

## The Art of Nick Mangan

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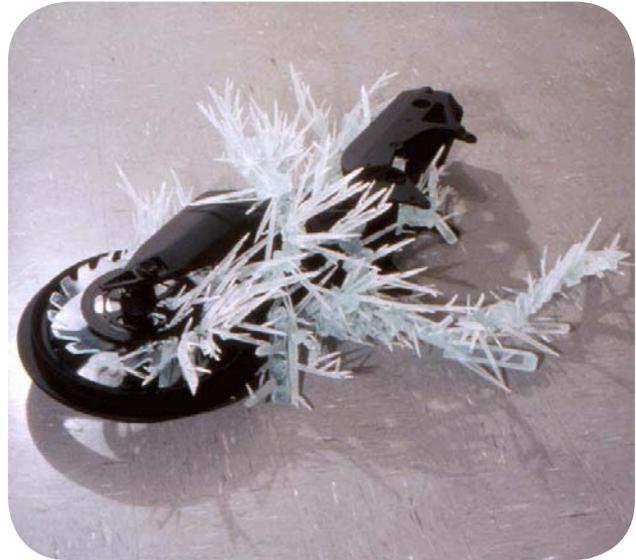
Usually when life is translated into a static sculptural format, the stillness functions in a secondary way; on some level it is necessary to understand the object as life frozen in time – an attribute which is not often integral to the work's concept. Much of Nick Mangan's work, whether through accident or design, sidles into an aperture which liberates it from this temporal appendage. Each sculpture in his *In the Crux of Matter* series, for instance, presents us with a common contemporary object – a photocopier, a glass coffee-table, the remains of a motorbike – whose form is being corrupted with the growth of crystals. Because crystals naturally develop at a pace imperceptible to the human eye, we are able to perceive the work as natural, rather than modelled; it becomes easy to imagine that the object of our gaze is immersed in deep time. The same can be said of *Untitled [Nest]*, in which a termite mound transmogrifies a tradesman's ladder.

In Mangan's work we are confronted with evidence of an alchemical sort of productivity which cannot be sighted through the scope of scientific plausibility. It is as though secret deals are being made between objects and structures to which we are not privy. The unnerving force of the natural elements in Mangan's work seems almost like a form of sympathetic magic, attempting to fortify the processes of an earth which suffers increasingly from human occupation. The paradox is that the origins of these objects are to be found in the cerebrum of a man and, in a sick sort of synthesis, the elements of the work which visually represent the organic are actually synthesized from the processed, the noxious and the chemical.

These objects summon a reaction which is reminiscent of early supernatural horror literature written by M.R. James, Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood among others. These writers spearheaded a soul-penetrating brand of horror, which was oft based in a realisation on the part of a protagonist that an inanimate object has exhibited some form of will.

With cold removal, objects which we value as utilitarian step back from our affections and allow themselves, almost wryly, to be corrupted by forms for which we have no use beyond the aesthetic. These objects seem to have their own idea of what a system should be, and it hasn't got a great deal to do with human functionality.

What is it that compels Mangan to reiterate the proposition that nature craves to devour utility? Turning the focus of this model outwards to encompass all utilitarian systems, we can shift our perception of a city from being a compacted, almost exclusively human habitat, to a mass of potential fodder waiting to be devoured by natural systems of growth. In this way Mangan's objects become nuclei for new understandings of our metropolitan environments, in turn articulating a need for human



*In the crux of the matter* (2003) acrylic, jelutong, PVC sheeting, automotive spray, acrifix, K & H two part filler, 50 x 190 x 110cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

systems to acknowledge their connection to/origins in the natural, to which we have become binarily opposed. Each of Mangan's couplings involves a compromise, but never on the part of the natural form.

These couplings are not beleaguered by their status as artworks. Like much interesting work which has come to pass during the last decade, they offer terms of engagement for which a fore-knowledge of art theory is not a prerequisite. The objects are aloof without a sense of smug complicity. Mangan's works do not lead the mind of the viewer down a pre-determined path – we are presented with the physical manifestation of an imagining, which we can consider however we might. His oblique titles, reminiscent as they are of the names given to pharmaceuticals, reaffirm a sense that the work sits comfortably in a sphere where determinants exist beyond the rules of mass appeal. It would be absurd to suggest that Mangan's work is not equally at home in the commercial sphere. However, I would suggest that the commercial position does not drive the work, nor influence the ideas it expresses. It is not trying to befriend the viewer; there is no air of funky arrogance telling us 'this is where it's at'. His objects are on offer as commodities, but by begging a deeper level of consideration they utilize this position, infiltrating the 'cutting-edge' mentality of art collecting with something a lot slower and steadier. Although he is part of a system in which the personality of the artist is amplified both socially and within the media, Mangan seems to make a concerted effort to extract ego from his actual work, his objects appearing as much as possible as though they were discovered rather than constructed by humans.



*Untitled (nest)* 2004, aluminium ladder, western red cedar, Tasmanian oak, 275 x 50 x 170cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

Where the earth artists, during the seventies and eighties, asserted masculine gestures into the natural landscape, Mangan presents us with a negative of that process by asserting organic structures into the man-made. The cynical-minded among us could interpret this as an indication that places of human occupation have grown sufficiently over the past few decades to replace nature as the perceived dominant. But we could also read it as an expression of hope that the natural has not lost its power, but that the colonial hangover which laces our perception of it with threat is finally beginning to wear off, and with it our compulsion to punctuate the landscape with grand gestures of humanity. The accompanying hope is that our awareness of our own position as a dominant species, and the responsibility which should accompany it, is increasing. This is reflected in Mangan's work by the grass-roots aesthetic of crystals and lathed wood which seems to permeate his output.

There is presently a growing movement towards transforming cities into healthier environments with the help of permaculture. An increasing number of birds, animals and plants have adapted to city living<sup>1</sup> in the past decade, concurrent with the increasing pace of what scientists believe to be the sixth mass extinction on earth<sup>2</sup>. Implicit to Mangan's objects is the hope that nature will fight back.

This leads me to a review by Alex Gawronski on Mangan's work as part of *Primavera* 2004, which was published in the December 2004 – February 2005 issue of *Broadsheet*. Gawronski said the works 'tended

to emphasise the bravura of material production and an isolated aestheticism over their communicative capacity<sup>3</sup>, and considered that Mangan's 'regressive display methodologies'<sup>4</sup> (low-lying white plinths) stressed the identity of the objects as aesthetic commodities and little else. In conclusion, Gawronski stated "It is somehow vaguely distressing that so-called 'emerging art'... does not evince a greater sense of its non-complicity and that it seems more concerned to get things 'right' and to appear indisputably as institutionally and professionally 'valid'...". In response to this I would like to refer to an interview with Chantal Mouffe, a theorist of art and politics who is aligned with the left. When questioned as to how Germany might formulate a democratic alternative to the concept of 'the people', that term still having strong connections to Nazism<sup>5</sup>, Mouffe responds that this 'should not happen by abandoning the idea of "the people" because it's necessarily related to either a Nazi past or to a certain type of exclusion.'<sup>6</sup> She argues that abandonment can be read as a form of surrender where reclamation would be a better alternative. To my mind, this model of approach can be applied to the relationship between individual artists and the expectations of the art institution – change the system from within. Making art which is political does not by default require an outright rejection of institutional vernacular. To the contrary, to engage with that vernacular is in some instances the most effective means of penetrating that sphere of understanding. If Mangan had chosen to erode the architecture of the MCA rather than install an eroded object, his work would have become political on that level – it would have been about rejecting the institution. But he is not interested in that level of politics. The issues which his work addresses exist on a far broader scale. Presenting work within an institutional context in a way which does not antagonize that context can allow a more extensive consideration of issues which the artist is addressing.

On January 24th this year, the *Meeting the Climate Challenge* report was released, put together by senior politicians, business leaders and academics from around the world. All indications suggest that we have ten years before the global warning "point of no return" is reached.<sup>7</sup> On an individual level it is easy to forget this sort of information, but our disastrous environmental predicament is not going to improve without significant amounts of lifestyle change. It is for this reason that I find work such as Mangan's to be not only socio-politically relevant, but of vital importance.

To my mind there are parallels between Mangan's work and the Clock of the Long Now<sup>8</sup>, a mechanism which is currently being prototyped and which will run for at least 10,000 years, ticking once a year and chiming once a millennium. The clock's purpose is to remind humans of the importance of long-term thinking. Both drag our perceptions into a broader time-scale, and in this way remind us that we are an incidental life form rather than a pivotal vanishing point.

Whilst easy parallels can be drawn between the work of Nick Mangan and Ricky Swallow on account of their shared penchant for monochromatic materiality, Mangan's work contains none of the reverie for the guiltless consumerism of childhood which fuels many of Swallow's works. What Mangan's work shares with

that of other artists of his productive ilk is a tendency towards high materialism; a compulsion towards a hand-wrought delineation of form with a level of precision which in many spheres of production was lost under the rise of industrialism. The emphasis on craft within art production has grown in popularity during the past few years. Whilst this can obviously be seen as a backlash against the highly conceptual art movements which proliferated during the nineties, it can also be understood on another level as an outright rejection of mass production. In combination with this there is a general inclination towards a re-acceptance of 'fantasy' art, its politic being that by rejecting reality in favour of an imaginary 'world', an underlying dissatisfaction with reality becomes apparent. Mangan's work is effective on this level because there is an absence of social specificity to his subject matter. For this reason the work is also accessible to a broad range of people.

Within Mangan's work there is something of a fusion between dream and reality. There is a gap being bridged, and a world being imagined where humans no longer dominate. I like the way it triggers my brain.

#### Notes

1. For instance herring gulls in London, cougars in Los Angeles and ghetto palms in New York. There is some interesting information on this subject at the following websites: [http://www.atimeforfear.blogspot.com/2003\\_05\\_11\\_atimeforfear\\_archive.html](http://www.atimeforfear.blogspot.com/2003_05_11_atimeforfear_archive.html) and <http://www.oliverk.org/weblog>
2. An article on the sixth mass extinction can be found at the New Scientist website here: <http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn4797>
3. Alex Gawronski, 'Primavera 2004', *Broadsheet* Volume 33 No 4, Dec 2004-Jan 2005, p. 52
4. Ibid, p. 52
5. Paraphrased from "Every form of art has a political dimension", Chantal Mouffe interviewed by Rosalyn Deutsche, Branded W. Joseph, and Thomas Keenan, *Grey Room* 02, Winter 2001, p.101
6. Ibid, pp.98-125
7. "Countdown to global catastrophe", Michael McCarthy, Environment Editor, *The Independent*, UK, 24 January 2005
8. More information on the Clock of the Long Now can be found at <http://www.longnow.org/>

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