

Title

Mashup Painting and Liquid Modern Consumerism: Engagement through the Street, Impact through the Storefront

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to produce a series of paintings and exegetical writing that uses mashup and retrosapes to critique and comprehend consumerism in the digital age. There is a lack of meaning in contemporary life in our post-global financial crisis (GFC) digital age. Consumerism fills the void created by this lack of meaning as it becomes incessant unfulfilled desire. Philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's term 'liquid life' provides a starting point to research this contemporary human condition: the search for meaning through consumption, and subsequent unfulfilled desire. This research also draws upon marketing strategies such as retrosapes (an aspect of retrobranding) in visualising 21st century consumer landscape. In this research mashup concepts and method will be used to reflect desire, consumerism and retrosapes.

Theories that inform the research are drawn from Bauman, psychologist Jacques Lacan, and consumer culture theorists such as Craig Thompson. This practice-led research project will use expanded painting mashup as an embodied approach to critique consumerism. For the purposes of this research Mashup is defined as a creation using material from two or more disparate sources, and expanded painting is defined as that which uses complementary mediums with painting as the primary body of work. This research connects painting in post-GFC diaspora to the art historical framework of 1950's and 1980's pop art movements, as well as the evolution of the term mashup in the visual arts. In order to reflect and comment upon the effect of consumerism on our physical and subjective landscapes, source material called 'retrosapes' will be defined and employed.

Biography

Laura Mitchell

Mitchell is a U.S.-Australian contemporary artist and PhD Candidate at Edith Cowan University, WA. A member of A.I.R. Gallery NYC and Artsource, WA, she also founded the artists collective Destabilising Walls which received DLGSC-WA support for an inaugural exhibition and forum at PS Artspace, WA. Upcoming exhibitions and residencies include Fringe World Festival 2020 at Spectrum Project Space-ECU, Gallery 25-ECU, and Nyistor Gallery, WA.

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Keywords: Mashup, Painting, Consumerism, Retrosapes, Liquid modernity

Introduction, background and research questions

The title phrase engagement in the street, impact through the storefront, aligns the 2019 ACUADS conference focus with my current PhD research project. First, a synopsis of this practice-led PhD project is provided in order to link the project to the conference topics of impact and engagement. This PhD practice-led visual arts research uses mashup as a method in painting to critique and comprehend consumerism in post-Global Financial Crisis (post-GFC) times (Graw, 2015; Stakemeier, 2015), and the impact of post-GFC consumerism on place, space and collective memory. Among the research questions for the PhD, this paper will focus upon research question 1a. (Figure 1).

1. In what ways can practice-led research, through expanded paint media, mashup and retrosapes critique and comprehend consumerism?
 - a. How has the desire to consume in post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) diaspora, been defined within selected theories and concepts?
 - b. How do these theories contribute depth of understanding of 1960's and 1980's pop art and its evolution into mashup in post-GFC painting?



Figure 1: Mitchell, Laura. (2019). *Research questions and street-storefront-studio experiment*. [graphite on rice paper, aerosol on rendered building facade].

The research is fuelled by an auto-ethnographic connection with philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's concepts solid modernity (Bauman, 2013) and liquid modernity (Bauman, 2012), and the use of mashup as method (Grenville, 2016). The auto-ethnographic aspect is discussed first, secondly the aspect of mashup in contemporary arts as informed by the use of mashup in music (Augaitis, Grenville, & Rebick, 2016; Sinnreich, 2010), and finally Bauman's solid and liquid modernities (Bauman, 2012, 2013). The auto-ethnographical aspects initiate in US-Australian dual citizenship, and former industry work as a musician and screen technologies art director. The musical background triggered a cross-disciplinary desire to apply digital music mashup techniques to painting methods. The art director/branding consultant work in 1990's Silicon Valley, USA and Spain ignited an interest in global consumerism—the impact of post-GFC on real and virtual streetscapes, and the relevance of the legacy of pop art in post-internet painting (Beers, 2014). The following key eras are discussed in exploring post-GFC diaspora in relation to the visual arts: the 1930's US Great Depression, the late 1990's dotcom bubble (Hayes, 2019), and the 2008 GFC (Graw, 2015; Stakemeier, 2015). When the venture capital fuelled dotcom bubble burst in 2000, this tech sector market crash left billionaires, redundant employees and original Bay Area residents, jobless in hyper-inflated real estate conditions (Bauman, 2013). The latter two socio-economic groups formed a mass exodus, seeking viable living conditions elsewhere (Hayes, 2019).



Figure 2: Mitchell, Laura. (2019). *U R BLESSED Car Care*, Lynchburg, VA, USA. [Oil and graphite on canvas].

Special attention is given to the notion of consumerism as religion, and religion as business, and the expression of this notion in the visual arts (Bauman, 2013; Jacobsen & Hansen, 2017; A. Ross, 2014). This is informed by lived experience,

coming of age in Lynchburg, Virginia, a 'bible belt' town in the Appalachian Mountains (FitzGerald, 2007). Lynchburg is notable for fundamentalist Southern Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell, Sr., televangelist earned over 30 million dollars per year in the 1970's (see Figure 2). Simultaneous with his television fame and fortune was political power. Falwell co-founded the Moral Majority, a voting block of conservative Christians (FitzGerald, 2007) who have hosted speakers such as Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump. Now deceased, Falwell's empire flourishes under the direction of his sons in a city where the poverty rate is 22.3%, well above the 13.4% national US average (USA, 2019).



Figure 3: Mitchell, Laura. (2019). *MASHUP DIPTYCH: U R Blessed Car Care, USA–Spearwood Deli, WA*. [Oil, cold wax, aerosol and graphite on canvas].

Mashup is the juxtaposition of disparate elements—in creative practice this includes, but is not limited to, genre, source material and concepts, and materials and techniques (see Figure 3). The term mashup painting in this PhD research is a tool to discuss post-GFC artists whose work has a connection with consumerism and the legacy of pop art and 1980's popism movements—without using the problematic terms pop art and pop culture (Foster, 1996, 2003; Tunnicliffe, Jaspers, & Wales, 2014). Problematics of the term pop will be discussed in the exegesis of this research. Mashup painting also describes the praxis of the research, located within the white cube of the gallery, the street, between digital and tactile media, and source material from disparate locales along global flight patterns.

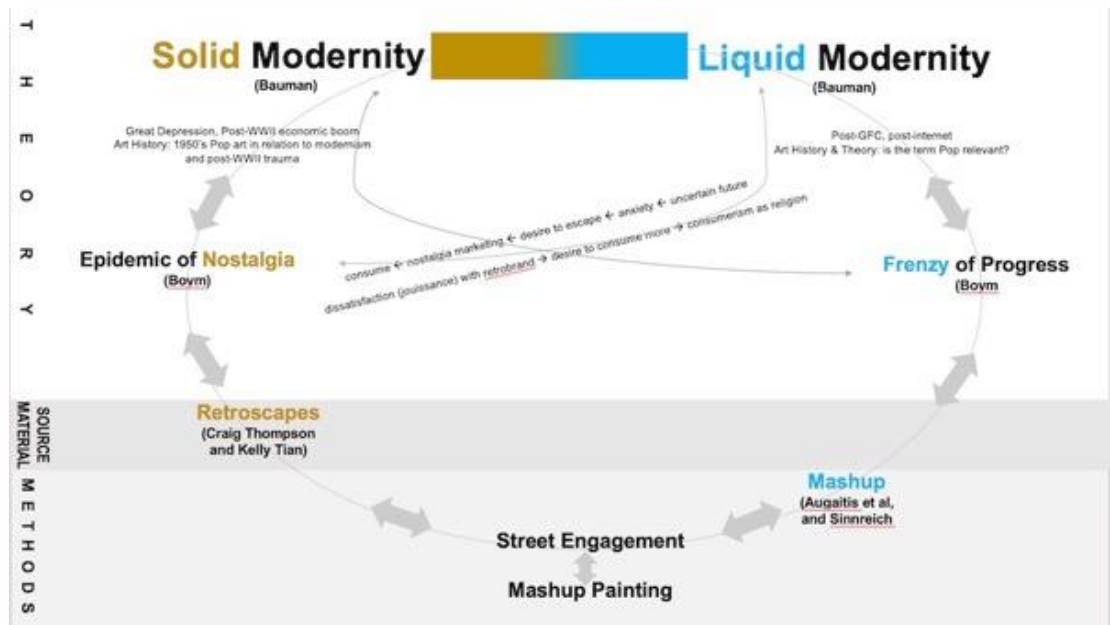


Figure 4: *Solid Modernity Liquid Modernity Cycle*: (adaptation of Smith & Dean, 2009)

Figure 4 details selected theorists and concepts regarding the desire to consume in post-GFC life. This diagram is not intended to oversimplify these chaotic phenomena, rather clarify the non-binary nature of these theories (white band in Figure 4), and the relationship of theory to practice (grey bands in Figure 4). Philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman asserts that the relationship between solid modernity and liquid modernity (Bauman, 2012) is a cycle or transformation, not a binary opposition (2013). Bauman relies upon Harvard professor and writer Svetlana Boym's discourse on nostalgia. The term retroscape is discussed by Consumer Culture Theory researchers Craig Thompson, Kelly Tian and Damien Hallegatte (2017; 2014; 2008).



Figure 5: Mitchell Jr., Charlie. (1961). *Worming*. [2019 Digital photo of colour copy of 1970's print from 1961 35mm slide].

Solid Modernity: A Society of Producers

The essence of Bauman's solid modernity is captured in Figure 5. My father described his family (grandfather pictured in Figure 5) as 'dirt farmers', a colloquialism specific to the particular lifestyle, place and time as well as the personal nature of this narrative. Current equivalent terms identified include family farmer and small farmer (ADMIN, 2019; Benjamin et al., 2016). This narrative depicts an economic time of austerity which for small farmers began with the 1930's Great Depression in the USA, continued through the rationing, fear and insecurity of WWII, and into the 1960's. Shown here is my grandfather in the tobacco field, worming. A scraper in one hand, a bucket in the other, removing worms one by one from each leaf. By the time the end of a field was reached, it was time to retrace those steps, removing new worms which had appeared in the interim. Bauman asserts that the solid modern era was characterised by a society of producers, who craved a secure future they believed could be achieved by the acquisition of solid, time-resistant possessions. Rather than pursuing immediate gratification, activities and artefacts promising protection from dangers perceived to be lying in ambush in the wilderness were pursued (Bauman, 2013).



Figure 6: (Background): Hill, Mallie Bowman, maternal great-grandmother. (1920's). *Crazy quilt*. [Flour sack remnants]. (Above inset): Unknown. (1940's). *Flour sack advertisements*. (Times, 2017) (Below inset): Matthews, Carrie. (1940's). *Mother, in flour sack dress made by maternal grandmother*. [Printed photograph].

Women were essential to the survival of the dirt farmer in depression-era Southern Appalachian tobacco cash crop economy, and as such are a unique example to aid in the study of gendered work in household commodity chains. Women bore stereotypically female as well as stereotypically male roles, and as such present a unique opportunity to deconstruct notions of gendered work. (Dunaway, 2013). Feminist theorist Wilma Dunaway challenges, 'conceptually, we need to stop being blinded by oversimplified stereotypes about women being trapped in housebound labor' (2013, pp. 13-14).

The central inset image in Figure 6 shows my mother in a flour sack dress made by her mother. In the background, a quilt made by my great-grandmother. The woman also stoked the smoke house fire, monitoring the temperature precisely in order to cure the tobacco to bring optimum market price, simultaneously birthing as many children as possible to help with farm labour, often experiencing death and disability with some of the children, cooking, cleaning, preserving, and sewing all needed items from flour sacks by hand or foot powered sewing machines. When the leftovers had all been hand stitched into geometric quilt designs, the leftovers of the leftovers were hand stitched into crazy quilts, as shown in Figure 6. Bauman posits that the solid modern society of producers, owners protected their possessions from premature obsolescence instead of consuming and discarding them in rapid succession, perhaps in part because new and improved models were scarce, non-existent, or prohibitively expensive (2013).

Liquid Modernity: Society of Consumers

According to Bauman, whereas solid modernity is a society of producers, liquid modernity is a society of consumers—the relationship between the two is not a dichotomy but a time-based transformation or state of becoming. Liquid modernity is characterised by durable things falling apart, and of a whirlwind of transient ephemera filling the vacancy (Bauman, 2012). The focus of Bauman's liquid modernity in this paper is the aspect of consumerism and shopping as religion: a potent human desire for new and improved commodities which provide relief from anxieties and hardships created by capitalism (see Figure 8).

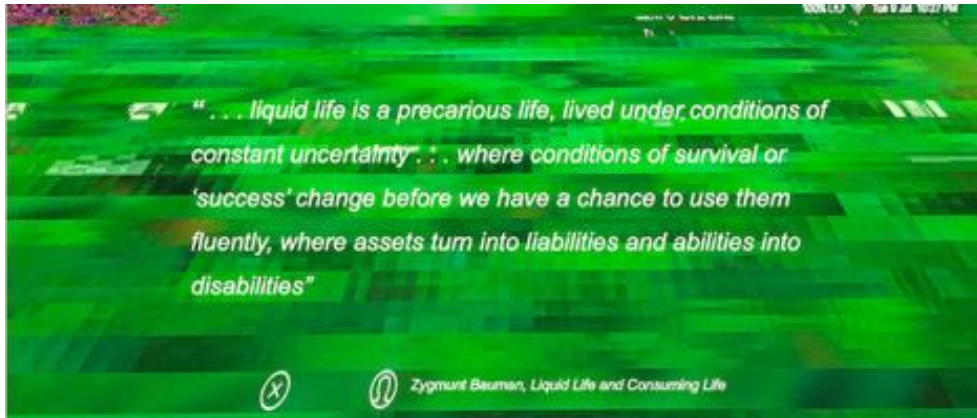


Figure 7: Mitchell, Laura. (2019). *_GLITCH_*. [Screenshot: damaged research laptop, recycled as desktop computer using external monitor].

In solid modernity, the farm was an asset, whereas in liquid modernity the farm has become a liability, as evidenced by the text excerpts in Figure 9 as my sisters and I attempt to manage the empty fields and farmhouse from our remote residences. This microscopic example reflects complex global dilemmas faced by small farmers attempting to compete with a mega-grocery store chains, climate change and more. (Benjamin et al., 2016).

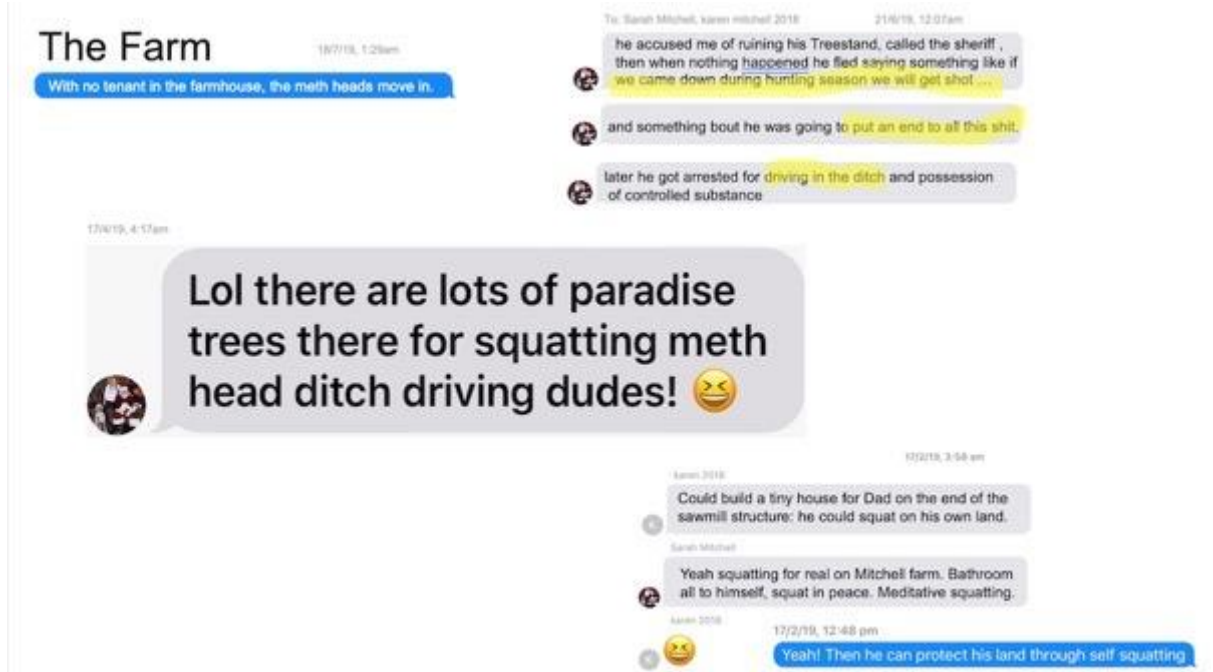


Figure 8: Mitchell, Laura, Mitchell, Karen and Mitchell, Sarah. (2019). *The Tenant*. [Text message screenshots].

Solid modernity, liquid modernity, transformation

Solid modernity, according to Bauman, existed through the 20th century post-war boom economy, a revolutionary time in art history as pop art vied with modernism for sovereignty (2013). Solid modernity was a society of producers who valued secure futures and product longevity. In defining liquid modernity, Bauman employs Boym's expertise on nostalgia: liquid modernity is a frenzy of progress which breeds anxiety (as cited in 2017). Nostalgic fantasies, real or imagined utopias, can alleviate this anxiety, resulting in a global epidemic of nostalgia. Retrospectives are a visual tool used in retrobranding to inspire consumer desire products through the power motivator of nostalgia (Hallegatte, 2014; Thompson & Arnould, 2005). In the praxis of this research, retrosapes refer to imagery that references the past, real or imagined, and include not only streetscapes but additional elements such as advertising imagery and text.

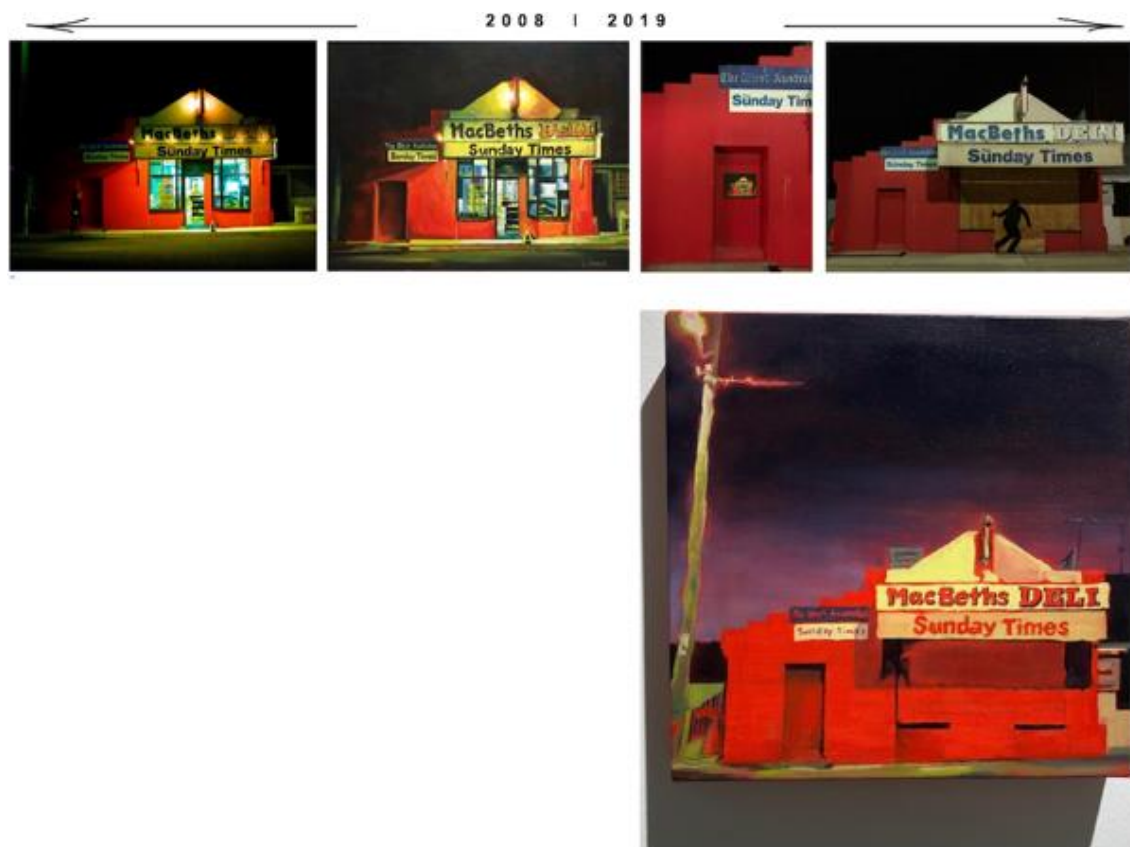


Figure 9: Mitchell, Laura. (2004–2019). *Macbeth's Deli Life Cycle*: [Clockwise from top: 2004 photo-documentation, 2008 oil on canvas, 2019 oil on canvas on building facade, 2019 aluminium sculpture on building facade, 2019 oil on canvas].

research within the legacy of pop art, precedents include art critique B.H. Buchloh's discussion of U.S. artist Edward Ruscha as a pioneer in the intersection of pop and conceptual art, and the incorporation of the language of advertising in painting practice (2005).

This particular venue, Macbeth's Deli, is currently abandoned, a phenomenon which has been attributed to the devastating impact of megastore franchises, internet shopping, and post-GFC economic austerity conditions on small business storefronts and street life. (Klein, 2001).

Liquid modernity: religion as big business, capitalism as religion



Figure 10: Mitchell, Laura. (2019). *Solid Modern—Liquid Modern Salvation Plan: 1970's Grandmother's re-baptism (solid modern religion) and 2018 subway pamphlets (liquid modern religion)*, Appomattox, VA, USA. [Digital collage].

The church of economic growth is a planet-wide congregation seeking relief from liquid modern conditions through mass production, commodification, and consumption. In this ministry, the 'meaning of "making life better" means to consume more. all roads to redemption, salvation, divine and secular grace, intimate and eternal happiness alike, lead through the shops.' (Bauman, 2012). Bauman also refers to this religion as economic fundamentalism. Firstly, consumerism, or capitalism, is the new most relevant religion for providing direction and solace in surviving liquid modernity. Figure 11 is a collage created as source material for paintings concerning the church of economic growth: juxtaposing 2018 religious advertising in a fast food venue with 1970's family primitive Baptist river rebaptism.



Figure 11: Mitchell, Laura. *ROCK SOLID: Motorcycle Ministries Biker Church and Thrift Shop, Lynchburg, VA, USA*. [Oil, cold wax, aerosol and mixed media on hand-built canvases].

This artwork from the first exhibition included in this PhD, responds to Bauman's notion of economic fundamentalism: 'all roads to redemption, salvation, divine and secular grace, intimate and eternal happiness alike, lead through the shops' (Bauman, 2012). See Figure 12, Biker Church and Thrift Store. According to Bauman, in the transformation from a solid modern producer society to a liquid consumer society, consumers themselves become commodities. In order to gain recognition and acceptance, consumers must design themselves as products to command attention. The father and son silhouette (Figure 13) references Bauman's argument that consumers' bodies and identities are under the siege of reconfiguration (2001).



Figure 12: Mitchell, Laura. (2019). *Retro Stasia exhibition installation view*, Spectrum Project Space, Edith Cowan University. [Oil, cold wax and mixed media on canvas].

Also concerning liquid life, religion and consumerism, writer Alex Ross cites Walter Benjamin: "Capitalism is a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed. Celebrities have risen to the status of secular gods: publicity stills freeze their faces in the manner of religious icons" (as cited in 2014). The relevance of the legacy of 1950's pop art movement in this research involves the post-war flight of artists and intellectuals from Europe to the US and the post-war economic boom. The prosperity and explosion of mass-production and consumption starting in the 1950's in the U.S. led to the revolutionary rise of pop art in reaction to the dominance of modernism in the art world. German Capitalist Realists joined Americans in the parody and critique of the 'economic miracle of capitalism' (Ibid.). Ross also quotes Frederick Jameson: the "cultural evolution of late capitalism" can be understood "dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together." (Ibid.).

Retromarketing



Figure 13: (Left) Redford, Scott. (2008). *The High/ Perpetual Xmas, No Abstractions*. [Brick, stone, steel, aluminium, 2-pack paint, acrylic, neon glass tube, fluorescent glass tube]

This project received financial assistance through Arts Queensland from art+place, the Queensland Government's Public Arts Fund / Collection: ArtsWorks Queensland / © The artist. (Right) Mitchell, Laura. (2018). *Abandoned Motel: Melody Inn*. [Photo-documentation].

Retromarketing motivates consumer desire through memory and nostalgia and promises escape from present day feelings of lack of meaning existential fears of the future. Retrosapes are a marketing tool involving media that sells commodity by creating a link between past and future. Fond, safe memories visualise an idyllic past, which promise a utopian future. Retrosapes are a blend of narrative and imagistic elements of past memories used to shape popular memories in the present. The goal of retrosapes is to promote 'culturally resonant stories' that enhance commercial gain, while simultaneously effacing cultural memories that contradict commercial goals (Thompson & Tian, 2008). The research based in the memory theory of Michel Foucault. The image on the right of Figure 14 is photo-documentation of an actual vintage 1960's motel, a nostalgic artefact for some audiences, transformed by time in an impoverished rural area typical to post-GFC southern US landscape (Dismal Swamp, Virginia, USA). In Figure 14 on the right, Scott Redford's sculpture intentionally preserving the utopic nostalgic memory of anachronistic signage with the support of the Queensland Public Arts program.

Retrobranding Post-GFC: Nostalgia Marketing

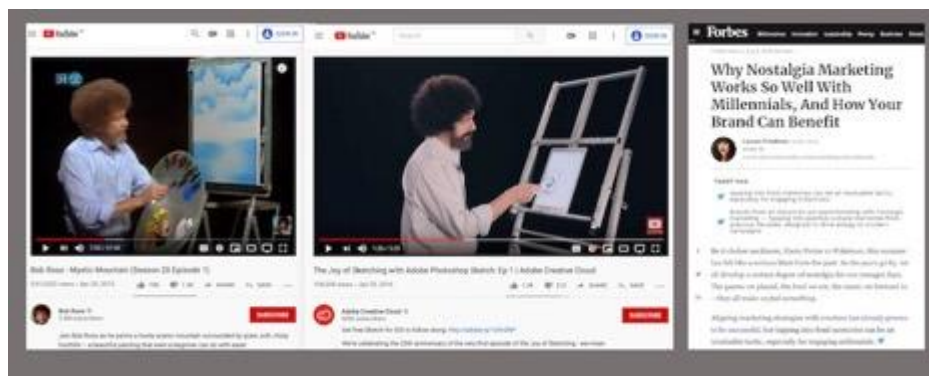


Figure 14: (Left) YouTube. (2015). *Bob Ross 1985 Joy of Sketching*. [Screenshot] (2016). (Centre) YouTube. 2016 *Joy of Sketching with Adobe* (2016). (Right) Forbes. (2016). *Nostalgia Marketing and Millennials*. (Friedman)

Retromarketing post-GFC has been rebranded as nostalgia marketing: it's success traverses 'generational change' (Morgan, 2014). 'Under 30' journalist Lauren Friedman (2016), who specializes in content marketing and millennials, 'tapping into fond cultural memories from previous decades can be an invaluable tactic for engaging millennials.' (Friedman, 2016). A recent example is Netflix and Adobe's 2016 re-release of artist Bob Ross's 1985 "Joy of Painting" to promote 'Adobe Photoshop Sketch' application for the iPad Pro. (Harvey, 2017).

Retrosapes

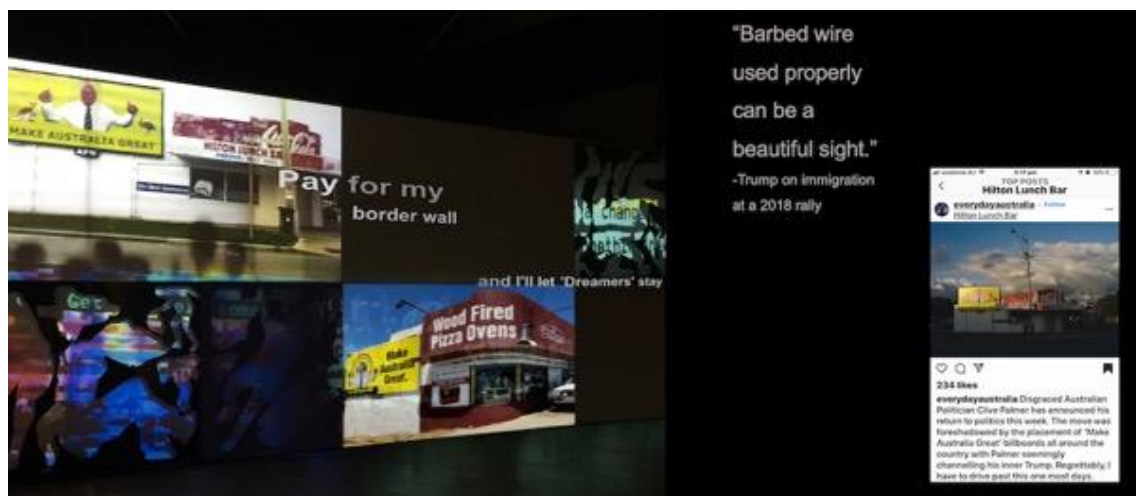


Figure 15: Mitchell, Laura. (Left)(2019). *Pay for my border wall*. (Middle) Trump, Donald. *Immigration quote*. (Post, 2018). (Right) everydayaustralia, (2019). *Hilton Lunch Bar*.

Retrosapes in this research are tools for referencing art history and politics through street engagement. Moving forward from this presentation, the exegesis will discuss Bauman's notion of Retrotopia: illustrated here by Australian political candidate Clive Palmer's campaign, borrowing heavily on Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' campaign. By using the word 'again', Trump's nationalist neo-liberal propaganda strategy successfully ignited Americans' desire to return to a utopic past: a real or imaged past paradise which allegedly could be realised through increased border protection, security, and economic growth. Though Palmer's campaign eliminates the word 'again', the modified appropriation of Trump's campaign phrase provides an example of 2019 Australian nostalgia marketing.

Impact and engagement: studio-street-gallery practice

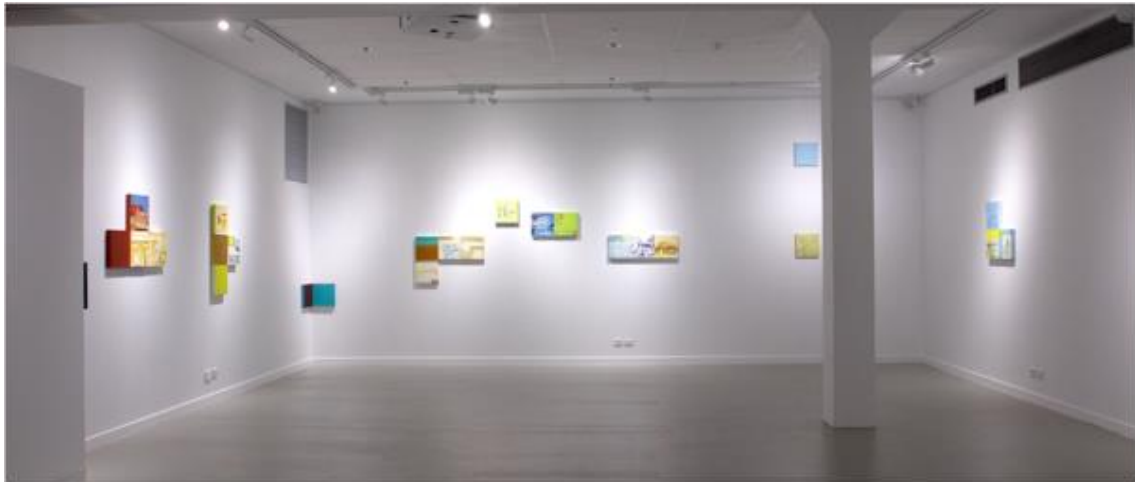


Figure 16: Mitchell, Laura. (2019). *Retro Stasia*, exhibition installation view, Spectrum Project Space, Edith Cowan University. Photographer: Alan Thompson.

In the first exhibition of the research, 'Retro Stasia' (Figure 17), one of the material aims was to use mashup as a method for translating the physical rhythm and motion of music into painting. A second intention was to use mashup defined as juxtaposition of source material, genre, and historical timeframes in order to comment upon the effects of liquid modernity on physical, psychological, and digital landscapes in the past and present, and to create mythologies pondering liquid life in the future.



Figure 17: Mitchell, Laura. (2019). *Cluster 1: Out damn spot*. [Oil, cold wax and mixed media on canvas].

The juxtaposition of figurative and abstract, naturalistic and graphic elements is meant to mimic the way targeted advertising interrupts internet content mid-article, and content marketing where brand promotion masquerades as informational content (Figure 18).

The works use mashup to reflect my cultural and physical displacement from the US to Western Australia in 2001 by incorporating American and Australian delis, corner stores, lunch bars. They are referred to as retroscapes in that they involve a temporal mashup: some still operational as storefronts, most of which have outlived their usefulness, some abandoned and falling into disrepair. My idiosyncratic fetish for vanishing storefronts illustrates Boym's global epidemic of nostalgia, a "human response to the frenzy of progress . . . A yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (Boym as cited by Bauman, 2017, pp. 2-3). A simultaneous 'sentiment of loss and displacement' (Ibid.) and 'romance with one's own fantasy' (Ibid.).

Conclusion



Figure 18: (Left) Mitchell, Laura. (2017). *Farmhouse, VA, USA*. (Right) Mitchell, Laura. (2018). *Black Friday* [installation view from 2018 exhibition, PS Artspace, Fremantle, WA. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

In closing, what is the universal relevance of the dirt farmer narrative in relation to impact and engagement in liquid modernity? On the street, on the farm, in the gallery, the educational institution, and in practice-led research (Figure 19)? Solid property, once an asset, becomes a liability in liquid modernity. Through engagement, artists, arts educators and arts institutions can positively impact the problematics of liquid modernity.

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