

SHELTER: ON KINDNESS

A deceptively simple concept, 'kindness' serves as the catalyst for the generation of a wealth of fantastical forms at a recent RMIT Gallery exhibition.

review

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photography

Courtesy RMIT Gallery

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Safe Houses – LAB Architecture Studio (centre left); *4" x 2" Nest* – March Studio (centre); *Sense* – Gregory Burgess (centre right).



“**KINDNESS** is innate in us because we are group animals,” Adam Phillips states in a video interview exhibited in the recent Melbourne show, *Shelter: On Kindness*. His book, *On Kindness* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009) provided inspiration for this group show of artists and architects at RMIT Gallery, housed within the well-known Storey Hall building – renovated and extended by Ashton Raggatt McDougall in 1996. In many ways, it is a show of small ‘shelters’ within this rich and layered one; but as opposed to other ‘pavilion’ type shows, which often serve as collections of essentially disparate objects, this show attempts to deal with an overarching theme – kindness – a simple concept, but a difficult one to address.

The 13 responses displayed came from a diverse group of practitioners both young and old. Most of these were Australian, with the notable exception of Japan’s Terunobu Fujimori, who with Jun Sakaguchi produced *Black Tea House, 2009* – a reworking of the traditional Japanese tea house, elevated on four legs like a big occupiable animal. With its own front room in the original Storey Hall, the work functions as a memorial to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires, its dome-like structure making use of scorched timber from the affected region. The notion of the dome structure as essential to shelter is discussed in a framing essay commissioned from Murdo Macdonald, “We All Need Shelter”, which along with the transcribed

Adam Phillips interview was given to contributors at the start of the process. Both these and other writings around the kindness and shelter topics feature in the accompanying catalogue.

On the night of the exhibition opening Fujimori’s *Black Tea House* was filled with children, and there was a joyfulness in its use and form that would seem to suggest the quality of kindness. Some of the other architectural works in the show sailed closer to shelter than kindness – although this is not to say they are separate poles of thought, as Fujimori’s work demonstrates. The show was interested in the overlap and tension between these themes. Two works of a similar scale and formal basis, but from two very





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Black Tea House –
 Terunobu Fujimori, Jun
 Sakaguchi.

/04
Corners – NMBW.



different architectural practices, flanked the entry to the main room of the gallery. To the left, Lab Architecture Studio's Beuysian series of grey felt covered walls create a brief maze of furry cable ties to brush past. To the right, Gregory Burgess and Pip Stokes follow a similar wall-making strategy, here with two embracing arcs of beeswax blocks. I was struck by how these partition-type works suggested themselves to each other but were framed distinctly by their authors – Lab's *Safe Houses* was about just that; Burgess' *Sense* was a symbolic representation of union.

Perhaps most imposing in the main room of the gallery was 4" x 2" *Nest*, the work of March Studio, the youngest practice featured in the show. A large orthogonal timber 'hedgehog', the interior of this beast is a pure cubic room with benches, suggesting a kind of rugged sauna in what is a clear reworking of the fabled log cabin. The traditional overlapping corners of this vernacular type are the basis of the structure, as it uses lengths at 90 degrees of the standard four-by-two. The 'nest' also cleverly uses mass and quantity to make itself both stable and temporary – it was constructed from recycled ordinary builder's hardwood, borrowed from a timber yard and returned after the show.

The world of real timber cabins is presented through a series of photographs of Wallace's Hut, which is of one of the Victorian High Country huts that provide shelter to those passing through the mountains. Importantly, these huts are open to all – kindness and shelter meeting in a generous civic gesture, which captures the spirit of the exhibition. Temporary occupation of unclaimed space is explored in NMBW's *Corners*, which features a 1:1 reconstruction of a real services cupboard within which a homeless man lived in a North Melbourne building.

Integrating itself into a false wall in the gallery, this is a potent exploration of how small an occupiable space can be, and was accompanied by a series of cardboard houses in an adjacent corner. Either small buildings or strange models, in a surreal play on scale visitors could partially enter these odd-sized constructs.

Charles Anderson's work was perhaps the hardest to find. In the small lift lobby between this and another show, his work was stuck to the ceiling like a thief hiding from their pursuer. This work is a selection taken from *A House for Hermes*, a series of 200 photographs of ceilings that the artist has slept under thanks to the generosity of others. His investigation of the horizontal plane is in deliberate contrast to the other more architectural attempts to enclose space. The images are backlit, multi-hued and truly engaging – fragments of shelters as seen from the unique position of lying on your back.

This was a thoughtful and diverse show. Others featured included noted Melbourne sculptor Robert Bridgewater, in a continuation of his large, timber, wall-based works and detailed paintings of bowls by John R Neeson. Bowls, Macdonald argues in this essay, are the smallest form of shelter. There were also several contributions from the RMIT Koori Unit and a fantastic cloak of possum skin by Elder Wally Cooper – animal as shelter. Lastly, there was Peter Corrigan's work, which it was good to see continues to baffle and humour. *That's That about That* features an inverted merman sitting on a charred throne discussing the linguistic forms in which we use the word kind. **ar**

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