

BLUT & BODEN - gunter christmann

... a one day site & date specific installation

by

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11 November, 2014

media - elemental actuality

- Gunter's collection of bloodied tissues & ochres
- paraphernalia relating to the development of BLUT & BODEN ... as he saw it
- furnishings from Gunter's apartment
- exhaust pipe didgeridoo constructed by Gunter from found elements
- real time sound tapped from inside didgeridoo
- smell of tobacco
- construction media

acknowledgements

The work is indebted to the generous support of the National Art School (NAS) and in particular to Michael Snelling (Director and Chief Executive) and Judith Blackall (Curator and Manager, NAS Gallery) for their advice and direct engagement.

Ben Tooth and Sam Bennett (students at NAS) assisted generously in the creation of the work. Their particular abilities and extensive involvement is greatly appreciated.

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NATIONAT ART SCHOOL J

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background ... to a friendship

The thin old interesting man that I occasionally happened upon in Darlinghurst, ... wandering the streets, ... at times pushing a fragile but alert woman in a wheelchair while huddled over her conversing in loud German, ... or smoking several tables away at the café Tropicana engaged with endless trinkets brought into light from his shoulder bag or belt pouch, be they Jew's harps, a transistor radio held against a large sponge with elastic band, ochres or bits of colourful rubbish in boxes, ... turned out to be the painter Gunter Christmann.

We met at a time when his outward behaviour had become noticeably tender, spanning extremes from fearful anxiety to maddened states of directed rage. Jenny, his wife, partner and collaborator in life, art and thought, had just passed away. Theirs had developed into a complex symbiotic existence, having taken seed in 1963 when they first met.

In time the rawness slowly subsided and we became friends ...

I could easily relate to his appreciation and respect for the here and the now, his arrival at his own standards and codes for life and practice, while all along finding inspiration and strength in the fullness of his resolve.

BLUT & BODEN ... a last work as he saw it

beginnings ...

Over a morning coffee in early July 2013 at Tropicana, Gunter began to cough which was not unusual. Urgently reaching for the serviette dispenser he asked if I was squeamish. I said "No". Discretely unfolding the tissue that he had just spat into, he revealed the now broadly absorbed bloodied wetness, saying it had started a couple of days earlier.

In doing so he had also quietly communicated the cause for the blood.

Several days later he produced a small collection of such serviettes, that had been dried flat. They featured unique blood patterns, somewhat centred, with regions of graduated dilution, as well as concentrations of colour and certain density of matter where lung tissue had been trapped.

Annoyed, he shared that he had been trying to represent these by various pictorial means and that he had been utterly dissatisfied with the results.

Having long invited into my practice the notions of "actuality" and "the incidental", it was natural for me to respond by suggesting that perhaps no representation could be more potent than the actual, particularly here.

This was something he had already suspected.

Having standardised his process he soon began collecting in earnest.

The toilet roll from home had become the paper source of choice, which thanks to the perforations would give him a standard workable size to play with. The growing collection was now housed in a large white envelope that travelled in his shoulder bag.

towards resolution ...

In late September the cancer had begun to make its presence felt and a lump that had advanced between his neck and left shoulder was what he referred to as "the head of the monster". He had caught an over-the-shoulder glimpse on the monitor during a medical scan, and having perceived a face he felt it hadn't looked nasty at all, just "stupid and hungry".

The blood had been lessened to the occasional trace by now. The collection of "nuggets" as he referred to them was complete and had grown to fill a shoebox.

Along with putting his work and personal affairs in order and managing his pain so that he would die at home in the "same spot as Jenny", Gunter felt compelled to give form to the collection of nuggets. It carried the full weight of representing his last work.

Over the course of October he was unable to leave the apartment and became increasingly incapacitated. We forged onwards ... towards resolution, with me simply as sounding board and facilitator. It was of paramount importance to somehow bring into the work his collection of red ochres, which would typically be ground into powder and find their way as pigment onto canvases. Collected in Hyde Park, The Domain, Green Park and corner of Bourke and Stanley, they lived as vibrant clusters in a bowl in the studio. To him they represented the blood of the earth and the certain sense of time and place to which he felt he had come to belong.

He had begun to see individual tissues against a cool grey A4 paper with a black drawn border framing it. The initial leaning had been towards an A4 book with plastic sleeves into which these pages could be inserted, a format he had worked with previously. However the book stood in the way of the ochres and had to thus be abandoned.

The A4 page proposition was soon refined in form and process to serve as a repeatable module.

We explored the potentials of presenting these pages as wall fields, with the ochres in a bowl beneath or individually fixed to the wall.

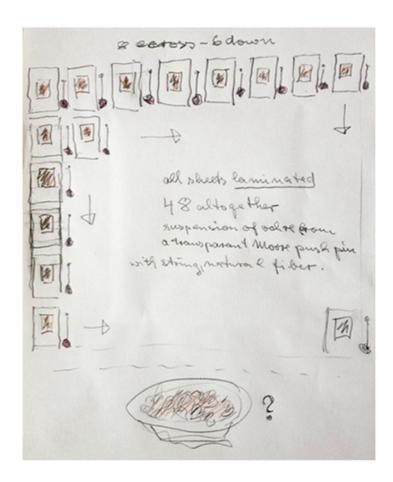


image 1: Gunter's plan for a wall grid presentation of 8 x 6, A4 bloodied tissue modules and strung ochre pairs.

The resolution was arrived at in late October - see *image 1*. The work would take the form of a rectangular grid of the moduled pages on the wall, each paired with an individually strung ochre pinned next to it. The grid would be eight pages across and six high, with twine to serve as the fibre of choice for stringing the ochres.

He saw the work in the context of a white walled gallery.

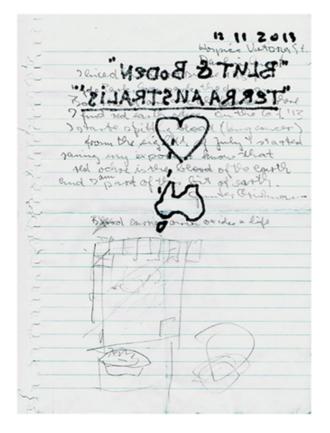
The right title though had thus far eluded him. "EARTH BLOOD" was one.

By early November his condition had deteriorated substantially and the pain was proving unbearable. With the aid of close friends Gunter abandoned his firm-held ambition to breathe his last at "Jenny's spot", and moved into the Hospice. Here he found comfort and excellent care for which he was very thankful. Further, many friends visited and got to say their goodbyes.

title and statement ...

When I saw him on Tuesday, 12 November, he energetically proclaimed "I've got it!" just as I peeked around the drawn curtain, pointing to the note on the side table. It held the title BLUT & BODEN on one side in marker pen, and on the other a pencilled statement of nine lines that he had signed - see *image 2* and transcription below.

"BLUT & BODEN" in German served as title, meaning "BLOOD & EARTH".



12 11 2013 Hospice Victoria St. Darlinghurst

I lived in D'hurst since 1959.
Hyde Park, Green Park, The Domain
Bourke St are the places where
I find red earth ochre. On the 6.7.13
I started spitting blood (lung cancer)
from the eighth of July I started
saving my exponent know that
red ochre is the blood of the earth
and I am part of this bit of earth.

Gunter Christmann

image 2: Gunter's last note dated with title and artist statement - title written in marker pen on opposing side of pencilled statement.

BLUT & BODEN - gunter christmann (2014)

With the note Gunter had implied arrival at an absolute resolution.

Over the course of some four months he had successfully drawn form and meaning out of his nuggets and beloved ochres. From addressing media and process, to title and statement, the work was now ready to be implemented.

I undertook to realise BLUT & BODEN as he saw it.

Minutes later and as though having waited for this very moment, I instinctively put to him the following notion ...

What had held me by the throat all along had been the truth of the man made manifest in deed and to which I had borne witness.

Here he was, an artist, a painter producing his own bodily medium, his own pigment, acutely aware of his end being very near. He had genuinely struggled for form and meaning, and had managed to doggedly push it all towards resolution.

I asked if he would allow me to respond to this very truth as an artist. To be suggestive of it through my own work ... through my own language and form, in which the actualities of artefact and experience of BLUT & BODEN would serve as source material for an installation that honoured it.

The answer that came was a generous and emphatic "Yes".

Neither of us knew at the time what form it would take, nor how and where it would be shown.

He passed away on the 19th, one week after handing me the note.

BLUT & BODEN - gunter christmann, (2014), has become that work, exhibited as a one day site and date specific installation in the Cell Block of the National Art School on the anniversary of the note, with the broader notion of Darlinghurst - the place of his connections, serving as site.



image 3: Installation view; "BLUT & BODEN - gunter christmann" (2014); artist impression.