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# Stella Brennan: Archaeologist of Suburbia

Su Ballard

*University of Wollongong*, [sballard@uow.edu.au](mailto:sballard@uow.edu.au)

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# Stella Brennan: Archaeologist of Suburbia

## **Abstract**

Stella Brennan's early works began from the birth pangs of the Internet age and the messianic phase of neo-liberalism. They mark the decade when the world changed. By 1990 New Zealand, Japan and Australia had joined the magical mystical tour named the Internet, and packets of data were flying through deep underground cables and across starlit southern skies. A Labour government was well along the path of a neoliberal reformation of the country's economic and social policies. The market had won out over equality and solidarity, and we were immersed in a new language of "return on investment," "choice," and "deregulation." The global concentration of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere reached 350 parts per million by volume. Walls and stocks had fallen, the Exxon Valdez ran aground, and the earth became a little warmer.

## **Keywords**

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**Dr. Susan Ballard**  
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*Stella Brennan: archaeologist of suburbia.*

“It was the result of an inevitable break in the surface of things, as if a fire from the centre of the earth or a volcano beneath its skin had at last been forced through into an overtaking of the visible world.”

Janet Frame *Living in the Maniototo.*

Stella Brennan’s early works began from the birth pangs of the Internet age and the messianic phase of neo-liberalism. They mark the decade when the world changed. By 1990 New Zealand, Japan and Australia had joined the magical mystical tour named the Internet, and packets of data were flying through deep underground cables and across starlit southern skies. A Labour government was well along the path of a neoliberal reformation of the country’s economic and social policies. The market had won out over equality and solidarity, and we were immersed in a new language of “return on investment,” “choice,” and “deregulation.” The global concentration of carbon dioxide in the Earth’s atmosphere reached 350 parts per million by volume. Walls and stocks had fallen, the Exxon Valdez ran aground, and the earth became a little warmer.

In this context, Brennan’s consumerist love and desire is somehow misdirected – not for the product, but for the box it comes in. One of her first works for the new century, *Studio Monitor* (2000), saw the polystyrene boxing of a fresh Apple computer emit a fluorescent glow, like some new form of designer domestic lighting. The beautiful throw-away had generated its own material world. In *Second Child*

(2007) we watch the artist invigorated by the commodity form, introducing a shiny new laptop to its now obsolete older sister. These works are small gestures but they set the theme for much of Brennan's practice over the past 15 years. This is an approach to making that is driven by the materiality of modernity, and framed by its keywords: labour, production and utopia. In Brennan's practice, art comes to matter through the rethinking of how objects behave, and in particular she helps us to focus on the domestic suburban environment as a form of technical and "social packaging."<sup>i</sup>

There were critics amidst the expansion of globalized economies and the manufacturing of human subjects. Marilyn Waring's advocacy on behalf of an infrastructure of unpaid labour made its way to the United Nations, and artists listened closely; motherhood and art shared labouring practices. In both activities it was difficult to account for the real cost of production. The creation of the neoliberal market saw new flows of capital that offered artists in New Zealand a structure—a potential income—and they were expected to enter into its social currents. Artists were to be manufacturers of cultural capital, participants in a world of social capital, enrol in schools of creative industries to learn how to make creative capital, and eventually contribute some spiritual capital back to the empty commodified world.<sup>ii</sup> An eager participant, the newly democratised artist entered the global marketplace. Along the way aesthetics changed. Ian Wedde and Gregory Burke captured much of this in the exhibition/book *Now See Hear!* (1992) that not only mapped a few last challenges to the market discipline, but also showed how the self-absorbed moodiness of the New Zealand landscape was out and sharp pointy post-modern texts were in. Those of us growing into our own political lives, and perhaps even voting for the first time, felt the change in the air. Around us arguments for social justice and cultural identity were suddenly rendered radical, edgy places from which to begin. Without a pang of irony we adhered rainbow stickers to our windows and met the new technologies at the door with a burst of enthusiasm.

I need to emphasise that Brennan does not celebrate technology; instead she rethinks the modern obsession with progress at all costs. Works like *Theme for Great Cities* (2003) question the construction of architectural spaces to escape the wilderness of the urban jungle. Originally screened inside an igloo of computer boxes, the video traces Lego towers that seem to go on forever – so much so that counting the floors no longer makes sense. A computer voice drones on and on gathering excerpts from Raoul Vaneigem’s 1961 manifesto “Comments against Urbanism.” The related video work *Citizen Band* (2004) that merges radio noise with Friedensreich Hundertwasser’s “Mould Manifesto” from 1958 and the towers have proliferated. These are not the neat pencil buildings that swarm over the reclaimed harbour of Hong Kong, nor the clean white lines of Le Corbusier’s cities for radiant living but messy teeming assemblages of the kind found in a skip outside the art school ceramics department.

This tension between assemblage and manufacture was explicit in Brennan’s survey show *Memory Hole* at Trish Clark Gallery in 2015, and is reinforced in *Black Flags* that opened, again at Trish Clark Gallery, in July 2016. In *Memory Hole* the videos documenting the organic growth of great cities screened alongside large format digital prints of Venus’s surface taken in 1982 by the Soviet Venera space probe. Alongside these were slightly awkward Kintsugi repairs of studio pottery rescued from op-shops.

Dominating *Memory Hole* were the war machines of modernity: their flimsy constructions, their hopeless utopias, and the destructive tools that left their indelible evidence in the Antipodes. *White Wall/ Black Hole* (2005) treads carefully around a collective trauma: the 1979 Mount Erebus air disaster in Antarctica, which also marked a shift in the politics of landscape in the south. We could no longer wonder at the vast horizon of absence when it contained the bodies of our loved ones. Grainy images shuddered across black and white TV screens and we peered into a whiteout trying to make sense of a new kind of nothing. *South Pacific* (2008) initially has a similar feel to *White Wall/ Black Hole*, the video image is equally meditative, and a scrolling narrative consumes the viewer but here Brennan introduces extra levels of

mediation where post war scenarios of decolonisation dominate. Brennan draws on conversation and documentary to make a picture of the individual amidst the confusion of World War Two. She shows how the war made it to New Zealand in small and specific ways through data logs and across the wireless. The images that make up *South Pacific* employ sonar and radiography—both technologies that enable a translation of frequency and waves into image, and both operating within the part of the spectrum used for surveillance. To work with these materials, forms need to be captured through a probe that is listening to an echo-space of representation.

The middle years of the Anthropocene are a transitional time in which poets write about infrastructure and artists try to map a changing landscape. Beauty becomes a difficult concept. Like nature, beauty has been tainted by romance, and there is no place for either in a world driven by capital. Art schools across the country continue to do everything they can to ban both words from crit-sessions, preferring to focus on process, generative materiality, and above all a new kind of aesthetics named relational. Turning away from the by-products of an industrial society artists like Brennan fight back with homesteading, craft projects, and embryonic muck. *The Middle Landscape* (2010) suggests that it is still possible to become lost within a complex redefinition of nature. Across three tents resting on a scented bed of pine bark, Brennan narrates the disappearance of New Zealand's birdlife at the same time as offering humans a protective shell from which they can understand the kinds of sacrifices that are necessary for the continuation of our evolutionary story. In a small red tent an auger endlessly corkscrews into the earth preparing a new hole, a new boundary, and a new history for this patch of the earth. Rather than mourn the loss, we find ourselves lying on our stomach reading the litany of all the *living* Kakapo, (that most endangered of parrots), burnt into the taut nylon of the tent fly. It is a strangely cathartic experience. On the final screen, relics of forgotten 1970s countercultural dwellings are spotted in the bush. These are broken mementos of hippie yearning for post-consumerist Utopias. Utopias that themselves often foundered on the still gendered matters of childcare, laundry and groceries.

Like the memory space of our minds, *Memory Hole* was a scattering of thoughts held together by labour, production and utopia. The repetition is important because in Brennan's works the desires of modernity refuse to go away.

In *Black Flags* something has shifted; the ongoing consideration of the politics of labour amidst the flows of technology has hit a wall. Now Brennan grasps at trauma. The bodies here are not mere observers but figures threatened by horrors of technology gone wrong and the crushing mundaneness of suburbia.

Starting from the death in a local subdivision of a New Zealand hero, poet James K. Baxter, the artist is found walking the streets of her home suburb of Glenfield, tracing the narratives of previous inhabitants of this bourgeois heartland. Brennan's daytime wanders escape the night-time voyeurism of peering into shadowy windows. Distance and location are instead located in the physical memories of bodies gathered together in the local graveyard and in remnants gleaned from poems and headstones, signage and newspaper reports. The stories of the people who have wandered these streets before her entwine cultural capital and the natural environment of home. Many small moments of beauty and of horror have happened on the streets. Brennan's 12 flags, with their linked and overlapping stories, float just above the ground. The text is burnt through folded layers of cloth creating a mirror of black clouds of data writ large. Here a poet had a heart attack on a doorstep, there an author set a novel of unspoken transmogrification, flipping Glenfield for the arid surfaces of North Otago. In Janet Frame's *Living in the Maniototo* the geomorphic rocks of Glenfield consume a body with "a flash of light, a smell of laundry and the penetrating fumes of a powerful cleanser."<sup>iii</sup> It is a thoroughly domestic disaster.

Historical memory has often been estranged from the experiences of the everyday. Brennan, though, knits together the embodied forces of consumerist desire, historical memory and utopian aspiration; her works grasp at the eco-histories of New Zealand. It is a practice in which home improvement (in its largest sense) is front and centre; where the materials used are determined by the labour of the local and at hand. And

it is in these everyday experiences overwritten with the various faces of capital that Brennan locates an archaeological practice of love and repair.

SUGGESTED ILLUSTRATIONS:

Stella Brennan *Studio Monitor* (2000)

Stella Brennan *Citizen Band* (2004)

Stella Brennan *South Pacific* (2008)

Stella Brennan *The Middle Landscape* (2010)

Stella Brennan *Memory Hole* (2015) – installation shot with Kintsugi

Stella Brennan *Black Flags* (2016) x 2

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<sup>i</sup> <http://stella.net.nz/work/theme-for-great-cities/>

<sup>ii</sup> “Neoliberalism thus encourages the flourishing of any attribute that can plausibly have the term “capital” attached to it, as one can now talk completely coherently of social, cultural, creative, and even spiritual capital.” Jennifer Lawn, *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand Literature, 1984-2008: Market Fictions*. London: Lexington Books, 2015, p.222.

<sup>iii</sup> Janet Frame, *Living in the Maniototo*. Sydney: Vintage Australia, 2008, p.38.