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Art and Science in Venice: Interview with Sam Leach

Naima Morelli chats to Sam Leach about his work in Personal Structures – Crossing Borders, an official Venice Biennale collateral event.



Sam Leach in his studio with work for *Crossing Borders*, Palazzo Bembo, Venice Biennale 2015

With a strong theoretical background, **Sam Leach's** work draws on Dutch paintings of the 17th century as well as elements of formalist paintings from the 1960s and 70s. His focus is on the intersections between science and nature. Born in Adelaide, Leach worked for many years in the Australian Tax Office before deciding to dedicate himself to art full time. He explains, "I have always drawn a lot, but oil painting was a totally different matter. I had to learn a technique from scratch." A recipient of both the Archibald Prize for portraiture and the Wynne Prize for landscape painting, Leach is living proof that dedication pays off.

Melbourne-based Leach currently has three paintings on show at *Personal Structures – Crossing Borders*, a collateral exhibition to the 56th Venice Biennale. Naima Morelli spoke with Leach about the Venice experience, the ideas behind his glossy and mysterious paintings, and past controversy that has surrounded his work.



Sam Leach, *Tiger Satellite*, 2015, oil and resin on wood, 16 panels, each 50 x 50 cm, overall size approximately 200 x 200 cm

Tell me about the three paintings you're currently showing at Palazzo Bembo.

They are part of a larger series, the consolidation of work that I have been doing over the last three years. The different themes that I have been working on are animals with abstract elements, scientists working on large scale experiments, and landscapes. This series is bringing those three themes together and relates to Roland Barthes' *The World as Object* essay. I think it says a lot about how our society comes from a vivid modernity. I began by looking at the way 17th-century paintings portray the space between the viewer and the object.

What is it that attracts you to those painters of 17th century?

The paintings speak to me as contemporary works. I'm so fascinated with that aesthetic because I think the 17th century is when it turns into the society that we now live in. With the emergence of experimental science and national corporations, it was quite a turning point.

Another influence for you is minimalist and formalist painting. What is the attraction there?

I'm fascinated with this idea of making work that would be a logical end point, the last possible work that can be made. It's such a utopian concept! I'm also interested in the connection between their investigation of aesthetic, perception and scientific investigation. I spent some time with a researcher in Queensland and saw the All-Weather Bee Flight Facility. It's used to test how the bee perceives the world, but it looks like a formalist or minimalist installation. There is a dark underside in the ways this information is being used, including creating systems for American defence applications.



Sam Leach, *Trophic Cascade*, 2015, oil and resin on wood, 9 panels, each 50 x 50 cm, overall size approximately 150 x 150 cm

Did you intentionally create an element of mystery in your paintings?

That has been my experience when I've visited science labs. There is this impenetrability. In my paintings you can see the forms, you can see they are doing something, but it's not clear exactly what it is. There is curiosity about what it might be, enjoyment just in the aesthetics, but also there is a sinister component to it. Because I think in terms of the history of modernity we have a legacy of horrific problems as a result of some scientific discoveries.

Some of your paintings, in particular *Self in uniform* and *Proposal for landscaped cosmos*, caused a stir when they were exhibited. How do you address the criticism?

In that portrait of myself as Hitler [*Self in uniform*, 2008], there was a comment that it was inappropriate to use it in pop culture. For me it wasn't pop culture. I didn't treat the subject lightly as a source of humour. I can accept that it was misjudged and says things in a way I didn't want to. And I regret that. But it was serious painting, trying to ask questions about my relationship with a recent period of European history. The second painting, *Proposal for landscaped cosmos* [2010] was a tiny painting, part of a series referencing 17th century imagery. When I entered the [Wynne] prize, I didn't really expect to win. So it felt like this little painting received a disproportionate amount of attention. That painting was a deliberate comment on the influence of 17th-century landscape painting on the physical landscape of Australia. In Australia we remodelled the land to resemble the aesthetic of those paintings. I wasn't really trying to do some postcard copy.



Sam Leach, *Jupiter*, 2015, oil and resin on wood, 16 panels, each 50 x 50 cm, overall size approximately 200 x 200 cm

For Australian artists it can take a lot of work to exhibit internationally. In your case is it something you have intentionally sought?

I've looked for the opportunity, but also the gallery which represents me in Sydney [Sullivan + Strumpf] has helped me to do that. For me, Southeast Asia has been a great bridge. Connections in Singapore and Hong Kong led to connections elsewhere in the world. Without that step, it would have been much more difficult.

What are your highlights of this year's Venice Biennale?

One of my favourites is the British Pavilion with Sarah Lucas. It's heavy and light at the same time. And I loved Herman de Vries in the Dutch Pavilion, very elegant and concise. The funny thing is that I came here with my two young daughters, so I have this filter – if they enjoy the work, I think it's fantastic too. If I were by myself, it would have been a totally different experience.

Personal Structures – Crossing Borders, A collateral event of the 56th Venice Biennale, Wed to Mon 10am-6pm until 22 November, Palazzo Bembo, Riva del Carbon, Venice, Italy, palazzobembo.org

Participating Australian artists: Michael Cook, Jayne Dyer, Ariel Hassan, Sam Leach, Phebe Parisia, Mike Parr, Reko Rennie