

表面张力
SURFACE TENSION

Erin Coates
Justin Spiers

艾琳科茨
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catalogue essay by Kate Abon

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Surface tension is a term used in physics to describe the cohesive forces between liquid molecules and the strength of the outer membrane. In the context of this exhibition 'surface tension' refers to the relationship between a defined space and its outer edge, between the human body and the places we occupy. The photography, installation, sculpture and video works in this show examine the physical and ideological nature of boundary marking and the influence this has on the way we live our lives.

Erin Coates and Justin Spiers' practices thematically converge in this current exhibition, which is part of a sustained enquiry into how space is constructed and subsequently demarcated. The artists are concerned with the way the built environment is inscribed, whether intentionally or not, with a desire to define territorial lines. This current body of work focuses on the contemporary urban landscape while juxtaposing it against contrastive contexts, namely the archaic model of the medieval fortified castle – remnants of which can be found in amusement parks and fantasy architecture.

A wry humour emanates from the artists' work as they accentuate and interrogate our territorial behaviours with a playful intelligence. In assembling familiar, everyday items in unfamiliar ways, the artists create curious oddities; Coates' multi-eyed concrete domes watch you with surveillance camera eyes as fleur-de-lis¹ capped fence poles impotently attempt to protect them; Spiers' photographs reveal a miniature Neuschwanstein castle found lurking conspicuously in the Australian bush; a collaborative video records in infrared secrecy a cartoon figure blacking out the Disneyland emblem.

The aesthetic of these new objects and scenes is reminiscent of b-grade films and at times the works appear like abandoned props and sets from the era of pre-CGI science fiction cinema. Familiar structures and common building materials are altered to generate a series of absurdist propositions. Within this work there is a noticeable absence of human figures, which acts to draw the viewer into these scenarios and spaces and asks us to reflect on where we are in relation to the images and the ideas. What are the boundaries of the spaces we build and how do we define them? Why do we do this and how does it create space? Once marked, what do we do to guard our place? Are we protecting against unwanted intrusion or a more sinister invasion?

The artworks are not overtly political however the questions they raise strike a resonance with current social and political phenomena. Coates and Spiers' work suggest that in seeking safety we build an absurd and at times hostile environment. However, space must be demarcated in some way.

Michel de Certeau writes, "It is the partition of space that structures it... from the functioning of the urban network to that of the rural landscape, there is no spatiality that is not organised by the determination of frontiers"². According to de Certeau, the stories we make and tell ourselves as a society play a decisive role in this organisation of space. Coates and Spiers' references to national histories and childhood fantasies correlate with this concept. Our narration of place gives us ways of seeing that assist in the construction of boundaries, and subsequently, space.

Closer scrutiny

Coates' grey concrete domes highlight her interest in spatial demarcation in the built environment and the relationship between the body and the city. The human sized cement blobs are covered

with materials used to fortify a site – security cameras, pointed fence poles and a flag. There is a sense of heightened paranoia in the need to protect and claim. Yet these attempts to fortify become absurd gestures that guard over a minuscule territory. The fleshy colours of the poles and tumour-like shape of the concrete further thwart the seriousness of the gesture and refer as much to the body as to built space.

The metamorphosis between *Urban Growth I* and *Urban Growth II* is minimal and involves only the 'growth' of additional defensive appendages – the pink, orange and red fencing poles with spiked caps. Here, the idea of 'growth' carries a malignant tone, like an ominous lump that signals something lurking beneath the surface. The black protrusions embedded in the concrete forms make further allusion to the medical body, as closer inspection reveals that they are not security cameras, as they first appear, but in fact cupping glasses; a medical device used widely in Traditional Chinese Medicine to 'draw out' impurities within the body and to dispel stagnation. The effect of these small black spheres is that of eyes watching the viewer – the winking red lights in their pupils like the operating light of a surveillance camera.

The idea of surveillance gone awry is reflected in Spiers' series *Viewings Rooms*. These photographs depict home technology and security cameras behind neatly placed bunches of flowers. At first glance they are reminiscent of a perfect home interior shot intended for a glossy magazine with their spotless bright white spaces. However the odd assemblages speak of something more oppressive as the clean interior becomes clinical and the technology encroaches too close.

Spiers' series takes from the trope of still life painting (in particular Dutch vanitas), in which the beauty and vibrancy of the arrangement – often of flowers or food – is contrasted by small elements that suggest contrary qualities of decay and death. Hidden bugs, curling up leaves or the skull in the still life arrangement remind us of our own mortality and of the transience of life. Here the reminder is not of mortality, but of our acceptance of the ever-present technological intrusion into our lives. The security cameras are no longer looking out as they are in Coates' *Urban Growth* sculptures, the cameras are now internalised, an extension of Foucault's panoptic schema spread intimately throughout the social body – the boundaries of the private sphere dissipating in the process.

The notion of private space is explored further in the collaborative work *Erasing the White Castle*. This video is set in a miniaturized Neuschwanstein castle in an abandoned theme park on the fringes of Perth. The Australian bushland has begun to grow back over the site, and no other structures are visible in the shot. It is a single straight shot of the castle, and over the 4:45 minutes of the video there is a time-lapse effect. We see a Mickey Mouse character – an alter ego perhaps – using a roller and paintbrush to transform the castle from white to black, at one point miraculously appearing on the roof, blacking out the watchtower section of the castle. As the castle is painted it becomes indistinguishable from the blackness it is surrounded by, and its form and defensive features appear to erode into the night.

Coates and Spier's work *Erasing the White Castle* draws on our idealised notions of home and the idea that 'everyman's house is his castle'. The castle in the video is a more domestically scaled version of the iconic Bavarian (and subsequent Disney) castle on which it is modelled, yet it still has the fortified design of

Medieval architecture. The video is shot in infrared, mimicking the security systems that are being increasingly used in contemporary domestic environments, while also referencing the origin of this technology in military surveillance. The atmosphere in the video is that of witnessing a crime or seeing a peculiar military operation in action. This subtle blurring of right and wrong teases at ideas such as the Castle Doctrine, where the use of arms is acceptable in defending private property.

The trace of the body

The photographic works in this exhibition were shot in Perth and Beijing and show walls, security devices, fences and fortresses in varying states of construction or decline; from newly declared suburban property lines marked in fresh colour-bond fencing, to the decaying territory of the castle. Certain formal qualities in the photographs are echoed in the sculptural works; the use of muted greys, the large and un-precious scale of the works and the seeming lack of inhabitants.

The materials commonly used to define boundaries form the basis of the sculptural work, and although employing abstract forms, the works question our position in the urban landscape. While the human body appears absent in Coates' work, it is implicitly referenced in the relationship between the concrete and other objects; swollen car airbags pushing against a concrete slab, a vein of red LEDs feeding into a block of cement, and tumorous shapes growing from the surface of a concrete mound. The trace of the body is also evident in Spiers' photographs which explore and depict the consequences of human activity. The question of how our organic, yielding bodies respond to the rigid urban environment that we have created to keep ourselves safe, runs beneath the explicit content of the exhibition.

Coates' *Immovable Object Against an Unstoppable Force* comprises of two elements; a concrete slab and an inflated structure made of car airbags. These two materials are in sustained tension with one another; the concrete slab is suspended from the ground by the cushion of airbags, and the airbags are pressed down and shaped by the downward force of the concrete slab. It appears that the protective function of the airbags ultimately secures the system in an immobile state; a cautionary tale about the dangers of excessive physical security.

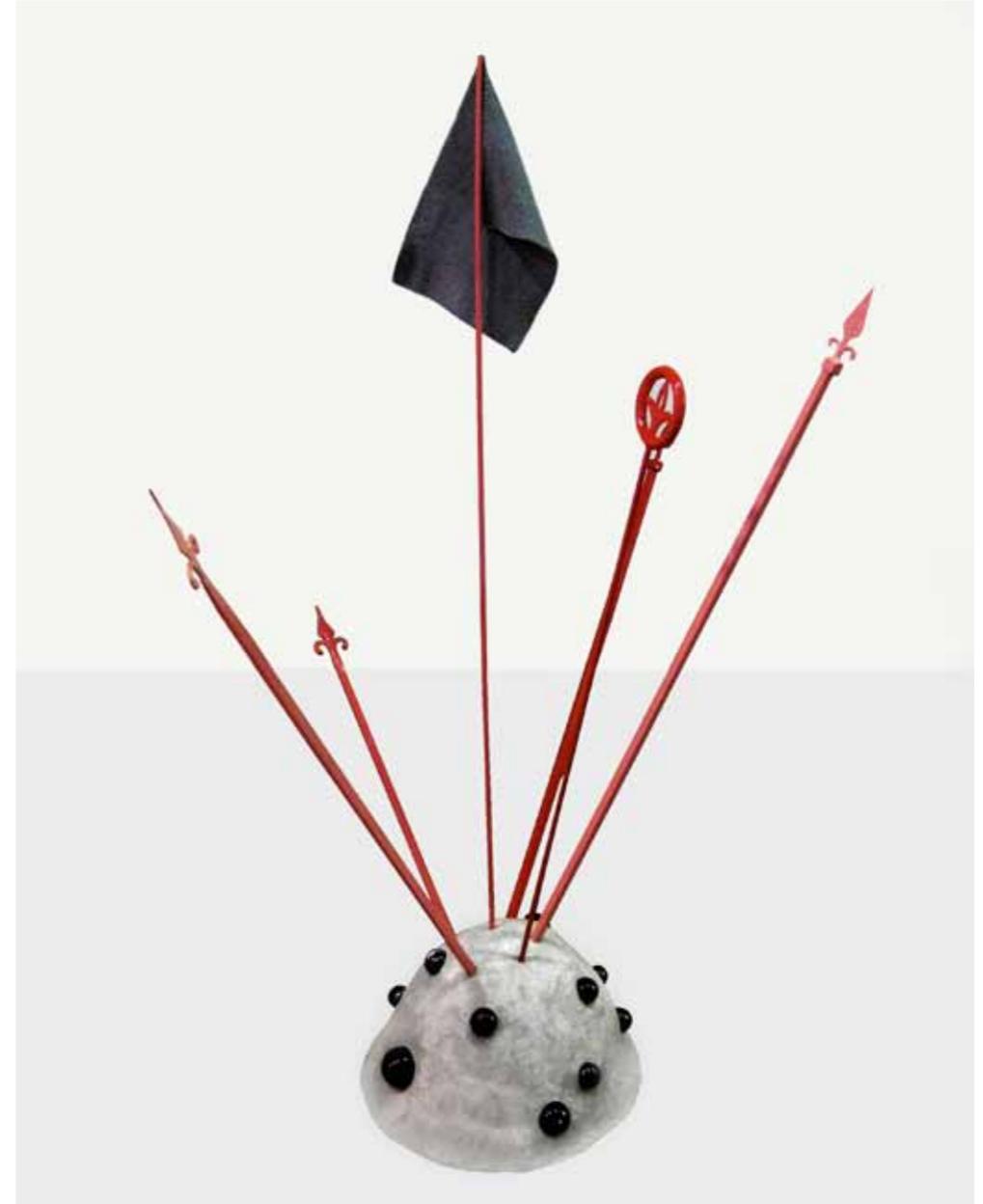
The works in *Surface Tension* provide an enquiry into spatial demarcation and the processes of urbanisation. While these themes carry global relevance and refer to a homogenisation of space, the artworks in this show reflect a nuanced and specifically Australian perspective. Exhibited within the context of Beijing, Coates and Spiers' work is set against a backdrop of unprecedented urban transformation; a process that does not come without contestation. The presentation of the work in China opens new readings for the artworks and extends the visual vocabulary into an international realm.

1. The fleur-de-lis symbol dates from at least 12th century France and is historically found in military and imperial crests. It is now commonly used as a decorative element on fence poles.

2. de Certeau, Michel (1984) *The practice of everyday life*, University of California Press, Berkley and London, page 123.



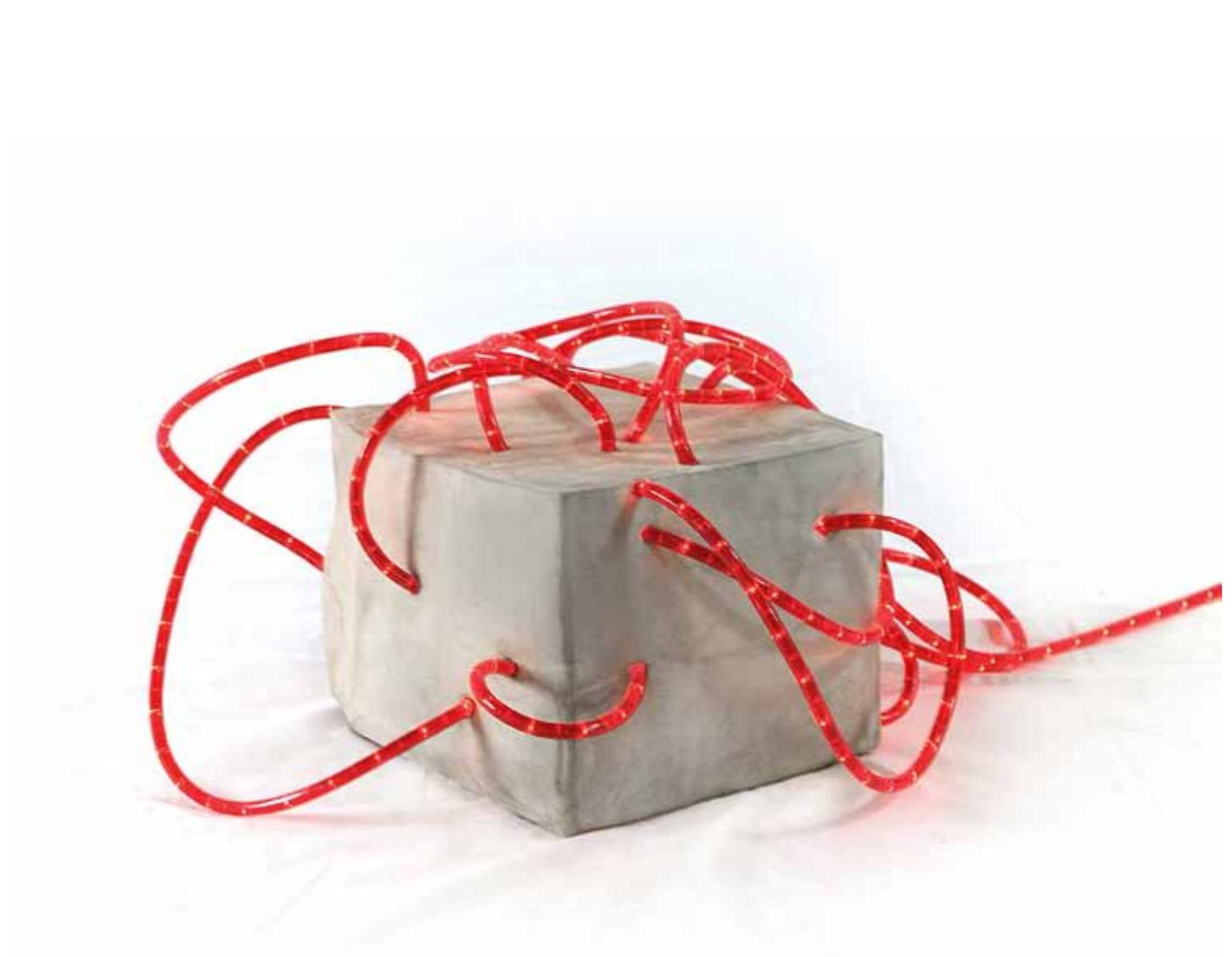
Erin Coates, *Urban Growth I*, 2010,
concrete, medical cupping glasses, steel, nail polish, paint, LEDs, wool, 155 x 40 x 40 cm



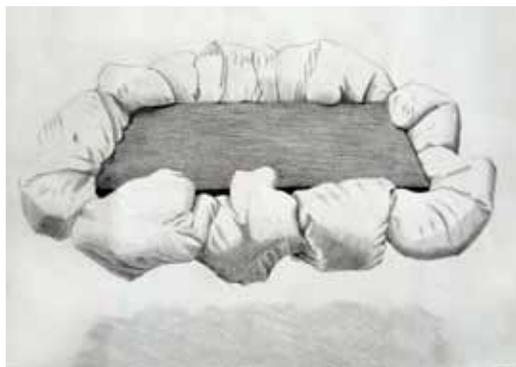
Erin Coates, *Urban Growth II*, 2010,
concrete, medical cupping glasses, steel, fencing pole caps, nail polish, paint, LEDs, wool, 155 x 80 x 80 cm



Erin Coates, *Transfusion* (detail), 2010



Erin Coates, *Transfusion*, 2010, cast concrete and LEDs, 60 x 60 x 45 cm



Erin Coates, planning drawing, 2010, pencil on paper, 35 x 41 cm



Erin Coates, *Immovable Object Against an Unstoppable Force*, 2010, salvaged car air bags, concrete slab, fan, 54 x 120 x 170 cm



Erin Coates, *Infill (fallen sky)*, 2010, flag fabric, fans, dimensions variable
Erin Coates, *Infill (fallen sky)*, 2010, flag fabric, fans, dimensions variable
Erin Coates, planning drawing for *Infill* installation, 2010, pencil on paper, 29 x 32 cm



Erin Coates, *Infill (fallen sky)*, 2010, flag fabric, fans, dimensions variable



Justin Spiers, *Stalker* from the series *Viewing Rooms*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 155 cm



Justin Spiers, *MindCom* from the series *Viewing Rooms*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 155 cm



Justin Spiers, *A momentary sun*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 155 cm



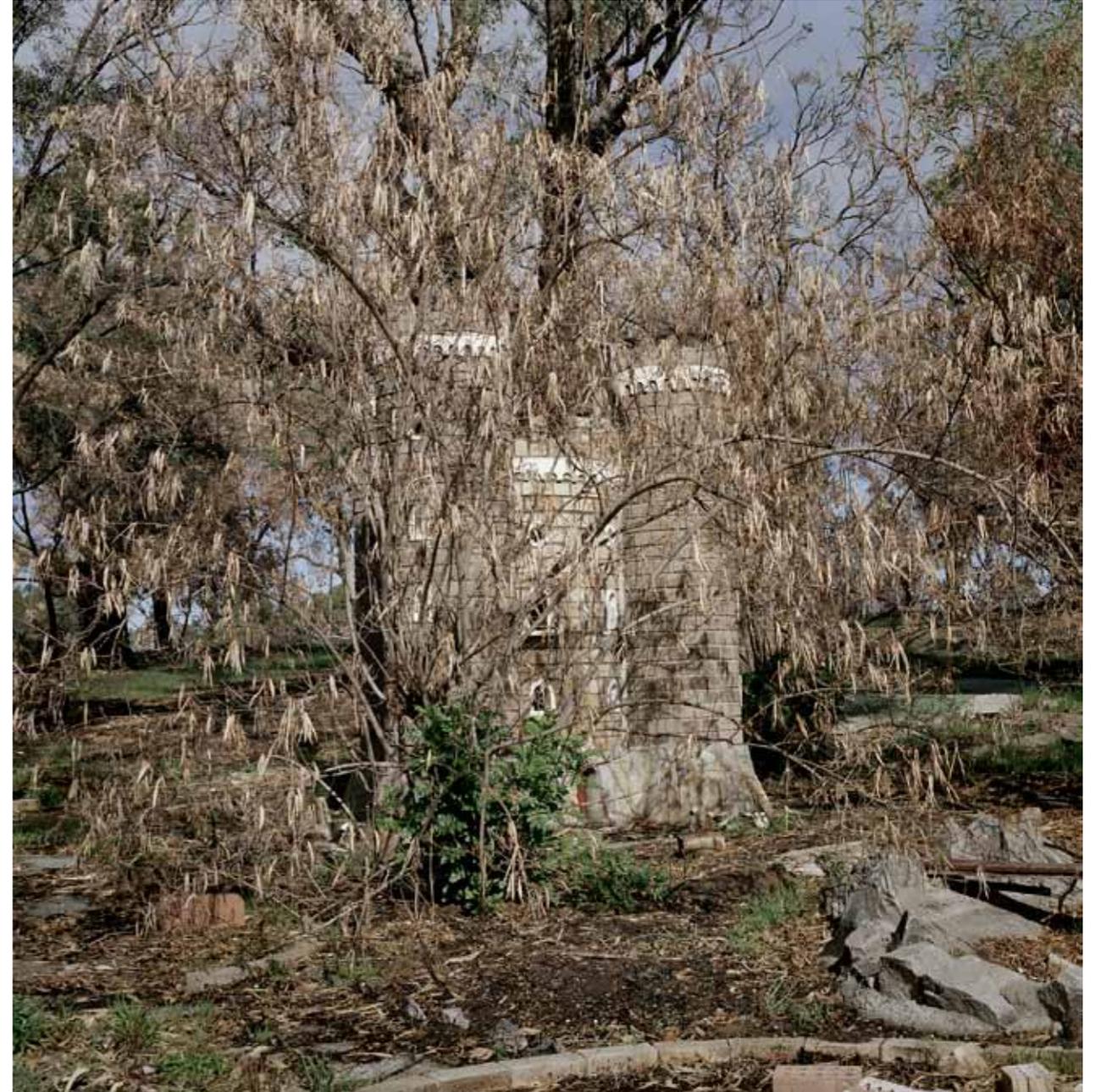
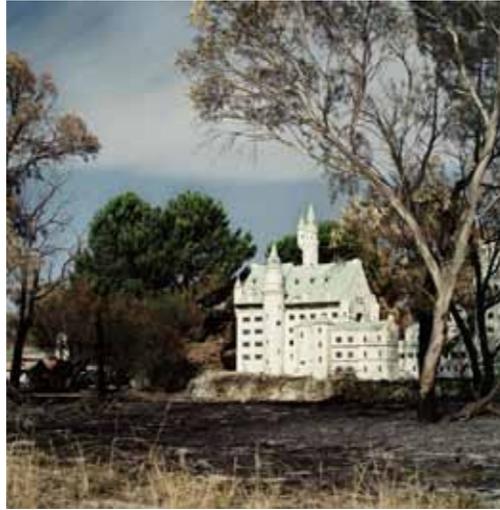
Justin Spiers, *Pretending to be fearless*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 155 cm



Justin Spiers, *The timid habit of the skin*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 155 cm



Justin Spiers, *Alternate view*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 155 cm



Justin Spiers, *Until the night dies*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 107 cm
Justin Spiers, *Control*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 155 cm
Justin Spiers, *A secret life*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 155 cm

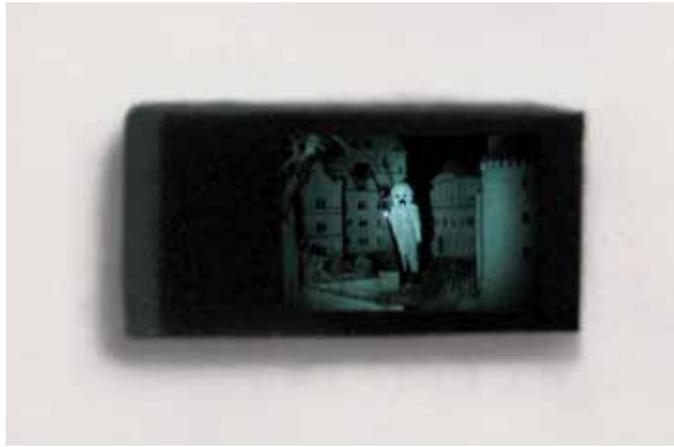
Justin Spiers, *The invisible bones of the face*, 2010, photographic print on Hahnemühle paper, 107 x 107 cm



Erin Coates and Justin Spiers, *Erasing the White Castle* (video still detail)



Erin Coates and Justin Spiers, *Erasing the White Castle* (video stills), 2010, HD infrared video, 16:9 format, with sound, 4:45 minutes



INTERVIEW

Kate Abon speaks with
Erin Coates and Justin Spiers

KA: You have been collaborating on video projects for a couple of years now, but you maintain your respective practices in other media. Can you tell me about how you came to work together and why it is only videos you make collaboratively?

JS: For the past three years we have been discussing our work with each other and after a while we realised that although we work in different media we were both interested in certain types of built structures and in staging actions in relation to them. We had both separately been looking at security cameras – the appearance of them as well as the grainy, infrared footage shot through them – and from there we began to think about a video work together. Our first collaborative work was a 3-channel video called *The Greenwood Guardian* which involved a lot of crawling around suburban rooftops at night and tying tiny night-vision cameras to long poles. It's pretty amazing neither of us broke any bones. We learnt a lot from making this work, and it generated further ideas.

EC: There can be something quite alchemical about collaborations, and the strange path that an idea follows when it shifts between two artists. I had worked with video for a number of years before Justin and I worked together, but I would never have made these works solely through my own practice. I am still predominately concerned with sculpture, installation and drawing and Justin with photography. But certainly the ideas we talk about influence each beyond the video work, and the separate works in this exhibition were created in dialogue with each other.

KA: The collaborative video *Erasing the White Castle* seems like a fun piece to make. There is a sense of crazy irreverence in this project although it is quite a complex work, would you agree?

JS: Yeah, it was a mixture of fun and terror. The video was shot in infrared, so during the filming process there wasn't actually any visible light – we were effectively shooting in pitch-blackness. Added to this, I am wearing a giant mouse suit, which makes climbing up a castle in the dark considerably more challenging. We chose to make the figure wear a Mickey Mouse suit as this married the character back to the associations of the castle with Walt Disney's famous 'Sleeping Beauty' castle, which was based on the iconic Neuschwanstein castle in Bavaria. The infrared causes the normal contrast of tones to shift dramatically, so Mickey's suit has an odd whiteness to it. We wanted him to be in stark contrast to the cartoon figure we remember from childhood, and to make it difficult for the viewer to reconcile his behaviour with that of the original Mickey. In historical Eurocentric binaries of good and evil, black is always the latter, and so we can assume that painting the castle black taints the structure in some way. This 'dark side' of Disney partly references Walt Disney and his role in the 1950s Communist witch hunts. It is also about the relationship between European architecture and the Australian bushland.

EC: In our video, the Mickey Mouse character is both guard and vandal and we cannot tell if his painting/erasing of the castle is an act of protection or effacement. We shot this work at night to generate a heightened sense of theatricality (verging on horror) that is very different to the 'happy' light-filled spectacle that is Disneyland.

KA: The Mickey Mouse character also appears in your other collaborative work, *The Guardian*. What is happening in this video?

JS: This little video pays homage to the boredom of guards. *The Guardian* is shown on a tiny screen inside a wall-mounted black box. The guard here is a Mickey Mouse suited character who listlessly stands with an oversized rifle. The video is only 30 seconds long and for most of it character doesn't move – making the work look more like a still image. In the final few seconds the guardian shifts the rifle in his hands, turns from one side to the next, then walks off screen, behind a turret.

EC: We shot this piece at the same time as the other video, but it wasn't until we were living in China that we edited it into this work. There are so many guards in China, standing in tiny guard boxes outside apartment complexes, or in banks or expensive shops. Often they look no older than 17, and wear oversized military-guard informs. They stave off the boredom by playing music on their mobile phones. There is something tragically comical about guards and the guise of seriousness they try to maintain.

KA: Justin, the lost Neuschwanstein castle has featured in your photographic work as well. It seems to relate to your interest in spaces of entertainment, can you tell me more about this photographic project?

JS: Yes, it is a part of a larger series – or set of series – I have been making that deals with spaces of entertainment and sites of artificial nature, such as amusement parks and zoos. I am interested in the qualities of failure in these sites, where the artifice of spatial production becomes somehow 'unmasked'. When I work in these sites I see the camera as remaining unconvinced by the attempted illusion, which contrasts with how photography is often used in such spaces – it colludes with the 'fantasy' and suspension of disbelief people enter into. China has provided some exceptional spaces to continue this project, as did the lost Germanic mini-land where I found the Neuschwanstein castle. In that series of images I focused on the relationship between the decaying structures and the natural environment they are in. The authority of the architecture, as we imagine it in its original scale and state, is severely eroded within the setting of the encroaching bushland. The little castles seem to want to camouflage themselves amongst the bushes and trees, for lack of any other defensive mechanism.

KA: That's interesting because I see Erin's *Urban Growth* sculptures as also exuding a kind of pathetic defensiveness.

EC: The dome sculptures have been referred to as 'melted darleks', which I think is hilarious. They are certainly guarding an absurdly small area of land. These sculptures appear to be made from materials that are found in public urban space; I wanted to mould these substances into a new form, to make something that was of this space yet an inversion of its rationality and control. Kind of like a bubble that has ruptured from the sidewalk. The domes also look a bit like caricatures of a moon surface – I'm thinking of that great prop in Méliès' film 'A Trip to the Moon' (1902) – and in a sense they are like mini-planets that are tiny but have already been claimed and instated with a home-made flag, and fortified with odd little defensive features.

KA: This work articulates an incongruity between the materiality of urban space and bodily space. How do you see this idea relating to the other sculptural works you made for *Surface Tension*?

EC: In *Transfusion* I wanted to make the glowing red string of LEDs feed into the swollen cube of concrete like an uncontrolled blood transfusion. There is not a direct symbolic corollary between the forms and the idea of body and city, but certainly they can be read in this kind of relationship. The cube has a strong connection to modernist art and architecture and the city; the string of LEDs is a reminder of the currents of power that run through them. It is also a really cheap, flamboyant way of breaking down some of the authority of the cube, and penetrating its sides. I like the way the strings of red LEDs are used all over the place in China, as building bling, or twisted into simplified Chinese characters on street stalls. Red is an auspicious colour here, meaning power, prosperity, happiness and luck. Seen in a long glowing string, it reminds me of veins and blood.

KA: I like the way the cube bulges. Cement is meant to be straight, providing a certain and sure barrier yet you use it more organically. In *Immovable Object Against an Unstoppable Force* you highlight concrete's vulnerability and its oppressive nature. In contrast with the airbags, there is something almost human about it. Was this intentional?

EC: The scale of the concrete slab relates to the scale of the human body, and is comparable to the size of a single bed, a gravestone or a park bench. The slab shape of the concrete references building materials and architectural space, and I am interested in the notion of architecture as the macro housing of the body and of it representing a type of body itself. Despite the lack of any recognisable anthropocentric qualities, the cement slab stands in for the body that it normally houses; here it is an inert body, in repose or maybe even in death. The slab is cut lose from any larger structures, and almost made vulnerable in the way it is cradled by the airbags.

Image top left: Erin Coates and Justin Spiers, *The Guardian*, 2010, infrared video, 4:3 format, 30 seconds, displayed on 4 x 6 cm screen



Erin Coates, installation image from Surface Tension

JS: It certainly wasn't the concrete slab that was feeling vulnerable when we had to move it – it weighs almost 300kg.

EC: Yeah, it's not always an easy material to work with. It is interesting to me though how concrete has attained a level of invisibility; it's beneath and around us, and in fact it is used more than any other fabricated material in the world. I started using concrete in my sculptures about a year and a half ago, mostly by casting or trowelling it, and this is the first time I have used a found form - a man with a trolley bike helped me bring it to my studio from a pile of discarded building materials.

KA: Where are the car airbags from and why were you interested in working with these objects?

EC: The car airbags were salvaged from wrecking yards in the outer boroughs of Beijing. They are pretty highly charged objects, considering the associations they have with injury and violent death. This is also why I felt there was no need to make figurative reference to the body in this work; it is so implicitly present in this object. The car airbag is a device that is meant to resist force caused by sudden impact, to protect the body during a car accident. Here, it holds the concrete slab in a state of suspension, hovering above the ground. I am interested in the tension between these two materials – pushing against one another in continuous tension – and how this might communicate something of the relationship between the body and the city.

KA: Is this work a critique of the types of urban spaces that we build?

EC: I think this work operates on a more individual than socio-political level. Of course we should think seriously about the way we are constructing the cities we live in, but to develop this sense of criticality I believe it has to come from our own experience. I am interested in how art can alter individual spatial experience and awareness.

Erin Coates

b. Australia
lives in Perth and Beijing

Erin Coates received her BA (Honours) from Curtin University of Perth in 2002, and her MFA from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2005.

Coates participated in *Golden Lining*, as a part of the China International Gallery Exposition and the Caochangdi Spring Photo Festival at Platform China Contemporary Art Institute, 2010. Coates held a solo exhibition *PANANTHEM* at Spectrum Project Space in 2007 and in the following year was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery of Australia and the ABC to make a video portrait for *My Favourite Australian*.

Other exhibitions include *Plan 9 from Public Space* (studio residency and exhibition), Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2009; *Greenwood Guardian*, Guildford Lane Gallery, Melbourne, 2009; *The Yellow Vest Syndrome: recent west Australian art*, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 2009; *Joondalup Invitation Art Award* (winning acquisitive work), Joondalup Lakeside, Perth, 2008; *New Work 3*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth, 2007; *Event 1: Screening*, Morton Street Spare Room Project, Brisbane, 2007; *Beograd Nekad i Sad (Belgrade in the Past and Present)*, Prodajna Galerija, Belgrade, 2005, *Horses For Courses*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Vancouver, 2005; *Flux: Survey of Contemporary Art in Western Australia*, The Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth, 2003.

Coates curated an exhibition of video and light-based work called *Transmission* in 2009, which was held in an abandoned car yard in central Perth. Currently, she is researching Chinese video art for a forthcoming project in Perth.

artist's website: www.erincoates.net

Justin Spiers

b. New Zealand
lives in Perth and Beijing

Justin Spiers' photographic work was shown in a recent solo exhibition, *The Detour*, at Fremantle Art Centre, Perth, 2010. He has twice exhibited in the *National Portrait Prize*, 2009 and 2010, at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. Other exhibitions include *Golden Lining* as a part of the China International Gallery Exposition and the Caochangdi Spring Photo Festival, at Platform China Contemporary Art Institute, 2010; *Greenwood Guardian*, Guildford Lane Gallery, Melbourne 2009; *PPB, Wood Street Gallery, Darwin, 2008; Silver*, as a part of the Artrage Anniversary Festival, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2008; *Year of the Bird*, Hawkesbury Regional gallery, 2008; *Pet Photo Booth*, The Breadbox gallery, Perth, 2007; *Pet Project*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, and Span Gallery, Melbourne, as a part of MIAF, 2006.

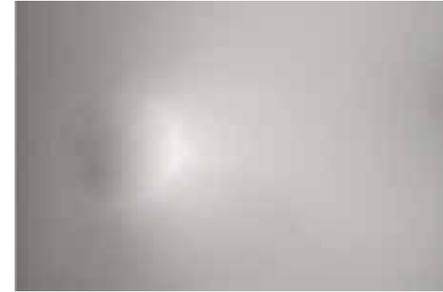
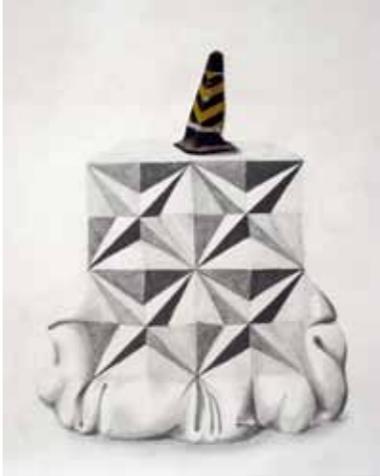
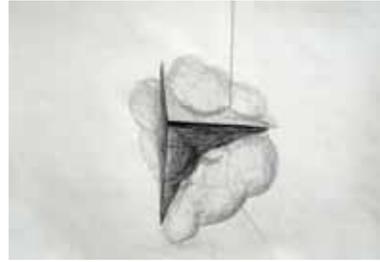
Spiers studied fine arts and film at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch before relocating to Perth, Australia.

From 2004 to 2007 Spiers was the Director of Perth Centre for Photography and curator of several exhibitions, including *Heresies; a Pedro Meyer Retrospective*, 2008; *Phosphorous 15: Fifteen-year anniversary exhibition* for Perth Centre for Photography, 2006; *Sex, Tripe and Bowling* for FotoFreo, Perth Centre for Photography, 2006.

Spiers has published a photographic book *Moeraki*, through Reed Publications, Auckland, 2000, and produced the cover image for *Stonefish*, written by Keri Hulme, Huia Publishers, Wellington, 2004.

Previous artist residencies include Powerhouse Museum, Brisbane, 2009; 24 Hour Art, Darwin, 2008; Australian Centre for Photography, 2006.

artist's website: www.justinspiers.com



APPENDIX

drawings : Erin Coates

photographs : Justin Spiers

All artworks and images are copyright of the artists
Front and back cover: Justin Spiers, *White Surface I (detail)*, 2010, digital print
This project has been supported by the Department of Culture and the Arts, Western Australia



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Red Gate Gallery
