

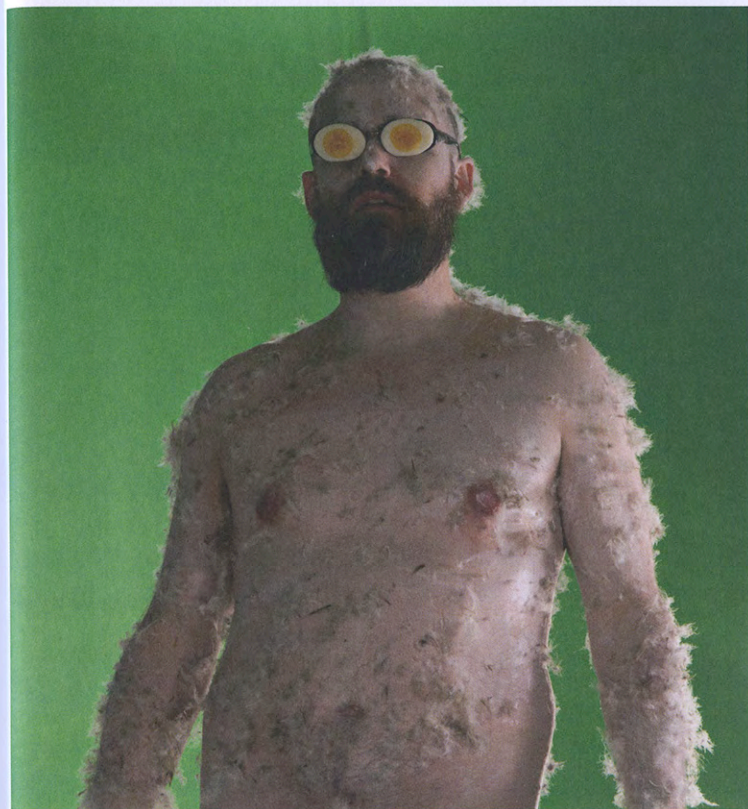
An aerial photograph of a vast ocean with numerous small, white-capped waves. The water is a deep, dark blue, and the white foam of the waves creates a textured, almost abstract pattern across the surface. The perspective is from directly above, looking down at the water.

ACTS OF EXPOSURE

MARK SHORTER

Schleimgurgeln, 2011

Production still



ACTS OF EXPOSURE

'To expose' relates to personal revelation, emotional expression and the act of making visible. 'Exposure' can mean a vulnerable body in open space, sustained contact with the outdoors and extreme climatic conditions. While these elements are central to *Acts of Exposure*, they were also fundamental to the nineteenth century European Romantic movement that largely took place in the first person and embraced the subjective experience of the artist.

Acts of Exposure is a contemporary take on Romanticism and the artistic tradition of the body in space. Mark Shorter, Michael Schlitz and Leigh Hobba each use the landscape as a stage to enact performative or narrative-driven works of art. Pushing physical and psychological limits, they locate themselves - virtually or actually - within the external environment. Hence it may be no accident that the three artists have each drawn from past, epic voyages - fictitious and factual - to connect with their contemporary world. They warp reality by various degrees and muddy the threshold between art and life. The fiction created by Schlitz and Hobba is partly autobiographical, while for Shorter it manifests through his alter ego Schleimgurgeln.

In a literal act of exposure, Shorter smears his naked body with white paint, honey, and feathers to become one of his three performative alter egos. Schleimgurgeln lurks as the most basic humanoid. Stripped of language and all usual accoutrements, he exists beyond time and culture and encounters the Australian

landscape and its representations by artists such as Hans Heyesen and John Glover with guttural, animalistic responses. His name is equally unlocateable, resembling the German word for mucus and the English verb 'gargle' to imply something amorphous, slippery, and impossible to pin down.

Shorter describes Schleimgurgeln as "an exoticised European other" and continues "just as the French novelist Gabriel de Foigny (c.1630-92) produced his own vision of 'The Australian', Schleimgurgeln represents a reversed projection of 'the European'." In *The Southern Land*, Known 1676, Foigny combines a fictitious action-packed travelogue with a scathing critique of pre-revolutionary France. He imagines Terra Australis as a utopia occupied by civilised near-human hermaphrodites who live harmoniously without class, gender, competition, envy or even love.² Shorter uses his contemporary Australian perspective to flip this fantasy, conceiving Schleimgurgeln as the exotic European creature that might have been imagined by Australians.

Schleimgurgeln is maladapted to encounters with the Australian landscape in much the same way as the early explorers and colonists. When performing *Song for Glover* 2012 he took a gruelling eight hours to ascend Hobart's Mount Wellington. With bare feet, his body covered in sticky smattering of feathers and boiled eggs to obscure his vision, Schleimgurgeln struggled through the rock and scrub.

Shorter's *Unguided* 2013 takes place in the hallowed colonial gallery at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Schleimgurgeln

is a messy and peculiar spectre in an exhibition defined by a mannered historical period. In defiance of the didactic interpretation that abounds in such institutional settings, he gesticulates and grunts in response to the nineteenth century landscapes that promote the picturesque and progressive Tasmanian colony. Like Mary Shelley's (1797-1851) Romantic monster in *Frankenstein* 1818, Schleimgurgeln is a lost, out-of-place, and deeply sentient creature.

Schlitz also initiated an intervention in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's colonial gallery with a series of prints that re-imagined the experience of European explorers in nineteenth century Australia. Deeply etched fragments of a dinghy and male figures in boyish and military dress were installed amongst oil paintings of colonial Tasmanian landscape and people. This event, *Intervention 4* 1996, was parenthesised by two outdoor performances: the year before Schlitz had retraced John Oxley's 1823 journey down the Brisbane River and in 1997 he wove a round raft from hemp and filmed himself paddling with one oar, turning circles and going nowhere. Boats continue to represent the voyage in his imagery.

Schlitz has consistently re-evoked the European exploration of Australia and the consequent cultural collisions. Since 1999 he has quoted repeatedly from an image by Jacques Arago (1790-1855) that depicts the 1818 meeting between Louis de Freycinet and Aboriginal people at Shark Bay, Western Australia.³ Although Schlitz's interpretation of Arago's image has evolved over time to be less direct, Arago's construction of the beach as a stage, or

liminal zone, where two worlds meet maintains significance. The sand, the sea, and the ripples between appear in nearly all works by Schlitz. Their fine, linear pattern fuses landscape and figure as it swarms within and without the human form. Branches, roots, blood vessels and bone are interchangeable in *Water bearers* 2005 and *Trees of bone* 2013; the coopered-lines of the dinghy in *Explorers dream* 2006 meld with those of the sea; the divining stick pierces - or merges with - the eyes of the *Diviner* 2006. In the performatively titled *Digging a hole, jumping in, looking up* 2005, the face loosely reflects the coastal profile and the looming cranially-shaped cloud replaces the head that drops off the paper's edge. By contrast, the black sky in *Mind shadow* 2013 is devouring the floating figure.

Emotion and environment are inseparable for Schlitz who lives on a remote bush block in a self-hewn shack. The cold and wet Tasmanian air penetrates the gaps around doors, windows, floor and roof, and is as real inside as it is out. Somehow such relentless exposure is vital to the raw intensity of his intricate wood engravings. They serve as a diary, fulfilling his need to record and create, and forging a deeply symbiotic relationship between the artist and his art.

For more than thirty years, Hobba has used sound and moving imagery to create art works that also intensify and distort his personal experience. As Jeff Malpas aptly observed in 2007, "space" is of particular importance to Hobba, "opened up always

in relation to particular *places*, in which there occurs a mutual presencing of us to things and of things to us; the space in which the world comes to appearance."⁴

Following his father's death in 2011, Hobba revisited childhood photographs of the time the family had lived in American Samoa. The potency of these images was magnified by the loss of his father. They represented a transitional moment in a foreign place that Hobba barely remembered. An image of a man called TAITO held particular poignance for in family folklore TAITO was the first word young Hobba and his brother had spoken. Moved to return to the land of his birth, Hobba began plans to sail from Hobart across the Tasman and South Pacific seas in his 12 metre yacht.

Ultimately, Hobba was unnerved by the brazenness of the mission and would imagine the voyage instead. He was reminded of the notorious British sailor and entrepreneur Donald Crowhurst (1932-69) who died competing in a race to circumnavigate the world. Like Crowhurst, Hobba logged the fictitious journey in elaborate detail, accessing weather and navigational charts and photographing the subtle changes of the Pacific Ocean as 'proof' of the journey. While these near-repeating images conjure a meditative or even mundane vision of life at sea, Hobba's articulation of the shifting 'moods' and sheer expanse of the ocean is similar to the Romantic interest in the nuance and majesty of nature. In *Sailing to Samoa* 2013 these images are overlaid with Hobba's spoken contemplations of things past, present, and in transition, perceived during the three months he spent in Pago Pago, American Samoa in 2012.

In reality, Hobba flew to American Samoa. He documented his search for TAITO and the related encounters with past and new friends that reawakened his knowledge of and attachment to the place. The horrifying force of the 2009 tsunami remained palpable, relived in daily conversation and visible in the crushed houses, debris, and decimated coral reef. Metaphorically pertinent and an eerie reminder of the sea's indomitable power, the bleached and broken fragments of the coral graveyard are projected on the floor in *Sailing to Samoa*, directly beneath the images of the ocean's surface.

The sea and mountains are central to the works in *Acts of Exposure*. Arguably the most awe inspiring of the earth's surfaces, they also appealed to the Romantic sensibility. Behemoths such as Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840) and JMW Turner (1775-1851) reacted to industrialization and the Enlightenment by embracing wholeheartedly the enduring power of Nature - a phenomenon they perceived to be beyond the control of progress or rationalism. They could not have predicted how vulnerable Nature would have become two hundred years later. Today, gestures towards Nature's magnificence risk being trite and simplistic.

It is not Nature's splendour that informs the works of Shorter, Schlitz, and Hobba. Instead, the artists draw from the tangle of personal, emotional and historical ties to the land. The journeys imagined by Foigny and undertaken by Freycinet and Crowhurst establish curious anchor points for the artists: representing their shared interest in 'adventure' and underpinning the irrational nature of their 'actions'.

The effect of nature on the lone artist was particularly important to Romanticism, as it is in *Acts of Exposure*. Although various writers and curators have recently identified the emergence of a contemporary Romantic movement,⁵ Shorter, Schlitz and Hobba work well outside of such a model by engaging narrative and performative elements and focusing on aspects other than beauty. Each has devised an idiosyncratic practice that is tightly connected to the external environment. While they draw some close parallels with Romanticism, each pursues an avant garde approach that is uniquely characterised by the exposure of their internalized worlds in the vast outdoors.

JANE STEWART, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

1. From a synopsis on *Schleimgurgeln: Song for Glover* by Mark Shorter for Art and the Outermost Limits of Location - Specificity Symposium at Contemporary Art Services Tasmania 2012
2. Gabriel de Foigny, *The Southern Land, Known*, Syracuse University Press, 1992, original title *La terre australe connue*, Société des textes français modernes, 1676.
3. Jacques Arago (artist) and Marie-Alexandre Duparc (engraver), *Nouvelle Hollande: Baie des Chiens-marins Presque île Peron, entrevue avec les sauvages* [New Holland: Shark Bay, Peron Peninsula. Meeting with the savages], 1825.
4. Jeff Malpas, 'Breathing space. Leigh Hobba & the uncertainty of presence', *The space of presence*, ex. cat., Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 2007
5. For examples see Simon Gregg, *New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art*, Australian Scholarly Press, Melbourne, 2011 and Eds. Max Hollein and Martina Weinhart, *Wunschwelten: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, ex. cat., Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2005.