

○

I am the kind of person
you should choose to
have with you.

You are the kind of person
I would choose to
have with me.

○

17 SEPTEMBER -
14 NOVEMBER 2010



*I am the kind of person you should choose
to have with you. You are the kind of
person I would choose to have with me.*

2010

Photograph: Joseph Breikers

Pulling toward each other, struggling against each other.

17 SEPTEMBER -
14 NOVEMBER 2010

Catherine Sagin, formerly known as Fiona Mail, is the current pseudonym for the collaborative art practice of Catherine Sagin and Kate Woodcroft. As a young and emerging duo they explore the dynamics of collaboration and task-based activities, adopting the posture of the conceptual performance artist, and through both digital-video and custom-built structures.

The title of the duo's new installation *I am the kind of person you should choose to have with you. You are the kind of person I would choose to have with me* immediately establishes a poetic dichotomy. On the one hand it expresses the bond between the collaborative duo. It also addresses the audience directly. It speaks of the duo's relationship with the audience and conversely our watching them, as well as our relationship with others. It articulates a melancholy position of loneliness or separation as well as a desire, longing, aspiration or wish to be connected with others and the world at large.

The poetic dualities of all these potential relationships materialise in the installation. A raised jetty inhabits the gallery, creating a platform from which the video component may be contemplated. The jetty resides in memory and nostalgia, as a place for moments of reflection or self-awareness, and its actualisation in the gallery establishes a melancholy position from which to view the projection. From this platform we see the duo projected, in the cold early morning light, adrift in a canoe between an island and the shore. They sit at either end of the canoe with their backs to each other. Initially they are gently swept by the

tide, and then, each paddling in opposite directions, swinging or spinning the boat until one ultimately wins their way. This duo has decided to struggle against each other.

Isolation, interdependence and absurd competitive activities exploring rivalry and collaboration have emerged as prevalent inter-related subjects in the duo's tasked-based performances. Initially, in the performances of *Three Moorings* (2008), they leaned against one another and in *Equalled Compartments* (2008) each member sat, compartmentalised into a triangular plywood container, relating with one another through small arm holes. In 2009, as Fiona Mail, the duo secured first place, as a team, in the inaugural *Yulia Felbermayr Challenge Cup* hosted by Boxcopy Contemporary Art Space. More recently she engaged in what was promoted as a grudge match: dueling in a fencing bout, the most romantic of all sports, as part of the annual exhibition *Fresh Cut* at the Institute of Modern Art (August 2010). And the stakes were high. For the next year, their collaborative work will not be represented by the pseudonym of Fiona Mail, but under the name of the winner: Catherine Sagin.

Mail herself has drawn comparison with the praised Bristol-based taskmasters John Wood and Paul Harrison in *We're always trying not to repeat ourselves* (2009). The work is a low-fi reinterpretation that is exhibited alongside the original video interview with Wood and Harrison in which they discuss the methods for creating their absurd mini-tragi-dramas, endurance tests or experiments in

losing control. Without the resources of Wood and Harrison's studio or stamina for dry British-ness, Mail's version is less polished and more slapstick. At once Mail flatters Wood and Harrison through the imitation, but also pokes fun of their seriousness by laughing with them and at them. She introduces a good dose of larrikinism and we laugh with them, and a little at them. If Wood and Harrison are considered the art world equivalent of Laurel and Hardy, then perhaps Mail is the equivalent of Laverne and Shirley.

However, this comedy-duo slapstick is contrasted by the quietness of *I am the kind of person you should choose to have with you. You are the kind of person I would choose to have with me*. In this work, the duo has, for once, managed to keep a straight face. It is concerned with the relationship between two figures, but also between those odd couples of form and line, perception and perspective, the body and the void. It correlates more directly to the Romantic Conceptualism of the Dutch artists Bas Ader and Guido van der Werve in particular (not a collaborative duo).

In Ader's seminal 16mm silent film *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (1971) viewers encounter the artist weeping, racked by some profound misery in one long, tight close-up. Both the formalism and conceptual structure of this work is regularly repeated by contemporary artists, including Australian artists and works such as Todd McMillan's, *I love you I want you I need you* (2007), which repeats words taken from an early Elvis song and in Julie Rrap's *360° Self-portrait* (2010), also a video where the artist becomes visibly distressed

(from hanging upside down). Although Mail's *Breakfast of Champions* (2009) utilises the formalism of the original it manages to parody the tributes.

Ader was lost at sea as a young man. Having set sail from Cape Cod on a lone transatlantic crossing in 1975 for his multi-part work *In Search of the Miraculous*, the wreck of his boat was discovered off the coast of Ireland. His body was never recovered. With this unreal fable that completes his career, the tragic irony is that it heeds the ideal example of the romantic trope of the beloved's death, preferably by drowning.

Guido van der Werve is consistently compared with Ader. In his film *Nummer Vier: I don't want to get involved in this I don't want to be part of this Talk me out of it* we see the lone artist sitting at an upright piano on a floating platform in the middle of a misty lake. A classically trained pianist, he plays Chopin's *Nocturne No.1 in B flat minor*. A large ship interrupts the setting, ferrying a comparatively raucous choir and orchestra that gradually passes out of the frame and the work returns to the quietness of the earlier scene. Then, inexplicably, van der Werve plummets from the sky.

Death aside, Fiona Mail's activities reside within each of these bodies of performance, but it's with the kind of slapstick Romantic lineage exemplified by van der Werve that *I am the kind of person you should choose to have with you. You are the kind of person I would choose to have with me* belongs. Employing the ocean as a strategy for and image of isolation, its romantic landscape plays an integral role

I am the kind of person you should choose to have with you. You are the kind of person I would choose to have with me.

2010

Photograph: Joseph Breikers



in a conceptual approach charged with melancholia and empathy. The work, and its title in particular, embodies feelings of alienation, solitude and unfulfilled longing. Specifically, it draws on and emphasises emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience.

From its romantic starting-point, which could be described as a formal exercise dealing with the physical conditions of space and light, body and void, an allegory of fragility, failure and disappearance also emerges. As a task-based performance, their physical struggle against each other describes insecurity and the probable failure of relations. Mirroring an abject romanticism and isolation, loss of contact and possible dejection, it encapsulates how we typically experience Romanticism today, through awkward self-deprecation and irony.

However, this is not expressed through the self-conscious isolation of the archetypical lone Romantic artist but instead through a relational, collaborative identity. The ability for the relational doppelganger to look inward, at each other, and for the resulting inter-subjective action to occur within the video-frame is a unique opportunity afforded to collaborative performance. Each defines the other's existence and both define the rules of their conceptual endgame. They perform for each other, to each other and yet inevitably struggle to maintain individual control, which means working against each other.

More importantly, the duo has created a platform from which the audience can play an unscripted role. From the

jetty we may observe the duo, interrupting the sublimity of her surroundings, undermining the normative function of her canoe, as well as the collaboration unwittingly pitted against itself. Her actions beg the questions: what is the point of struggling against one another; to question the agonised pointlessness of it all; where does it lead us? Our speculative role in the action out-of-frame affords us open-ended interpretations. Searching inward, the work quite comfortably lies somewhere between conceptual and emotional contemplation, nostalgia and existentialism.

Utilising some simple romantic motifs, the duo introduces emotion into an atmosphere. Rather than a closed narrative or analogy, the poetic title establishes a mood, the potential for open-ended questions and interpretations. The totality of the installation triggers feeling and memories.

As a rule, teamwork, humour and irony are not generally perceived as the principal materials of art. However, the duo employs these tools with great effect, encouraging the viewer towards an emotional and questioning response that draws us in and has us wanting to know more of the collaborative duo's world.

Louise Rollman

Curator, Contemporary Projects
Museum of Brisbane

This publication is copyright. Except in the context of research, study, criticism or review, or as otherwise permitted by the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. / Text for this publication has been supplied by the authors attributed. / The views expressed are not necessarily those of the publisher.

MUSEUM OF BRISBANE

Ground Floor, 157 Ann Street, Brisbane.

10am-5pm daily. **Entry is FREE.**

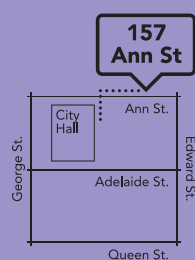
www.museumofbrisbane.com.au

or call Council on (07) 3403 8888.

Find us on
Facebook



Follow us on
Twitter



Dedicated to a better Brisbane