

Penny Bovell and Penny Coss

STORY LOUISE MORRISON

IT IS SURPRISING to discover that the studios of some of Perth's most established artists are not found in the CBD's underutilised commercial spaces but behind anonymous roller doors in the city's industrial estates. Inner-city tenancies can be difficult to secure and many artists find that the comparatively voluminous and uncluttered interiors of concrete tilt-slab factory units equally suit their needs. Western Australian artists Penny Bovell and Penny Coss share one such unit at the edge of a small estate located a few kilometres south of Fremantle.

Reflecting on an artist's usual progression from art school cubbyhole to shared studio to, finally, a space of one's own, Bovell and Coss acknowledge they've made an apparently retrograde move from the purpose-built studios they once occupied at home to the shared working space they've set up with a third artist and friend, Eveline Kotai. It was a move necessitated by their families' increasing needs for space at home and a wish to sustain a connection to like-minded peers that employment had afforded before they relinquished their positions to focus exclusively on their practices.

The artists had encountered each other's paintings and drawings at exhibitions held in Perth soon after Coss arrived from Sydney in 1994. The apparent formal and theoretical empathies in their work became clearer to the pair when they both participated in the New York School of Art Drawing Marathon in Adelaide in 1997 and even better understood in the years that followed as they taught together at the University of Western Australia.

These affinities can be partly attributable to the concurrency of their education in art. Both trained in the 1980s at institutions in which postmodern curricula had replaced traditional skills training. This ensured that a similarly rigorous level of theoretical enquiry underpinned all that they produced. Coss utilised the painting and drawing skills that she acquired through earlier study at TAFE to investigate the capacity of Abstract Expressionist marks and gestures to embody a contemporary experience of the Australian

landscape. Bovell's early interests included performance art and experimental drawing but, soon after graduating, she focused on putting into practice all that she could read about painting.

In 1989, Bovell's interests in landscape painting narrowed to the representation of the sky, in particular to the zone above the horizon. She acknowledges the paradox in "attempting to fix something that's formless" but our physical and philosophical understandings of aerial phenomena have remained at the centre of her explorations.

Bovell's early prints, drawings and paintings featured figurative depictions of skyscapes and cloud formations. Occasionally, she incorporated found imagery from photographs, meteorological maps and historical illustrations. Over time, though, Bovell's work has become more abstract as she increasingly defers to the behavior of wet paint to describe moving bodies of air. After all, the principles of fluid dynamics apply equally to gases and liquids. Banks of colour in her paintings accompany closed, netted forms that suggest shifting air pockets, vortices or plumes. For a brief period, Bovell considered the air in the social space between people but, recently, her focus became more hyperopic than ever before.

In 2008, Bovell was asked to curate an art collection for the Gravity Discovery Centre in Gingin which is home to the only gravitational wave detector in the southern hemisphere. Sine waves, pulsing lines and carefully marked points amongst the drifts of colour describe cosmological features and the transit of our reach into space.

Coss produces work in response to her daily walks through bushland terrain near her home and the perceived and imagined geological and botanical attributes of this environment are described in her washes and thin layers of paint. Although her interests seem to lie in an opposite realm to Bovell's, close consideration exposes rich parallels.

Whilst Coss' physical journeys can be sensed from linear elements in her paintings, her experiences can be gleaned from the tilting shifts





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in orientation in a single work. The unseen presence of an ancient aquifer can be identified in the amniotic pools that form as she pours thin baths of pigment on horizontal canvases, sometimes controlling their flow through partial elevation. Stains of warm magenta refer to the increasing prevalence of the lake’s algal blooms whilst the residues of fire are reflected in smoky hues.

The studio is not a place of inspiration for these artists, instead, both bring remembered or imagined experiences to be acted upon. These are naturally unstable and elusive sources as each act of envisioning changes the original. As a result, their works only stem from their sources, not describe them.

Both bring a sense of floating disorientation to their work and increasingly exploit gravity’s effect on the liquid properties of paint to embody the weightless environments that inspire them. Paint is poured, pooled and left to dry. The artists use photography to examine and reflect upon developments but often their intentions give way to the dictates of unexpected outcomes. An oscillation between contemplation and action allows each artist to make their way towards an intuited resolution.

Sharing a studio for the last five years has undoubtedly resulted in a degree of reciprocity and exchange in their work. The studio is usually quiet, each respecting the territory of the other yet working in each other’s peripheral vision. Both artists are deeply interested in colour. Coss applies paint in deliberately aberrant combinations in response to the envisioned topography whilst Bovell scrubs, scrapes and reworks areas to achieve muted fogs and hazes. Their pools and stains can be perfectly harmonious or, occasionally, so violently discordant that temporary screens get erected without offence.

Bovell and Coss are members of Perth’s newest artist run initiative, Art Collective WA, which exhibits and promotes the work of mid-career and senior practitioners. Artists of this calibre couple a savvy, entrepreneurial approach to their work with determined ambition, the flipside of which can be professional competitiveness. This could

conflict with the need for an atmosphere of collegial support in a shared working environment as failed attempts, stalled progress and nagging doubt are witnessed as often as any gains.

Coss was selected to represent the collective with a solo exhibition at the 2014 Art Stage Singapore fair. Fortunately, between this artist and her two studio colleagues, any feelings of envy are usually eclipsed by genuine aspirations for each other’s success as well as enough candor and humour to overcome the inevitable moments in which they’re not. ■

Penny Bovell and Penny Coss are represented by Mossenson Galleries. Coss will stage a solo exhibition at Art Collective WA in June and another in Sydney at Syndicate@Danks in August. Bovell will present a solo exhibition at Art Collective WA in October then both artists will join Eveline Kotai in a group exhibition at Perth’s Nyisztor Gallery in November.

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- 01 Studio portrait. Photography: Eva Fernandez
- 02 Penny Bovell, *Something for Nothing*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120cm
Photography: Bo Wong
- 03 Penny Coss, *Flotsam*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 153 x 130cm
- 04 Penny Coss, *Golden Verge*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4cm
- 05 Penny Bovell working in their studio. Photography: Eva Fernandez
Courtesy the artists and Mossenson Galleries, Perth.