

Ellie Buttrose talks to Ruth McConchie

ELLIE BUTTROSE: Describe your Fresh Cut installation, *The Babbitry of Bubbles Bathhouse*.

RUTH McCONCHIE: People enter the gallery and find a pair of DIY parabolic-dish microphones displayed on a plinth, like a sculpture. Soon, they notice that the walls are dotted with peepholes. There are two plain-looking doors that weren't there before, which open onto a dark, narrow, hessian-lined corridor that surrounds the gallery. It smells of stale beer and oil. If people enter, they can look through the peepholes and check out others in the gallery space. A third and final room—accessed through a crawlspace in the corridor—is like an abandoned office/dressing-room. It's painted salmon-pink, and has flickering fluorescent lights, messy lockers, and dressing tables with mirrors. I doused it with coconut oil, beer, and rum. Overhead, the dull thudding bass of pop music can occasionally be heard. The three spaces—'gallery', 'corridor', and 'back room'—have different logics, different ambiances. The gallery feels public, the back room private—like you shouldn't be there. Sonically, they are also very different; the corridor reverberates with sounds from the gallery, while the back room dulls them. Interestingly, some people kept going, and went through the emergency exit in the back room, ending up in the Judith Wright Centre loading dock, thinking they were still in my show.

What was the starting point?

I was thinking about secret corridors with peepholes and I was researching Japanese love hotels, strip clubs, and 1980s bedroom and bathroom designs. I wanted to build a more elaborate structure, but IMA Director Robert Leonard suggested I make use of the temporary wall that had already been built for Caitlin Franzmann's Fresh Cut project, which concealed a quarter of the space; that wall became part of my corridor structure. In the show after Franzmann's and before mine, Simon Starling cut a hole in the wall, to project a video through; I covered it with a one-way mirror. I used a pair of spare doors that belong to the building for the corridor entrances. With their generic quality, the doors looked like they might conceal off-limit utility spaces, such as cleaning cupboards or plant rooms. I was hiding my corridor 'in plain sight'. (When the show is over, the doors will doubtless go into service elsewhere in the building.) Behind Franzmann's wall was another wall, which had been built for Mikala Dwyer's 2012 show, and included a crawlspace. I incorporated it as well. The crawlspace became the access point to the back room. Some visitors may have had a sense of déjà vu, as they negotiated it on their hands and knees for a second time.

What does the title refer to?

It refers to Bubbles Bathhouse, the notorious 'casino that didn't exist', the Fortitude Valley massage parlour that was head office for Bellino criminal activities in the 1980s. I am fascinated by Queensland's police-corruption period, particularly the 'Moonlight State' episode of the TV program Four Corners that focused on it, and the consequent Fitzgerald Inquiry. I have referred to this period in previous installations. The IMA is just up the street from where those secret places were. But my project was not about reconstructing the actual Bubbles Bathhouse, so much as reimagining it, by mashing up multiple histories and references. I like the idea that the IMA might be a front for something else.

You've used gallery spaces and found non-gallery spaces. Do you approach them in different ways?

I always work with the specifics of the site. In non-gallery spaces, there is usually more information to work with: traces of the wear-and-tear from years of habitation, found objects, and strange noises. In galleries, such idiosyncrasies can be more subtle or hidden. However, in galleries, the audience tends to be familiar with the space, so I can play off their expectations. Most of *The Babbitry of Bubbles Bathhouse* is hidden from immediate view, and this means most viewers have a longer engagement with the space. To see all of it, you have to open doors, walk along corridors, climb through holes, and then find your way out again.

You spend a lot of time thinking about the way visitors navigate your installations.

I'm interested in the ways that architecture entails responsibility and culpability. When people cross a threshold, they are choosing to be in a space. I remember hearing, years ago, that, during a police raid, you should make sure you are not in the room with the illegal substances; you can then legitimately claim you are not aware of them. However, if you are in the same room, you're implicated. In many exhibitions, people don't have to go all the way into the gallery to see the work—so they don't. I like to lure people in with shiny objects, pop music, and secret corridors—the promise of more; I want to tempt them to open a door or crawl through a hole. In my works, viewers often feel they are intruding, but that's also part of the attraction. I reward the curious.

It's a social thing too. Viewers become part of the installation.

Sure. I want people to walk past other people whom they have just been spying on. Voyeurs have to meet the gaze of their subjects, who will then go on to spy on other people. Different people have different experiences of the work, depending on what they want, how curious they are, how far they are prepared to go. Later, comparing notes, some will feel that they missed out, because they didn't go far enough, didn't see it all; others, who went the whole way, may feel privy to a dirty secret.