

**Image credit:** Leigh Hobba, *Any Which Way*, 2007, Video installation, silent, Dimensions Variable, Courtesy of the Artist.

# LEIGH HOBBA

## STONED (Any Which Way)

FEB 29 - AUG 2 2020

### FOREWORD

Leigh Hobba is a very significant artist in the development of Australian video art as both a teacher and as an artist.

Leigh Hobba has exhibited extensively since 1976. His experimental performances and videos were first exhibited at Adelaide's Experimental Art Foundation in the mid-1970s. For thirty years Hobba taught video and new media practice at the Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart. Hobba has exhibited widely internationally, including at the Biennale de Paris, Biennale of Sydney, Fotofeiss, Scotland and the Centre International Creation Video at Montbeliard, France.

On a personal note, Hobba was important to my developing interest in art as a young, first year art school student. It was at this time, I encountered Leigh's *Lighthouse* video work when he was Artist in Residence. The simple but uncanny qualities of the work captured me and burnt into my memory.

Hobba's work is both simple and unique. His work demonstrates a capacity to distil the elements that go to make up our feeling of 'presence' and 'being'. We don't need to necessarily understand his work; we just need to experience and to register its effect in our bodies.

LRG is delighted to present two important works of this artist to you. Slow down, and let the videos of Leigh Hobba bewitch you.

● David O'Halloran, Senior Curator,  
Latrobe Regional Gallery

## STONED (Any Which Way) <sup>1</sup>

In pre-exhibition conversation with Senior Curator David O'Halloran, he suggested my work was about 'stones'. Reflecting on this, I realised that the three curatorial intersections we have had over the years, gave weight to this perception. I felt it appropriate therefore, to take a ramble through some of these works, and test this notion.

When my Great Uncle Arthur died in the 1950's, his shed on a small residential block in Walkerville, Adelaide was filled with the most wondrous 'stuff'. The dispersal resulted in all the family descendants receiving boxes of new or near new tools, many still in their original wax paper wrapping.

I claimed as mine, a collection of geological specimens, sparkling, glittering and curious, each labelled as to type, a hand-written ink pen label wrapped around each rock, held in place with an elastic band.

Compactions of silica and quartz, faceted stones, triclinically structured gems, tabular crystals, pleochroic wonders changing colour depending on angle and direction of the light. Phosphophyllites, feldspars, striated crystals, plasma varieties of chalcedony quartzes, striated, geniculated, hard, heavy and fragile.

In one of those moments, the impulse of which I now remember as childhood defining, I unwrapped those labels, perhaps, if I am generous to that childhood, wanting to better touch and look at the beauty of those rocks as objects, rather than as a collection of names which meant less to me. Like the inherited chest of hand tools, that now lie rusted, obsolete and functionally useless, Uncle Arthur's rock collection became just a box of rocks, but within that box, resided some part of the man I had only fleetingly met as a child when I would call in to his tailor's shop to collect large cotton reels for French knitting.

On my list of childhood misdemeanors, pulling the labels off Uncle Arthur's rock collection, I find myself guilty of 'squandered inheritance'.

His rock collection has long been replaced by my own – a battered box of memories.

The first time I left Australia, I was given two gifts. One was a book, "The oracle of changes" – how to consult the i-ching, with a set of coins, given to me by Noel Sheridan who at that time was Director of the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide. Noel's work, Everybody should get stones, was a landmark conceptual art work exhibited at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1975, the title riffing off Bob Dylan's song from 1966, Everybody Must Get Stoned.

Noel filled the ground floor gallery with river stones and offered the audience, via a complex matrix of choices, possible ways to interact.



Image credit: Uncle Arthur's tools (detail)

Now, throwing the i-ching, looking for re-assurance as to how I might proceed with this walk through my life with stones, my reading was:

hexagram 4. Meng – Youthful Folly –  
above – Keeping Still, Mountain,  
below – The Abysmal, Water

The Judgement

Youthful Folly has success.

It is not I who seek the young fool:

The young fool seeks me...

Does this release me from my childhood misdemeanour with Uncle Arthur's rock collection? You may think it would.

The second parting gift was a 'hag' stone. A hag stone is a stone with a hole in it, carved by the action of moving water. It offers many levels of magical protection and insight to the wearer as it is believed the now still water captured by the action of erosion, remains as energy within the stone and has power towards all manner of good fortune.

I remember a day when I picked up an Elder flying in for a gig at a Country Music Festival in Adelaide. He was a respected and celebrated leader from the Rirratjingu group of the Yolngu people.

He arrived with an attaché case containing some eucalyptus leaves and a Phantom comic. Since that day, I have carried my own rock collection in an attaché case or similar.

I travel with a good size handful of volcanic rock from Mt. Schanck, a volcanic crater near my childhood home in Mt Gambier, a small bag of rock concrete chips I bought from a group of East Germans who were chipping away at the Berlin wall with geological rock picks in 1989, various ochres collected near Maningrida in Arnhem Land for use as base pigments for etching prints, (most recently a series of digitally cut wood blocks titled A Room Full of Rivers), and a river stone from the Finke river near Alice Springs.

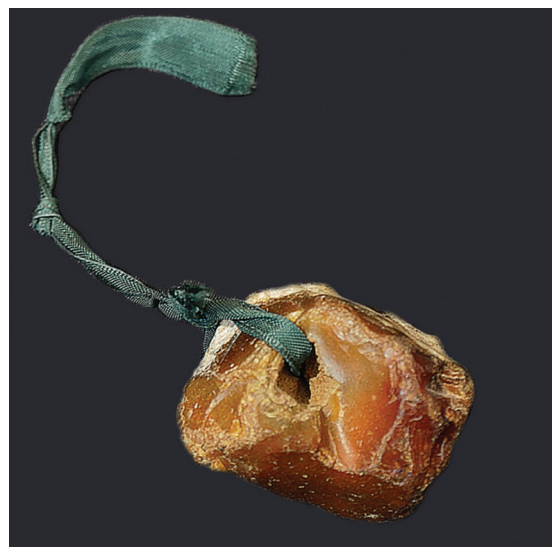
**Image credit: (right)** Hag stone, gift from Amatullah (formerly known as Jilly Armstrong), Courtesy of the Artist

## Thibaud views the 80's from the 90's

The fall of the Berlin wall, the iconic moment that drew a line under the Cold War, saw masses of East Germans flock across liberated check points, and the streets around the Berlin Hauptbahn filled with trolley loads of consumer goods, long denied the people trapped in the East of the city since 1961. The composite makeup of the concrete resembles the glacial fusion of the quartz conglomerate rocks from Frenchmans Cap and Mt Roland in Tasmania. Fused within the coarse concrete are fossil-like fragments of variously mined gravel stones, along with crushed paving stones from the streets of the city.

Fused also within these fragments is the historical narrative of that 'Wall of Shame' as referred to by the West, or the 'Anti-Fascist as referred to by the West, or the 'Anti-Fascist Protection ampart' as referred to by the GDR authorities.

On returning to Australia for the birth of my son, I wondered with hope, for his future through the 90's and beyond. The fragment of concrete/rock/wall from Berlin, used in the installation, was infused with the history of its making and contextualised meaning – surface graffiti covering historical division. I chose to pay for the chips the East Berliners were hacking away – they deserved it, they owned that history; a heritage demolished and dispersed as souvenirs, as art into galleries, as objects into museums of history and culture, and into private collections like my battered attaché case, across the world.



## Red

Following a 10 day walk on the Larapinta trail out from Alice Springs, undertaken with the somewhat elusive goal of recording night-calls of the desert dingo, I re-visited memories of an earlier 4WD journey, following the Finke River from Alice Springs to the town of Finke. The Finke River is one of the oldest if not the oldest river in the world. On this revisit, I walked a length of the dry bed, listening for the sounds of rocks, percussive, clinking musically as I walked, moving the rocks, listening for the sounds within the rocks energised by 400 million years or so of geological memory.

"...the sounds of memory, an evocation of an ancient timelessness and process – a clock marking the millenniums as seconds, the process of time and change. While swimming in a water hole the next day in that same river, it rained." <sup>2</sup>

This action informed several showings of an interactive installation titled "RED", one iteration of which was curated by David O'Halloran into the exhibition "Spooky", at the Glen Eira City Gallery.

An electro-magnetic trigger system reacting to a pressure pad caused one rock to fall against the other, making a distinctive, dry, pitched 'clink.' It became the first in a trilogy of works, *RED*, *WHITE* and *BLUE(S)*, which I completed over a period of time.

### **I've seen Mycenae glistening across the wine dark sea**

I used this Homeric title to accompany a proposal to exhibit an installation within a shipping container, bound for Copenhagen as one of 96 containers from sea ports around the world, for its European City of Culture celebrations in 1996, the Australian and New Zealand component of which was curated by David.

I had a fascination with Frenchmans Cap, a quartz capped mountain in the South-West of Tasmania. I had walked into the Cap several times – its was a four day challenge I used as a solo journey to keep tabs on my mental and physical well being.

There are several staging points on this walk, the last being a hut from which a final ascent to the top can be achieved in an easy return day. As I approached and had my first close view of the peak, a lightning storm moved across the Cap, striking the quartz summit. Despite the dynamics of the event, it was the actualisation of a recurring series of dreams I had had about the mountain which I had mythologised as 'Dreams in High Places'. In these dreams, lightning was hitting the Cap illuminating and putting charge into the quartz; white, thrilling, sublime. I ducked for cover and pulled out my camera.

"...there is a sense of timelessness as a postcard size image is projected. Around 15 minutes into the video, the erupting sound of thunder can be heard...with increasing and ultimately awesome crescendo, a violent thunderclap completely overtakes the soundspace of the gallery, and for a fleeting moment, the postcard size image is magnified to full screen before returning to its former position. The video offers a compelling representation of the sublime..." <sup>3</sup>

This experience, the early European view of an Arcadian Tasmanian landscape, the fleeting moment of lightning illumination, the hallucinatory release of narratives and dreams that are part of the joy of solo walks, was something I wanted to fill my container with and ship it off to Copenhagen, back to exhibit within the early European vision of 'place.'

I embedded these ideas in a large quantity of quartz rocks, collected from the rock bed at the foot of Frenchmans Cap. Each was chosen for its 'feel' of this embeddedness.

The work has had three iterations; Adelaide Festival 1996 and Copenhagen '96. Both curated by David, and at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in a 2007 retrospective (visited by David).



## Any Which Way

When I was reviewing work for a survey show in 2007, I came across a performance work I did at the Experimental Art Foundation back in the day when the lovers and the others<sup>4</sup> applauded equally extreme silliness and extreme catharsis at performance art nights in cold basements on Friday nights. The work (*Ringing 4 bells with the left and right hands*) involved ringing a permutation of four identical bells with the left and right hands until all permutations had been realised.

I adapted this as the score for the changing light states in the piece *Any Which Way*, adapted to accommodate all permutations of backlight, key light, fill light.

I shot it as an analogue studio shoot while 'performing' all permutations of the light states.

*Any Which Way* as a site for this reprise was also from the idea in 12-tone music, that if you took a 12-tone row of pitched frequencies, and then subjected that to the variations of retrograde, inversion, retrograde inversion, these four variations of the row, could still be considered, under the rules of compositional engagement, the same thing. That is, if you look at an apple, turn it upside down, reverse it and then backwards reverse it, it's still an apple...*any which way* you look at it, it's still an apple. I recall Korean video artist Nam June Paik doing something similar with an egg, but that was more about scale – with different sized monitors displaying the same shot of an egg.

The rock is conglomerate, glacial scree from Mt Roland in the North-West of Tasmania. I brought a selection down off the mountain. It is always mildly fascinating to me, as to how to select a rock – what kind of aura does it give for it to be selected from a scree tumble. These rocks carry within them the history of forced conglomeration as a result of enormous pressure over a period of unimaginable time.

I brought these kinds of thoughts to my studio treatment of the rock, floating it in time and space.

## Summary

The works on show at the Latrobe Regional Gallery, *Lighthouse* (1984) and *Any Which Way* (2007), are more than 30 years apart. They share an interest in exploring the aesthetics inherent in technology and the possibilities for making visible/audible my interpretation of the world around me as central.

In 1980 I was rafting down rivers with a portable Betamax recorder and brick size batteries in order to achieve a tracking shot. Now I fly a drone. In 2007, it was important that *Any Which Way* reflect a performative one-take analogue sensibility, today I might consider realising it as a fully digital manipulation, but I would never have found the insight.

Now, I can easily achieve cinematic quality imagery with modest cost outlays, replicate the ubiquitous drone shot with ease, create animated narratives with the designer tools of software, and have the history of compositional techniques available to me as a series of pre-sets in software – cold war warrior.

For a catalogue entry at the time of making *Any Which Way*, I wrote:

"Video seemed to me an ideal way to extend my ideas about both experimental and conceptual installation. It was the perfect package to carry sound and image as elements. It had the potential to both document, to re-vision and to re-locate meaning. It allowed process to unfold over extended time".<sup>5</sup>

Gone now is the warm embrace of analogue, replaced by the cold colonisation of replicating digital, ideas of process compressed through convergence – coherence of communities fractured in a race towards viral.

• Leigh Hobba, January 2020





**Image credit:** *Ringling 4 bells with the left and right hands*, 1976, Performance, Courtesy of the artist



**Image credit:** *I've seen Mycenae glistering across the wine dark sea*, 1996, Mixed Media Installation, Courtesy of the Artist.

1. An expanded version with links is at <https://www.leighhobba.online/stoned-any-which-way>
2. Leigh Hobba, *The Space of Presence*, ISBN 9780977533435 (2007)
3. *ibid.*, Professor Jonathon Holmes
4. Elwyn Lynn, on art, from a comment I somewhere remember.
5. *ibid.*, Leigh Hobba

<https://www.leighhobba.online>