means of undermining the spectacle of both regionality and philosophically of existence itself?

LR: perhaps I can begin with a song I wrote that speaks to your question:

The Night Pope Alice Came to Town

Paul the Sixth was then Rome's Resident –
A chico roll just cost you 30 cents
Queensland languished in the Lost and Found
On the night Pope Alice came to town.

Bowie's 'Starman' debuted on TV.
Another big event we had to see
But Ziggy Stardust couldn't steal her crown
It was the night Pope Alice came to town

Police were all about the place with guns and unmarked cars
Searchlights scanned the skies all night for Spiders here from Mars
The squeals from sirens went for miles around
On the night Her Popeness came to town.

Thousands came from all around bringing their high hopes
Then someone shouted, "Here She is now. Get behind the ropes!"
That's when the crowd let out this deafening sound
It was the night Pope Alice came to town.

On and on we sang into the night
Not lonesome now. Hell no! We'd seen the Light
How we loved that dazzling papal gown
On the night Pope Alice came to town

Luke had his picture taken with this Super Cosmic Star
He said, "She's sure a humble one though coming here from Mars."
The effect upon our lives was quite profound
It ain't often that Pope Alice comes to town.

Pope Alice signed her autograph, "To Luke My Biggest Fan"
And let him get acquainted with her Cosmic Cowboy Band
His whole life spun round then upside down
On the night Pope Alice came to town

© Luke Roberts

If you wish to make a memorable point, humor is a quick way to get to the nub of the matter, to the core, bring down to the essence. Humor can cut through serious drama and make light of a situation. If used unwisely it can attract danger. There are some very dangerous people who don't like being made fun of.

So, it's advisable to assess the situation and use humor with caution and intelligence. If the world is a stage as Shakespeare stated, then the stage we are on is part of a movie set, so make sure you've chosen a role in a comedy not in a horror show.

To a great degree I feel we are involved in a Cosmic Joke. When we laugh we are in closer contact with the Divine. Laughter is mysterious. My Wunderkammer work in Perspecta 1991 brought a new phenomenon into the Art Gallery of New South Wales: peals of laughter. I hadn't witnessed this before. Art galleries are, or at least were, somewhat like churches, you are respectful and don't laugh or talk out loud. My installation *The Voyage Within the Wonderful Continues...* was the conversation subject of many dinner parties in Sydney that year.

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In *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), Aldous Huxley stated 'If most of us remain ignorant of ourselves, it is because self-knowledge is painful, and we prefer the pleasures of illusion.' The Chinese say this century is 'the Century of the Waking Up of the Soul.'

Who are we? Where have we come from? Where are we going? Knowledge of ourselves will teach us the answers. We come from Source yet feel we are in exile. Within traditional and contemporary fields of higher calling, distortion, dogma, and elitism are still so pervasive, but the Truth is being unveiled.

Pope Alice represents a unifying cosmographic paradigm, a repository of an impressive body of information regarding the true origins of humanity and our hidden destiny.

A covenant was made a long time ago in 'a special pre-existent place.' We are on the threshold of the fulfillment of this covenant and that special place is known to the Maya as Hunab Ku, to the Ancient Egyptians as Ku, and to the Lakota as Pe'Sla. The Dorothy in each of us recognises this place as the Emerald City of Oz, the heavenly Tula...Tara... HOME.

We need to prepare for a new level of revelation, where we shall have direct, physical, consensual, and on-going contact with pro-human higher intelligence. They may be Extra-, Meta- or Ultra-terrestrial; a Gnosis in the truest sense.

NT: Earlier you mentioned that Pope Alice has stated that 'planet earth is the cosmological equivalent of a provincial town,' to question the narrative, and further her Divine Holiness has claimed that 'we don't live in the world we think we live in.' The implication here is that we exist both outside of this planet and outside of ourselves, particularly in the context of how we perceive or imagine ourselves in the bigger scheme of things in this universe. Ironically, you were born in Alpha, a small provincial town in central western Queensland. You were brought up a Catholic, educated in a Catholic convent school, and Catholicism still means a great deal to you particularly the rituals, but over the years your attitude towards Catholicism has transformed and transitioned into a complex understanding of who we are, where we have come from and of the very notion of existence itself. You seem to be constantly questioning the narrative, almost subversively undermining everything, every structure, from government to sexual identity to the authority of the church. Whilst religion have always been central in your life, the idea of belief beyond the constraints of structured religion has informed and influenced your art beyond its limitations and seems to suggest an extra-terrestrial existence, and life beyond the provincialism of this planet. Can you speak a little about your spiritual concerns and how your spiritual beliefs impact upon your art and your views on humanity?

LR: Yes, as Pope Alice advises, 'question everything.' Facts are not carved in stone; they are simply assumptions about the nature of reality that many people accept as fact. Rather than simply dismiss ideas because they challenged what I thought I knew, about the nature of reality, my questions created enough reasonable doubt regarding mainstream reality interpretations that I could consider ideas in a more objective framework.

In the 1970s there was much talk of what was disappearing from the Earth, especially regarding tribal societies and communities. I was a very proud and devoted Catholic and the religion was being reconsidered at the highest level via

the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council. Its ancient ways were changing, and its redacted history was being questioned. The religion that had fascinated me and held me in its thrall was falling apart in particular ways. In this regard I could understand what it was like to lose one's cultural roots and identity.

I longed to visit Rome or even attend a High Mass in a large city. We had marvelous ceremonies, ritual, magnificent vestments, orders of priests and nuns, monks and friars, people who had dedicated their lives to God. The universal language was Latin, and you could travel the world and be united with the locals via the Latin Mass. Catholic buildings had an architectural integrity that invoked awe, historical connection and a sense of security and protection. The religion was rich and inspirational and better than Hollywood in many ways, as it was real and genuine.

It took Pope Alice to place the imperial history and nature of the Church succinctly in words for me: 'It's not so much that the Roman Empire became Christian (read Roman Catholic), but rather that Christianity became the Roman Empire.' Pope Alice for her part refers to the Popes of Rome as Caesars.

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Puberty is an awakening for each of us and it happened far too young in my body and mind. I was eleven and still at primary school, so from that point onwards I began the long painful journey of freeing myself from this ancient construct, the Church, that was tearing me apart. The Church was also tearing itself apart. My puberty occurred just after the Second Vatican Council, which had a devastating effect on Roman Catholicism. Priests and nuns left the Church in droves, and it has never been the same since. Throughout my high school years one change after another was instituted. Whilst I welcomed many of them there was a great sadness around the sense of loss that came with a lot of these innovations. In many ways the Church was being demystified and a type of iconoclasm was taking place. I was also aware that perhaps I was holding on to trinkets and the real truth was on a higher level.

It took many years, decades, to reach a sense of calm and inner peace. One great intervention was encountering *Chariots of the Gods* (1968) in the early 1970s. Another was separating from Australia and living in self-imposed exile in Europe for four years in the 1980s. Another was returning and feeling quite lost before living in New York City for a year in the late 1990s, then later encountering the Raëlian Movement in 2001. In 2012 I was the Australian Scholar at the British School at Rome allowing fulfilment of the childhood dream of contact with the Vatican. However, the greatest intervention of all, to date, was in 2018 to finally free myself from religions and belief systems and take complete responsibility for my life. Being able to research freely and not be held back by dogma is a great liberation.

There are many belief systems and religions in this world; even atheism is a belief system or set of systems. Mainstream Science has become a religion unfortunately, paid for by the mega corporations to achieve particular lucrative goals, and cognitive dissonance is rampant. 'Trust the science,' has become the tedious mantra of a very questionable faith in mainstream science.

NT: In our many discussions you have constantly referred to the importance of the moving image, as in film and the televisual, from the experimental to the avant-garde. It has been of great interest to you and has influenced your practice. You have mentioned a diverse and often eclectic range of films, including Andy Warhol, Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini, Ken Russell, Kenneth Anger, Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), Pier Paolo Pasolini, Australian classics like the chilling *Wake in Fright* (1971), and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1959), and they all seem to inform and are present in some form in your art.

LR: We all stand on the shoulders of giants. Western Culture in its greatest expression seemed so far away, remote, from where I grew up, where I was standing. These directors all seemed like magicians and the journey to where they were seemed impossible. I was drawn to the more avant-garde works, those that exhibited a more exaggerated view. I was drawn to Warhol and Federico Fellini without fully realising they were from Catholic backgrounds. Something about their work resonated with me. Fellini's *Roma* (1972) had a greater effect

on my work than Andy Warhol's *Trash* (1970) or John Waters' *Female Trouble* (1974) but something about the demi-monde Warhol and Waters cast light on connected with my own world at the time and obviously many felt the same connection.

Don't Look Now, *Wake in Fright*, and *Look Back in Anger* are the titles of several works I've made since the late 1970s. Using the titles of three well-known creative works I feel I've described the human journey in all its absurdity, up until now. For me it's a dig at the Mainstream Narrative, which is currently unravelling big time and will leave many people shuddering.

The exaggerated masculinity graphically exhibited in *Wake in Fright* elevated brawling and drinking to excess as worthy pursuits. There was no humor present but a dark absurdity. I had a fear of drunken aggressive men or just male aggression in general, there is something deeply suppressed about their behaviour. I think of Barbara Kruger's dictum, 'You construct elaborate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men.' I avoided public bars, which in the earlier days were the exclusive domain of men. Women drank in the beer gardens.

NT: Film and the camera seems to me a big part of your creative consciousness and your artistic vernacular, and an important feature of your work. What is it in particular that interests you about film, or the movies and how do you configure the idea of film as an important aspect of your artwork?

LR: Film is storytelling and how we construct our view of who we are and the time we live in. It took a long time for me to realise how we were being manipulated by film and how it's necessary to tell our own stories and take control of the means of production so to speak. I'm aware of the fantasy world that film represents and manufactures and that is also part of the attraction. You can reach broader audiences via film. The Australian film industry was revived in the 1970s. The output was rather disturbing for me at the time, embarrassing even. However, I've come to appreciate the accurate grimness of *Wake in Fright* and the genius of *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972). Australia has come into its own and punches above its weight in the film world now.

NT: You have also stated that you have been 'photographed therefore I am' (I think that's the correct quote from my notes...).

LR: Yes, I felt a great need to be photographed and to photograph. There was a significant side of me that felt invisible. I felt my life was bleeding away and my projects and ideas, my interests and research would go unrecognized, and I'd be unfulfilled as a person. A photograph is evidence. You can say what you like about a past event and people will pay some attention. Show them a photograph and suddenly what you are saying comes to life. From my perspective I don't have enough photographs to prove what I did, and many have been lost. My story is one of the billions of survivor stories. The resistance to what I do is ongoing. However, if there is any value in it, it will have an effect. If not, it's not meant to be. I'm philosophical about it these days.

In the 1970s I started using the term photographic performance. To this day I'm unaware of anybody else using it that early. I see the photographic performances I make as cinematographic, stills from movies, in which I take on many of the roles; main actor, art director, costume, and makeup. There is a relationship, a trust, with the photographer that the lighting and framing will be as discussed. Unlike many artists using photographers, I give a credit as part of the work and describe the role as 'Camera.' At this stage I don't list the other roles apart from fellow performers involved.

The *Alice Jitterbug: Transformer* photographs (1977) was a major early work and captured Alice at the peak of her beauty and public appearances. Decades later an aged floozy, claiming to be the famous Alice Jitterbug, was discovered out West serving *At the Bar of the Pub with No Beer* (2009).

The collaborations with Richard Bell were a great example of the dialogue I have with some of my Indigenous artist friends and their desire to close the gaps in our troubled histories. In the series of images such as *The Spearing* I'm inverting the power relationship. Richard was very gracious in lending his image and reputation to these works and the photoshoot produced some very powerful and memorable images. The alchemy that took place was palpable, and serendipitous elements came into play, which often occurs via the magic of photography.

During the AlphaStation/Alphaville project I was looking at creating classic, memorable images and monumentalising the West I grew up in, giving it a resonance and at times an eroticism to inspire and ennoble. *Apparition* is a diptych that encapsulates some of the mystery of the bush and the freedom of being in the wide-open spaces of the land. There is a charged religiosity to this set of images as well and a celebration of the ancient connection between humans and horses.

My family had a great respect for photography, but as the family grew, there was not necessarily the money or time for it. We recognised our ancestors though photography and had little record of them. Both sides of the family had experienced great photographic losses there. The 1950 Alpha flood took away many and only a box of elaborate frames remained in the shed. On Mum's side of the family there was the story of an in-law throwing the family portraits down the well at the ancestral home in Springsure.

NT: You have made Super 8 movies as well as many video artworks.

LR: Yes, I was desperate to make films. They were even more expensive than photography, so photography was a kind of compensation. I think it all grew out of a need to be recognised, to be understood. It was not a case of narcissism as some might have it or self-absorption. It was the proverbial search for visibility, identity, and connection with like-minded others. Most of all it was the universal desire to ascend our earthly condition and mushroom as an individual.

Much like my photographic performance work my films were made on the cheap with very little supporting team or none; simply me and the camera person. I did everything except operate the camera. Even so I did work the camera at times such as in *Living Arthur Street On* (1983). Some of the films for example the 'Sailing to Byzantium' series taken in Rome in 2012 were simply me holding the camera and spinning. Generally speaking, I've done all the editing up until the latest works documenting Pope Alice's epic Dark Mofu appearances.

Andy Warhol showed me that you could work with low-cost cheap productions and have them accepted as artworks. This was a freedom that assisted my

progress and encouraged my output. Nonetheless, I haven't made the number of films I'd planned and I've yet to make a feature film.

NT: And you have staged many private screenings of films that interest you.

LR: Yes, I appreciate the communal bonding of sharing film experiences. In Alpha as a child, I staged many elaborate games based on and inspired by the movies with my brothers and sisters and friends. These were mostly Cowboy and Indian epics, but there were Roman sagas on occasion. I made a lot of the costumes and weapons, and we had a lot of fun. Another gathering would be of an evening in our home yard with some of our cousins from across the road and maybe children of friends visiting our parents for cards or such. During these evenings I'd tell ghost stories and frighten the life out of my listeners, who'd be back the very next evening begging for more. Happily, we didn't have television and were therefore forced upon our own devices and made our own fun. Whilst I may have wished we had television like in the big cities, as an adult I understand just what a blessing it was to be able to gather and tell stories under the stars.

NT: How and when did you first become exposed or introduced to cinema and what was it about the idea of film that captured your imagination?

LR: The movie theatre in our town played a great part in my worldview. As a child I thought they were real and the people lived behind the screen. The fantasy world of film influenced my artwork in a dreamlike way and encouraged me to bring many elements together to tell a story. My painting of Mary MacKillop (*Mother Mary MacKillop Galloping Past the Alpha Convent...* 1994), sums up many of these influences on my art practice. Firstly, the religious icon and its sense of transcendence and aspiration. Mary's horse came not only from a story I heard about her horsemanship, but also the Westerns and the winged red horse on the Mobil sign above the bowsers outside the café in the main street. Sitting side-saddle was the feminine way to ride and memorably portrayed in Sydney Nolan's painting of Steve Hart from 1947. The writing at the bottom came from my interest in the work of Frida Kahlo and Colin McCahon, as well as the tombstones of the cemetery and the subtitles of foreign films.

During 2008-2010 I journeyed back home to Alpha with photographer John Elliott to revisit my childhood haunts and memories and involve my family in my art practice. This was the hugely significant AlphaStation/Alphaville project of which, to this day, many great images remain unseen by the public. My 'AlphaStation/Alphaville' show at Institute of Modern Art (2010-2011) and monograph (2012) of the same name established this project in the mainstream and opened up greater knowledge of my work and connection to place.

The title draws together Alpha, my birthplace, the first letter in the Greek Alphabet, Alpha Centauri; Harriet Jane Neville-Rolfe's visit to Alpha Station and the railway that established Alpha in the 1800s; the French New Wave science fiction neo-noir film *Alphaville* by Jean-Luc Godard (1965); plus a nod to the band of the same name with songs *Forever Young* and *Big in Japan* (both 1984).

We've spoken of the influence on my work by Japanese culture and my use of Chinese brushes as both instruments of writing and painting. As a teenager I made many Japanese traditional style dolls and had Japanese pen friends. At a young age I dressed my sisters in kimono. Kabuki and butoh have played a role in my performance work and affected the styling of Pope Alice appearances.

My childhood references to Japan were just twenty years after World War II and raised a few eyebrows. There were concerted diplomatic efforts to restore the dignity of the Japanese and the world was being flooded with Japanese kitsch, cheap decorative items and autos. For a while Japan had a name for being the manufacturer of items lacking in quality, something like the manufacturing image China has today.

My worldview from a young age was a wide worldview. I looked outwards and aspired to experiencing as much of the wonders of the world that I could. Despite appearances, for many years as an adult, a fear of the unknown held me back and like many Australians at the time I had to experience the greater world via magazines, television and movies. Thankfully, that was to change.

NT: Thank you for being so candid. In closing Luke, this has been a wide-ranging discussion that has covered a lot of ground around your life and your art. Is there

anything else you would like to add particularly in relation to the idea of place and in the context of your history within that place.

LR: There's so much more that I could say but given the limitations of this publication I feel it important to finish with the words of a song I wrote about an historic event connected to my own family in Central Queensland. It gives further depth of background to my own story and speaks about my relationship to my own history on this land and the way we are all still dealing with the trauma of the clash of cultures that has taken place here and our continuing challenges to properly reconcile with each other:

Cullin-la-ringo

Eigh'teen-sixty-one saw a family of Wills from the South
Come up with their horses and herds to the hot Frontier's mouth
Wagons fully loaded and bound up for glory
Reached Capricorn's vivid skies
In days of arriving here nineteen of them were to die
Horatio Spencer they're killing your families below
The Wills, Mannions, Bakers and so
The nineteen of Cullin-la-ringo

Traditional owners lived high up on Great Virgin Rock
Black eyes of Snake Range grew wide with the shock of sheep flocks
Hooves crossing over a land never broken
Wading through grasses waist high
Following rams, ewes and lambs in biblical tides
Horatio Spencer your dreams of fraternity sown
Queensland's awareness has grown
After Cullin-la-ringo

Revenge is a low common urge in all humans we know
Revenge followed swift on the heels of the massacre's blows
The Comet and Dawson were searched to their reaches
Native Police headed West

From the heart of the colony rose cries of fearful unrest
Hey, Horatio Spencer, they killed all the blacks you had known
Queensland's compassion has grown
After Cullin-la-ringo

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ⁱ Youtube channel 4bidden Knowledge, *Anunnaki: Ancient Secrets Revealed by Billy Carson*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3ZYHLyBqAE>

ⁱⁱ *Bruce Lipton Explains Epigenetics*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNvEAKZSBEU>