

by elizabeth stanton

A good ARI isn't hard to find

For the uninitiated, a visit to a Sydney Artist Run Initiative (ARI) or project space has long been an experience that requires a high level of commitment and navigational prowess. Locating unmarked entrances on busy streets, braving stair wells, tapping on windows or knocking boldly on roller doors are just some of the challenges undertaken to discover the treasure trove of work by emerging artists – as well as the experimental work of established artists – that ARIs offer.

The role of the visitor becomes one of urban explorer. Sydney's diverse ARI scene, scattered across the city fringe and the inner western suburbs, is akin to a delicate but resilient eco-system. Today, a somewhat balanced mix of more 'traditional' artist collectives (with and without spaces) share the ARI title with galleries that reflect an increased professionalisation of the ARI model – all contributing to provide at times transient platforms for a vibrant set of creative communities that are constantly evolving.

So where to start? **Firstdraft**, in Surry Hills, is one of Australia's longest running ARIs (established in 1985) and managed by a rotating board of directors that changes biennially. Directing and exhibiting with Firstdraft has become somewhat of a right of passage for emerging artists, with alumni including the likes of Hany Armanious and Lindy Lee. Recent capital developments (in the hands of the current board) have transformed the space from a low-key alternative gallery into a slick white-cube that will no doubt lift the game and the perception of the works exhibited there.

MOP Projects in Chippendale has also upped the ante in the presentation of emerging artists, moving from a humble 'back room' space to the renovated street frontage of the former Esa Jaske Gallery on Abercrombie Street in 2007. MOP is also managed by a board and presents an extensive annual program of over 30 exhibitions a year, across a three-tiered space. A mix of solo exhibitions and curated group shows by mostly NSW-based emerging and established



Nate Larson + Marni Shindelman, *Bill Gates* (from *Geolocation series*), 2009, digital C-Print, 55 x 75cm. Peloton.



Prudence Murphy, *To the treehouse*, 2010, archival pigment print, 120 x 150cm. MOP Projects.

artists are programmed by invitation and from submissions. An example of the diversity in programming can be seen this month with exhibitions of vigorous works on paper by New Zealand-born artist, Locust Jones, photography by Prudence Murphy and performative video works by emerging artist, Harriet Body (4-21 March).

A contrast to the white cube ARI lies just around the corner at **Peloton**, where four Directors (Matthys Gerber, Lisa Jones, Claire Taylor and Michele Zarro) manage the two intimate galleries exhibiting local, interstate and international contemporary artists. Peloton functions more as a space for early career and established artists than for unknown newcomers. Exhibitions such as *Remote Viewing*, curated by Claire Taylor and including the work of Mireille Astore, John Cussans, Jacqueline Drinkall, Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman (until 6 March) capture the often pensive and analytical tone of their exhibition program.

From Chippendale, taking a slight detour along Botany Road, Redfern, will lead you to **Locksmith Project Space** – one of the most engaging stops on the shifting ARI map and imbued with an air of possibility and potential. The directorial committee of five young emerging artists (Kenzie Patterson, Samuel Villalobos, Kenzie Larsen, Yasmin Smith and Rachel Fuller) met at Sydney College of the Arts and are committed to providing a rent-free, commission-free space for their peers. The one-room gallery is host to mostly solo shows with a modest four exhibitions annually (they also hold a monthly music night *Space Habit* organised by

Jonathan Hochman). Emma White will kick off their 2010 exhibition program (18-27 March), fresh from her show at Breenspace where she exhibited a pop-simulacrum of everyday objects reproduced in photography and fimo. While the gallery is small and closer in location to retro furniture retailers than established art centres, the three walls and one window are not the limits of this ARI; their focus is also on a curated ARI publication, *Locksmith Project*, the third edition of which will be launched this month. Like their counterparts in the wider art world, ARI publications are increasing in production quality. The ARI magazine *runway* supports Sydney ARIs by not only providing a forum for critical writing but by encouraging artists to conceptualise new works within the published format. Edited by Jaki Middleton and David Lawrey, *runway* is now housed in Firstdraft's new studio complex in Woolloomooloo, allowing for increased networks to be developed.

Still in Redfern, nestled between a laundrette and Thai restaurant, you'll come across **Slot** – a 'window' space that can be viewed 24 hours a day. In March, Tony Twigg will be exhibiting timber sculptures as a precursor to a larger solo exhibition at Damien Minton Gallery in April.

Further afield in Marrickville, housed in a former card club, is **Sydney Non Objective (SNO)**. SNO offers a 'flat platform' space exhibiting established and emerging Australian and international artists who share a commitment to non-objective, abstract and concrete practice – proving there is room for formalism in a post-formalist environment.



Inaugural ICAN opening ('K'), November 2007. Institute of Contemporary Art Newtown.

Three galleries, plus a sound project space and resident studio have seen some 57 exhibitions in the past five years and an upcoming director's show and publication will celebrate their fifth anniversary.

Returning to Surry Hills and to the independently-run **China Heights**, Directors Edward Woodley and Marc Drew manage one of the very few ARLs functioning without government funding. China Heights' exhibition program diversifies to include creatives working in fashion, photography, publishing and design in addition to visual artists. Their short turn-around shows see work as diverse as Chris Town's experimental, melted collages made from daily detritus (5 – 7 March) to photographer Bridget Mac's coolly composed images of vacant interiors (12–14 March). The warehouse gallery (at the top of an obligatory endless flight of stairs) also houses Heights Studios and there is a sense of broad creative inner-city community at work.

It doesn't end here. ARLs like **Gaffa Gallery**, **At the Vanishing Point**, alternative performance spaces such as **Bill & George** and **Serial Space**, and established project galleries such as the boldly named **Institute of Contemporary Art Newtown** and **Chalk Horse** in Surry Hills, all have a point of difference that add to the rich fabric of grass-roots cultural practice. Art Month Sydney is embracing ARL involvement and in May the biennial SafARI will highlight ARLs during the first weeks of the 2010 Biennale of Sydney. With the push and pull between Sydney rent prices and funding to subsidise the rental demands on ARLs and exhibiting artists, it is important to remember it remains a survival of the fittest. So whether your goal is to catch a rising star or engage with non-institutional practices, a committed, ongoing venture into ARL territory will more often than not be well rewarded.

Events > Artist Run Initiatives

www.artmonthsydney.com



Saturday 6 March 4pm

SNO – Floor talk with Dr Billy Gruner

Saturday 13 March 2pm

China Heights – Artist talk: Bridget Mac

Saturday 13 March 3pm

Firstdraft – Exhibition talks

Saturday 13 March 3pm

Chalk Horse Gallery – Appreciating and collecting emerging art

Saturday 27 March 2pm

Peloton – Artist talk: Mathys Gerber, Justene Williams

Saturday 27 March 5pm

MOP – Artist talk: Locust Jones, Prudence Murphy

Saturday 27 March 5pm

Locksmith Project Space – Launch of 3rd edition *Locksmith Project*