







CRAZY FINGERS
17 MAY - 24 JUNE 2011
SASA GALLERY

I've been reading Proust.

It's one of those pronouncements that can be differently interpreted, depending on your point of view, as pomposity or snobbishness, or an admission of a time waster or neurotic. Or all of the above.

I had a memorable dream. In it, I was about to give an art theory lecture, pretty much on automatic pilot, script in hand of a lecture which had been served up a few times before. I adjusted the microphone and looked up at the audience, but it transpired that the assembled company was poised to receive a standup comedienne: I was in a comedy club. I explained a little haltingly to the members of the gathered company that I intended to lecture them in art theory. They exploded with appreciative laughter. Then, by way of further introduction, I felt obliged to tell them how I had become an art theory lecturer: though a combination of poor career advice, misapprehensions about how to establish an art practice as a print-maker, and other quirks of fate. I related, deadpan, the biographical facts and, in response, the audience wiped tears of mirth from their cheeks and struggled to draw breath. While I had them eating out of the palm of my hand, I decided to quit while I was ahead, so I said briskly, 'And *that*, ladies and gentlemen, is how I became a Performance Artist! My audience guffawed as one, applauded vigorously, the dream ended and I awoke.

It is a dream that has left a strong residue. My dreamt-of comedy club audience hangs at the margins of my consciousness, taking pleasure at the banalities of my existence. To admit to reading Proust is, for some, to admit to Not Having A Life, but this is not what it signifies to *my* Audience. It greets the phrase 'I've been reading Proust!' with slightly delayed, sympathetic mirth.

To that empathic audience I'd say that the former self of my twenties and thirties prejudged Proust as something to explore in my sixties. A really *thick* book like *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* had seemed to be a bit like desert course, pudding, for well into one's second half-century. But, I've succumbed early, like a fridge-thief in the night, chomping down on all tomorrow's puddings. If I delivered these lines to my audience, first there would come a semibreve of indrawn collective breath, then a gathering chorus of low chuckles, joined by some titters and wheezes, the last of which would last for a full minute: *this* audience knows that to surrender to Proust signifies not simply premature ageing, nor having nothing better to do, but

being *very worried about yourself*. And I take that phrase from none other than Germaine Greer.

I was yet to read Proust when I read what Germaine Greer had to say about him a couple of years ago. She wrote in her Guardian blog, 'If you haven't read Proust, don't worry. This lacuna in your cultural development you do not need to fill. On the other hand, if you have read all of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, you should be very worried about yourself. As Proust very well knew, reading his work for as long as it takes is *temps perdu*, time wasted, time that would be better spent visiting a demented relative, meditating, walking the dog or learning ancient Greek.'¹ From her critique, we may glean that Germs must be worried about *herself*, as she reveals a deep familiarity with the inefficiently long *À la Recherche Du Temps Perdu*. She's like a smoker taking a deep, voluptuous drag on a cigarette whilst expounding that no-one in their right mind should take up the habit. For certain of us, that's just bait.

Yes, I'm worried about myself. Perhaps you should be too, if you aren't already. My dream of the comedy club audience is, itself, Proustian. Bar *you* of course, gentle reader, you who've made it to the **fifth** paragraph, I can't be sure that this audience of mine does, or should, or could exist, and so I live the life of a rhapsodic, expansive extrovert stuck in the body of a hesitant introvert. In this bewildering state, I enjoy a series of dark private jokes, which occasionally I risk sharing, and every so often someone laughs – but who knows exactly why. In trying to navigate, I have become a mental health hypochondriac.

I can easily persuade myself that I am bipolar. I base my diagnosis mainly on the marvelous phrase, *flight of ideas*, which refers to a way of expressing of a flow of thoughts that listeners find impossible to follow, as the connections seem to be based in obscure metaphor. (If you can spot the architecture of this essay, then you are doing well: I assure you, it is very structured). I also recognize myself in the clinical description of obsessive compulsive disorder. Only my obsessions are about a wide variety of things, coming to fixate on a few only when I have a writing project with a very tight word limit. My limbs (*mainly* my limbs but *also* my teeth) are schizophrenic, as they seem to vary so much in scale, sometimes seeming monumental, sometimes thin and fillet like; sometimes very, very distant from my torso and head. It's my torso that suffers from

depression, mostly between the shoulders, though at various times any or all of my internal organs can become depressed. Considering the title of this exhibition, I'd like to report that my fingers are almost always completely unafflicted by mental illness, though I am monitoring my right thumb and forefinger, which can get bit arthritic and saturnine when over exposed to keyboards.

Gentle Reader – or, by now, Seriously Off-Side Reader, you may be thinking that this is completely inappropriate: that I am making light of mental illness. Far from it. All jokes aside, for many years I was, in fact, beset by a phobia which first emerged when I was about sixteen, and which was resolved about ten years later through a variety of therapies including aversion therapy. To be released from the grip of my phobia was, of course, a relief but, I must say, it turned out to be not an entirely good outcome. My phobia had centred on moths and, frankly, the summation of all my anxieties into one neat concrete theme had utility. Of course it is stupid to have morbid horror of harmless moths, such that one's adrenal and cardiovascular systems go into overdrive in the presence of one, but I assure you there *are* some things to recommend it. It is reasonably contained (it was when it began to embrace butterflies and other flutterers that I took steps to treat it); there was a nice interpretable symbolism to mine, as moths represent an Icarian compulsion, the first syllable of 'mother', and as they feast on unread pages and unworn clothes they seem to represent stasis or entropy. Through moths one can meditate upon mortality and life's imponderables. What is more, the fluttering mothy sensation that I used to get always heralded change of a significant kind, and I could use that as a barometer for being *in extremis*: "pull back, here come the mothies". Being 'cured' shattered the symbolic unity of my anxiety, and its diaspora now seeks form and identity in so many ways, hence the partial applicability of so many labels.

Most lately I have diagnosed myself with Aspergers, which explains a lot about my poor social skills, disinhibited aspects and poor sense of propriety, so if I am speaking out of turn here about mental illness categories in a catalogue essay, indulge me: it's because of my Aspergers. My diagnosis has come about because of my five year old son's disinclination to participate in Physical Education. His teachers suggested that perhaps he has Aspergers. I was just as uncoordinated at his age, and as prone to simply wandering off from the herd of team players, so I looked up

Aspergers. It fits, mostly. This diagnosis also explains why I often don't smile back at people when they smile at me, and why I often talk over people in conversation: I had thought my conversational style was simply Polish.

I have to make the most of my latest diagnosis, because it will expire shortly: in 2013 Aspergers will be expunged from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* of psychiatric disorders, and downgraded to a simple human difference, which only leaves months for me to exploit my new found condition.

According to my limited understanding of the literature (hypochondriacs must only skim the surface, as too much epidemiology can ruin everything for us) Aspergers, like being gay, is to be rejected as a pathology or disability, and reconstructed as either merely socially constructed difference, or in more severe instances a position on the autism scale.² In late nineteenth century Paris, bourgeois children were not subjected to Physical Education but schooled at home and taken for walks, usually all of this was overseen by social misfits, apparently, and in Proust's world, all the children seemed to be peculiar: it would not have been possible to pick an Asperger. Today though, I'm not sure where the decommissioning of Aspergers leaves all the people who have found the label an enabling key to life, and established numerous chat rooms and self help groups. I have some suggestions, however, based on my reading of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. We could form *salons* (arguably this has already occurred, if you consider an Asperger support group a salon). I am proposing, ergo, a post-Aspergian Belle Époque. If you're worried about yourself or lost for a self-diagnosis, or if you actually recently lost a diagnostic category altogether, you can always read Proust. It won't exactly help, but it can be a badge of dishonor.

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1. Germaine Greer, guardian.co.uk, Sunday 8 November 2009

2. Sarah Allred, 'Reframing Asperger Syndrome: lessons from other challenges to the Diagnostic and statistical manual and ICDH approaches', *Disability & Society*, vol. 24, no. 3, May 2009, 343–355.

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Images:

Front: Brigid Noone, *Paint me warm*, installation view, Seedling art space, Hawthorndene, Adelaide, 2008.
Middle: Amy Patterson, untitled, 2011
Back: Mary-Jean Richardson, *Lost Girl 4* (detail), 2011

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