

LINDEN1968

EMMA CRIMMINGS

As years go, you would be hard pressed to beat 1968. With a smattering of globe-shaking assassinations, evaporations of prime ministers, simultaneous riots, revolutions and war, 1968 had it all. Often quoted as the year that changed the world, it is one of history's great modern chapters and as a result presents as a spectacularly ripe and bountiful wellspring for artists. So why, when faced with an exhibition of exactly this, was I reminded of an all but forgotten 80s pop song? (More on this later).

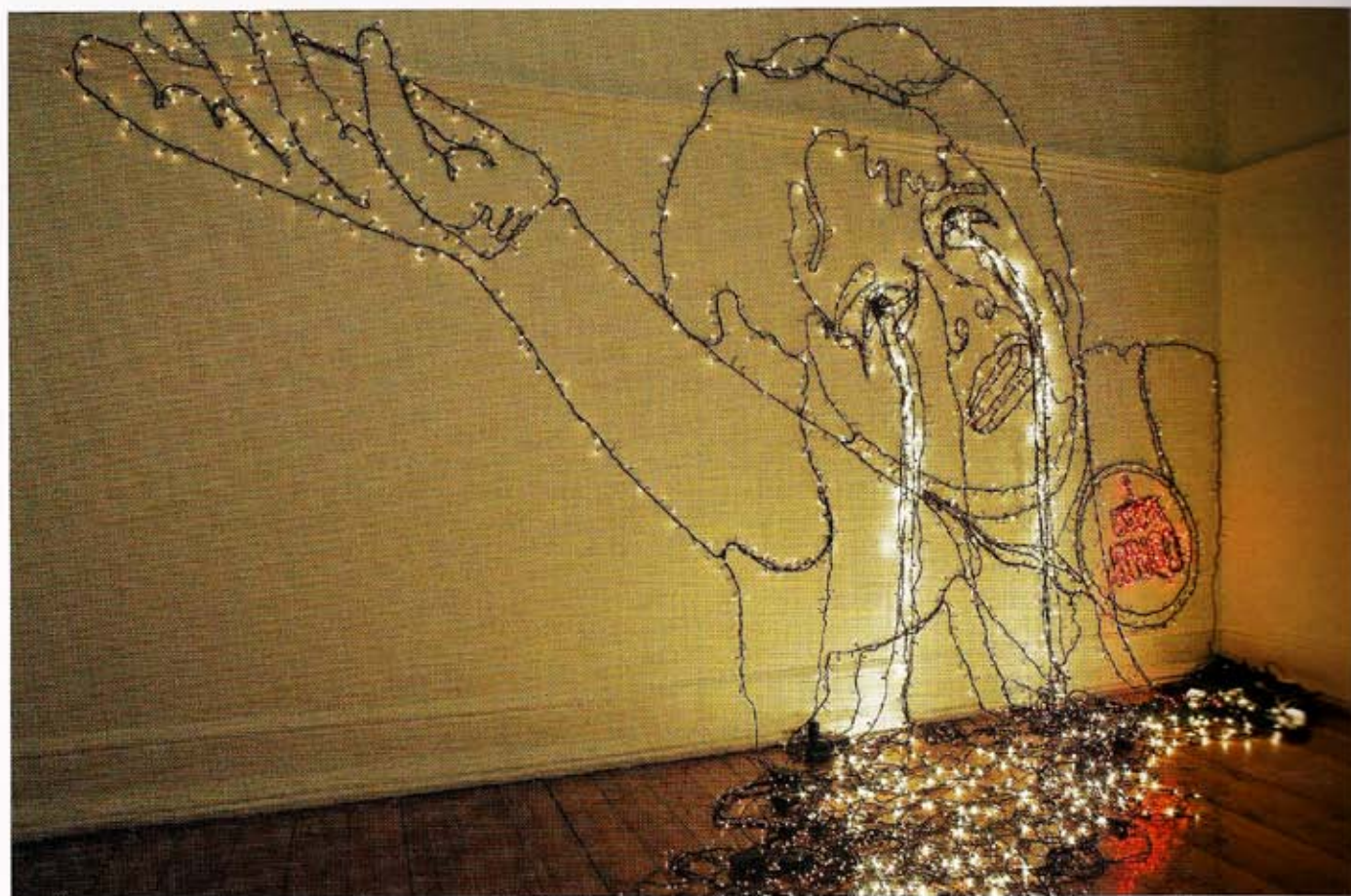
The exhibition, *Linden1968* represents the latest offering from the Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts Innovators Series. Running since 2005 the Innovators Series is a program designed to support the creation of new work. As an exhibition, *Linden1968* is literally bursting at the seams with new work from a range of over 30 emerging and established artists from Western Australia. This selection of west coast artists were chosen by curators Hannah Mathews and Ben Riding and asked to consider the significant events that marked 1968—the disappearance of Harold Holt, the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, the earthquake in Meckering, the Paris riots and the opening of the National Gallery of Victoria—in their creative response to the site. Given the calibre and breadth of this tumultuous period one might imagine that it would have sufficed as an exciting and fertile curatorial premise.

However, in addition to tackling momentous global change Mathews and Riding also asked the participating artists to respond to a 'tight' curatorial brief which was 'to devise works and strategies within Linden's interior and exterior spaces that will reshape, transform and comment on its previous function as a private guest house in the year 1968'. Again, for me this would have been a sufficiently evocative theme to explore. But meshed with the events of 1968 it felt a little lost.

Needless to say, I didn't imagine for an instant walking into *Linden1968* that I would be reminded of yesteryears' Ray-Ban Wayfarer piano man—Billy Joel. But I was. And the song that wedged itself into the folds of my mind, as I meandered around the gallery, was none other than his chart topping baby-boomer lament of 1989, *We Didn't Start the Fire!*

According to Wikipedia—that highly reliable fountain of 'faks'—*We Didn't Start the Fire* was scribed after a conversation Billy had with John Lennon's son, Sean, who was apparently complaining (and let's face it he had good reason) that he was growing up in troubled times. Fast-forward to the release of his album *Storm Front* and Billy belts out a nonsensical, but nonetheless rhyming list of historical events. As I walked around tyre-kicking works from the *Linden1968* exhibition, I couldn't help thinking that it too was a bit of a nonsensical but nonetheless worthy list of historical events that, in short, didn't really combine to start a fire.

It is important however, to clarify that many of the works, as stand-alone exhibits were original, clever and engaging. Moreover, it was the experience of the works en masse that detracted from



Laura Adel Johnson, *Sandy loves Ringo and Ringo loves Sandy*, 2008, fairylights, tape. Photo: Dean McCartney.

their power to impact more effectively. Crammed into Linden's various rooms, it was difficult to identify whose work was whose and where one work would begin and end. So, struggling to draw sufficient relationships between the individual works, I began to substitute my own *We Didn't Start the Fire* lyrics for *Linden1968*:

*Harold Holt, Earthquakes, Beatle-mania, Bike Race.
Charles Manson, Vietnam, revolutions spread their arms ...*

*Duchamp, NGV, Boarding House, help me ... ?
Op art, beach boys, colour theory, zebra car
Bobby K blown away what else do I have to say.*

*We didn't start the fire. It was always burning
since the world's been turning etc, etc ...*

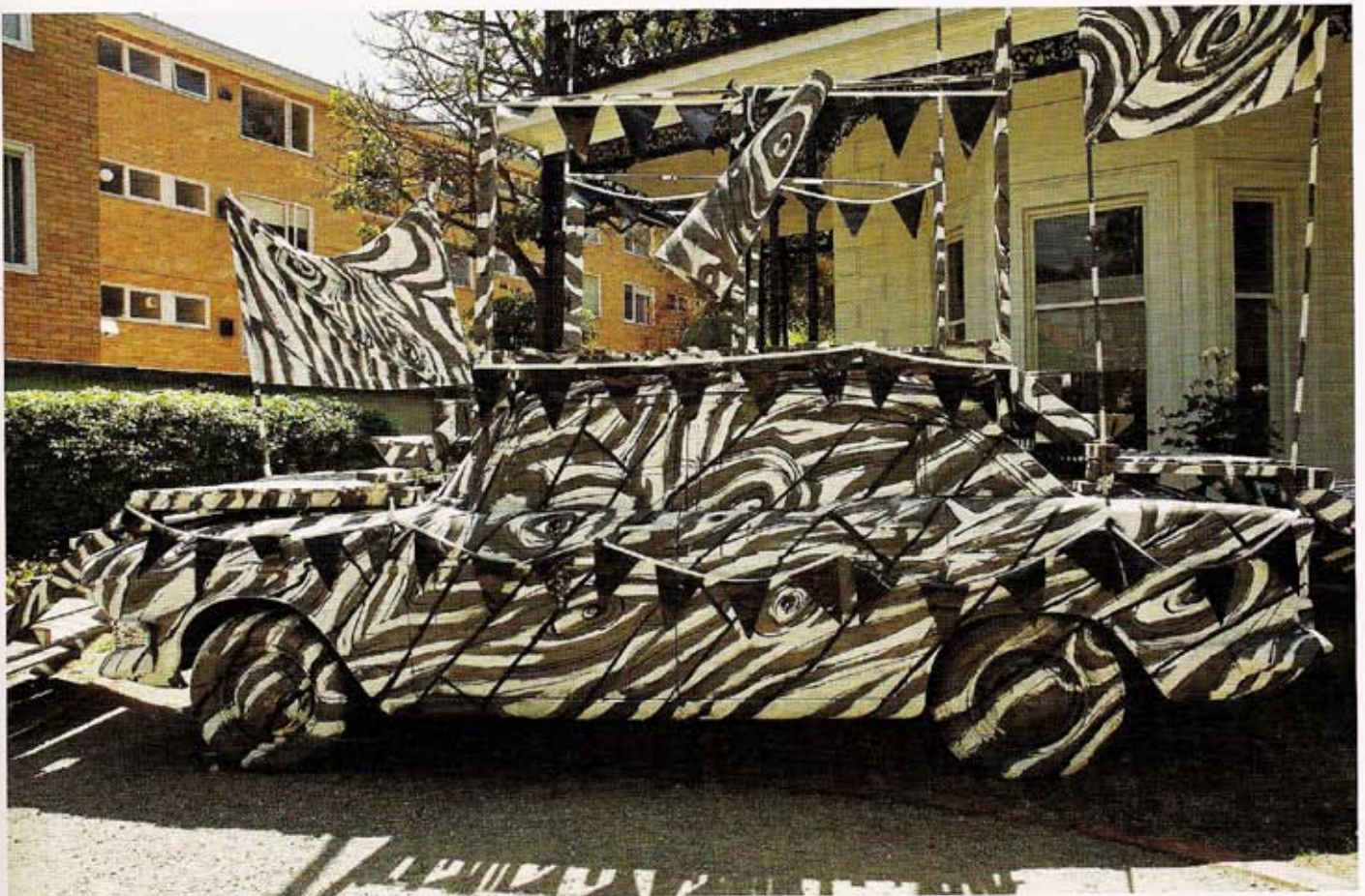
Bad song references aside, if you take the time to go beyond the headline (unlike Billy Joel) it is possible to gain more insight into the actual event. Regardless of the show's overcrowding, the same can be said for many of the works in *Linden1968*. Aidan Broderick's piece for instance, which references the first ever Dutch man to win the Tour de France in 1968 was one such work. With its rear wheel eternally trapped inside a block of bricks and mortar, Broderick's old-school road cycle, divested of its pedals, is a simple and searing symbol that points to the inability to move forward and thereby sustain the momentum needed for significant change. In short, the simplicity of Broderick's inert visual message is both arresting and depressing.

Annabel Dixon's re-presentation of the canvas work included in the NGV's inaugural 1968 exhibition, *Field Work* by Perth based painter Trevor Vickers, was also memorable. Dixon's *Portrait of a Painting* cleverly unites geographic, artistic and personal elements with that of the overarching curatorial theme; the result of which gives rise to a considered and layered work.

Another work that stood out was Marcus Canning's unsettling sound piece exhuming creepy connections that existed in the late 1960s between a disparate group of west coast personalities including Charles Manson, Brian Wilson, Kenneth Anger and Bobby Beausoleil. Dark and deliciously claustrophobic, Canning's work was housed in the tiny ante-room at the rear of one of the larger exhibition spaces. Hungry for light, my pupils dilated as I entered the work; once inside, the cultish soundscape leaked from small speakers, the experience of which was both disquieting and moody.

By their very nature group shows are difficult to unify as what makes them interesting—i.e. their unique interpretation of a theme—is often what works against them. Nonetheless, accompanied by an impressive if somewhat confounding catalogue, *Linden1968* may not start a fire but it was above all ambitious and full of promise.

Linden1968 was curated by Hannah Mathews and Ben Riding and held at Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts from 8 November to 14 December 2008. The show featured over thirty artists from Western Australia.



Simon Perich, *Everybody Cares and Everyone's Fine*, 2008, automobile, paint, wood, banners, bunting. Photo: Dean McCartney.