

Christopher Bennie  
*Name that Tune* (2004)  
Essay by David Broker

It's another hot day on the Gold Coast and there is nothing unusual about that. Visible heat shimmers from the bitumen of Burleigh Heads' main street as an endless stream of traffic, vehicular and pedestrian, emerges and disappears from the immobile frame of Christopher Bennie's digital camera. If there is anything interesting about this, it could be found in that human predisposition for watching each other go about our business for no particular reason or return. That is not to say that there are no moments of interest, for me at least. In a work where there is little room for short attention spans, a certain person, a certain car, the most protestant of churches at the end of the street, anything, become objects of a prosaic and voyeuristic gaze. The occasional text that matches number plates of passing cars seems to heighten the bathos as we are compelled to consider the things people do to amuse themselves.

On the surface, Bennie's work questions what is worthy of attention and perhaps, if anything is. While his video repertoire is substantial there are two previous works that seem to characterise and amplify an aesthetic developed from a personal engagement with the banal. In *That which Requires Space* (2001) Bennie does what many boys have done in moments of boredom; turn any object into an imaginary space ship. Roughly constructed from small cardboard boxes held together with packing tape Bennie's spacecraft are launched by hand while he vocalises a pitiable soundtrack of bips and beeps in the darkened space of his back yard. A far cry from even the technical ineptitude of Ed Wood's infamous *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959) Bennie eschews amateurism for what could be described as the 'pathetic sublime'.

As Jean Paul Sartre posited that hell is endless boredom and *ennui*, and Wood's film promised unspeakable horrors from outer space, Bennie brings hell, ennui and 'horror' together in *Mothership* (2004). Dancing to a mindless techno loop in his mother's immaculate suburban sitting room his choreography is frenetic and at times, awkward. While Bennie is not the worst dancer I have seen, over twenty-three minutes he pushes his luck. It is the incongruity of the trance-inducing dance in the context of the obsessive domestic order that renders this work strange and discomforting. As Alasdair Foster put it, "What, in the dark excesses of an industrial club, would seem uninhibited. Liberating, primordial here seems ... well, a little embarrassing. Absurd even." (1)

In both of these works and in *Name that Tune* Bennie rises above the just plain dull. Certainly his audience's patience will be tested, however, there is an innocent or ingenuous quality to Bennie's works that ultimately translates as charm. This charm is borne of the painful honesty with which Bennie reveals aspects of his existence that are, particularly in a contemporary society of spectacle, of negligible immediate interest. Of course he is not the only person who has, lost in a fantasy produced by boredom, turned a pencil into a space going vehicle, got down in his parents lounge or lost himself in the reverie of passing traffic. His trademark blend of hyperactivity coupled with a sense of being lost in himself generate an unnerving atmosphere in which the viewer can connect with his, and their own, ordinariness.

In all of his works Bennie attempts to reconcile most mundane aspects of everyday existence with a rich theatre of life. This theatre of grinding monotony aims to transcend or leave the materiality of the material world behind. Here, existential notions of the absurd meet Immanuel Kant's sublime. Bennie suggests that grandeur might be discovered on the streets of Burleigh Heads where reason is overwhelmed

by so great a tedium that the imagination is jolted and in fact, activated. And after all, the ebb and flow of traffic in Burleigh Heads is not so far removed, both physically and meta-physically, from the equally constant roll of waves onto the pristine beaches nearby.

Bennie's point and shoot aesthetic is of course not a new development in film and video. His free editing, long takes and the use of real time is somewhat reminiscent of the French New Wave and the films of Jean Luc Godard, Françoise Truffaut and Claude Chabrol who used these conventions in an attempt to produce *vérité*. Where their extended time lines provided a space in which things might happen unexpectedly, however, one never feels that anything might happen in Bennie's works other than what is seen. His low-tech approach, while presenting a certain reality, lacks the grandiose qualities of *cinéma réalité* or the earnest anthropological agenda of documentary. If this seems like a paradox in relation to the romantic sublime, it is not. The value and success of Bennie's work lies in his ability to render the unremarkable as sublime without embellishment or pretence. For Bennie, home, and its mind numbing security, is where the art is.

(1) Alasdair Foster, *Departure Lounge*, catalogue essay, published by the Queensland Centre for Photography, Brisbane 2004

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