



BE IT THUS RECORDED THAT THE ROAD
Round the inside of the Government Domain Called
M^{RS} MACQUARIE'S ROAD
So named by the Governor on account of her having Originally
Planned it Measuring 3 Miles, and 377 Yards
Was finally Completed on the 13th Day of June 1816

Rhymes with Failure
Daniel Mudie Cunningham

MOP Projects
30 September – 17 October 2010

Rhymes with Failure, 2010, HD video, 4 min 29 sec | Performers: Daniel Mudie Cunningham & Rachel Roberts
Music: George Tillianakis | Camera: Don Cameron | Editor: Vera Hong | Cello Designer: Drew Bickford
Filmed on location at Mrs Macquarie's Chair, Sydney, 18 August 2010

Rhymes with Failure

“Sit in Mrs Maquarie’s [sic] Chair and wonder what view the wife of the Governor of the colony would have seen way back in 1810. Take a few quiet minutes to relish the view that is before you today and appreciate the beauty of Sydney Harbour from Mrs Maquarie’s [sic] Chair.” – FunTours.com.au

Sometimes you struggle to express the thing you’re supposed to be feeling. You think about how you’d like to cry because you feel sad but the idea of crying overpowers the natural emotion, your mind too aware of the effort to make the tears come, and so the desolation is compounded by a self conscious and ultimately impotent act of will.

Mrs. Macquarie, second wife and cousin of the Governor, owned a cello that had been brought to Australia from England. Like many ladies of her time in the very early 19th century she probably played the instrument to entertain her family, guests and friends (though historians have debated whether indeed she could even play it). The chair that bears her name, carved out of sandstone at the end of the peninsula by convict labour in 1810, is said to have been commissioned by her husband so that she might enjoy the view or, as legend and Google claims, that she might view ships departing for her beloved homeland, so far and distant from the Colony.

The cello has been likened to the human voice, its shape to the female form. It is an analogy that bears no equation to the real world, just a poetic allusion that gives the musician straddling the wood the sensation that the time spent playing the instrument has a secondary meaning. It’s hard to look at Daniel Mudie Cunningham’s *Rhymes with Failure* and not be struck by the thought that the artist is playing the woman’s body - playing Mrs. Macquarie if you like - albeit through the slightly theatrical distance of the visual pun [cf. Man Ray, Nam June Paik], an already weird kind of embodiment made even stranger by the disconnect between the image and the sound; instead of the ‘human voice’ of the cello - even from a cardboard replica - there is the twangy lonesomeness of the electric guitar. Neither gesture nor sound really equals the thing we’re experiencing, that distanced effect of place and time removing us from the expression of the emotion.

Cunningham’s video work reminds us of the disconnect between the thing that we want and the thing that we eventually get, and how that moment is veiled by an odd sense of relief that we are rewarded at all. The external world is quite separate from our internal emotional world, yet at the same time it’s unalterably connected to our senses in the way we interpret the *out there* of the physical universe, a kind of causal loop that seems to say that there is really no out there, just in here. The melancholy of national identity is so closely allied with this internal state that it’s hard to imagine any other possibility. The blast of Australian heat and sunlight baking down on those wool suited colonists would, you imagine, have banished the European Romantic aesthetic for all time, yet it found a new home among the gum trees. Is it this idea of Australia that rhymes with failure?¹

That sadness you feel is natural, and it will never leave.

Andrew Frost

1. Barron Field, the first published poet in Australia, rhymed “Australia” with “failure” in *The Kangaroo* (1819), subtly revealing his pessimistic view of the new colony.



Tears Don't Come, 2010, SD video, 3 min 22 sec.
Music: ‘Love Changes Everything’ by Sam Phillips, 2004

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MOP Projects | 2/39 Abercrombie St Chippendale NSW 2008
Australia | www.mop.org.au | mop@mop.org.au

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