LWAG Talks

A podcast by Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

Ep 16: Salvation Rainbow with Benjamin Bannan and Brent Harrison

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Transcript of a conversation between *HERE&NOW20: Perfectly Queer* artist Benjamin Bannan and curator Brent Harrison on Bannan’s new work *Salvation Rainbow*.

Narrator:

LWAGTalks is Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery’s new podcast, bringing you insights and ideas with artists, curators, educators, writers, and more.

Brent Harrison:

We would like to acknowledge the Wadjuk people of the Noongar nation and the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung people of the Kulin nation, the traditional owners of the land in which we live and work. We recognise their strength and resilience and pay respect to their Elders past, present and emerging.

My name is Brent Harrison and I’m the curator of HERE&NOW20: Perfectly Queer at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery. Today I am joined by Benjamin Bannan, one of the exhibiting artists to discuss his work in the exhibition Salvation Rainbow. Thank you for joining me, Ben.

Benjamin Bannan:

Thanks, Brent. Nice to see you again.

Brent:

Nice to see you again, too. So for your work in the exhibition, you delved into the personal archive of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Could you explain a bit about the origins of the Sisters and their mission for those people who might not be familiar with them and how they came to exist in Perth?

Benjamin:

Yeah, sure. So the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are a worldwide group of self-proclaimed queer nuns. They’re a charity protest activist performance organisation, I guess, that started in San Francisco in 1979, kind of informally. And then they became an organisation and kind of spread across the world as different organisations. The group have quite a rich history in Australia, actually. I believe the third order was came about in Sydney in the early ’80s. And of course during that time is right before or right on the cusp of the AIDS epidemic. So the organisation has a very strong and rich history in relationship to AIDS in many different ways. The group came about in Perth when Michael Collie, who was a sister in the Sydney order, actually moved to Perth for work or life reasons. And he started the Perth order. So I believe that was in 1990, or 1991. The group, I guess, started out in Western Australia with about five to ten members and has kind of like expanded and contracted in number over its last thirty years of existence. And have kind of had, I guess, different goals at different periods of their lifespan.

Brent:

Could you perhaps describe your work in the exhibition, Salvation Rainbow, and what it looks like, for those who are unable to see the exhibition, but also like, the conceptual underpinnings of it, and how it relates to the Sisters?

Benjamin:

I guess, maybe I need to talk a little bit more about my research with the Sisters before I can start talking about how I approached the work. I think basically, when I was researching, basically, the group don't have like a formal archive. So in order to collate and collect the information, for me to understand what it was about this group that I wanted to honour and how I got in contact with some of the Sisters past and present and I guess started conducting interviews and collecting source material. I guess one of the key things that stood out to me was a set of six satin habits called the Rainbow Habit, which is I guess like a ritual that the Sisters bring out on or manifest on special occasions, for example, like Pride. So the Rainbow Habit is a term that kind of describes six satin habits, each in an individual colour of the original rainbow flag and each habit has a six-metre-long train. So it takes 12 Sisters to manifest at a time. And I guess for me, this was like a really pivotal and key thing to focus on because, for starters, it was something that all of the Sisters when I asked them if they had like significant memories during their time as a member of the organisation, almost all of them mentioned being a part of, or wearing the rainbow habit at a period of time. And for me, it also kind of really embodied the kind of embodied activism that the sisters live and breathe and a kind of camp occupation of public space, which is very signature to them. And I guess, yeah, promulgates a kind of joy, a joyous reaction.

So, I decided for the exhibition that the Rainbow Habit was something that was going to drive my work. And I was lucky enough to borrow a Perth set of satin habits. I should say that another reason why I chose to focus on this is that through these objects, the Perth order are connected very much to other or other Sisters throughout Australia. So the Rainbow Habit is actually something that was started by the Sydney house. And I think first manifested in the 2000 Sydney Mardi Gras. The Perth set was also made for the Perth Sisters by the Adelaide Sisters who are seamstresses. And so there's this kind of beautiful connection to the other houses through these objects. And it's also because it takes so many people to manifest different Sisters have flown into Perth at different times to help it manifest in its full form. So I guess, as a way of kind of starting to memorialise the object and the actions that the object has I guess helped manifest, I spent some time in the studio with the Rainbow Habit and started retracing the gestures that made them. So I started kind of deconstructing the garments into garment patterns.

The work in the show is made up of this series of garment patterns. So the gown, the scapula, the veil, the train, etc, have all been kind of compiled into an illustration or a drawing. And I guess what's interesting is like, the patterns are very simplified, for aesthetic reasons, but also because the garments are made by amateur sowers and so they're not perfectly constructed garments. And I think the patterns in the show reflect a kind of amateur quality, like, they don't, they probably don't function, they might function under my logic, and I could probably resew them, but that wasn't the point of the project.

The work is very much about layers to do with the body. It's kind of like a gesture of retracing, which kind of has a relationship to the bodies of the makers, and then in turn the wearer's, and also the viewer’s body in the space. The patterns have been recreated at a one-to-one scale, so they have kind of a direct relationship and direct correlation to the body in the space. The work has also been finished in a really glossy, two pack enamel, which kind of reflects the body back at the viewer in this kind of gold facade. So I should actually mention that the work is an etching (laughter). If you go to the space, and I hope whoever's listening does, they will find an approximately three by two metre etching into aluminium that's been finished in enamel. Yeah.

Brent:

The paint also has like that glittery quality, when you look like super close to it, which is also really nice, because I know from some of the documentation that you’ve showed me of the Sisters when they've worn the Rainbow Habits they're like pouring glitter onto James Street for Pride.

Benjamin:

Yeah, I'm glad you picked up on that. The first time the Rainbow Habit ever came to be in Perth, was at the 2010 Pride Parade and the Sisters were leading the parade and when they got to the end of James Street, yeah, they poured buckets of corresponding colours of glitter (laughter). So yeah, the materiality of the work kind of reflects that in a way.

Brent:

When we've talked about the Sisters before, you've used the term serious parody to describe their actions. I was wondering if you could elaborate on this, both in terms of where the term has come from, and how it's used to describe the Sisters.

Benjamin:

The term is something I came across in a text by Melissa Wilcox, called ‘Queer Nuns, Religion, Activism and Serious Parody’. So it's a term that she's coined in this text from 2018 and it's part of the ‘Sexual Culture’ series from New York uni. It's basically been coined in relation to the Sisters so in the text, she defines it as, ‘A form of cultural protest, where a disempowered group parodies an oppressive cultural institution, while simultaneously claiming for itself, what it believes to be an equally good or superior enactment of one or more culturally respected aspects of that same institution’. So what that basically means in relation to the Sisters is that their enacting parodies of Roman Catholic rituals and figures such as nuns, but also claiming in all seriousness to be an Order of queer nuns. So I guess how serious parody differs from something like dis-identification, a Jose Munoz term, like straight-up parody would be something that a performance artist like Vaginal Davis, like their character Clarence, which directly parodies a white supremacist. But like the Sisters are parodying Roman Catholic nuns while also claiming, in all seriousness, to be nuns. There's like a sincerity there.

I guess they kind of have four kind of main arguments for why they're also a group of nuns. The first is that they do the same work that nuns do, sometimes better, and they're more fun (laughter). They have more moral integrity, especially toward queer communities. Their work is spiritual or even prophetic. I think this is an interesting point and something I came across when speaking to the Sisters is that you have this kind of spectrum of, on one end Sisters who are atheist, and I guess the work is the work that they do is much more on parity side. And then you also have sisters who have, I guess, been rejected by typical religious and spiritual organisations. And I guess for them, the Sisters are a way that they can kind of enact a spirituality, while also being true to like their queer selves. Which is kind of like a really interesting dynamic and broad spectrum of people that kind of participate within the framework of this organisation. And then I guess the fourth is that the Catholic Church has no monopoly on nuns. Anyway, there are lots of different types of nuns.

Brent:

Did you want to talk a bit about the techniques and processes you used to make the work?

Benjamin:

Yeah. So I guess I retraced the garment patterns of the works, which have then been collated into a drawing or illustration that kind of reflects religious iconography. I've been kind of looking at a lot of like, proto-Renaissance work for my thesis. And I guess the work in a simplified way starts to reflect the compositions of that time, like a Masaccio kind of, like the martyr or the angel or the Christ. So I guess I'm like asserting the Sisters back into, abstractly, back into the aesthetics that they appropriate. And of course, the gold finish of that reflects the kind of gold soup that figures are swimming in from paintings of that time, which kind of I guess like symbolises a kind of divine unknowability in a lot of those paintings. The composition like starts to speak to an ascension or something. I guess as well it's important when talking about the materiality of the work because it's kind of like an exaggerated and abstract version of a plaque. So I guess while I was making the work, I was thinking a lot about the language of monuments or the material language of remembering in public space. And of course the Sisters were super influential in bringing the AIDS quilt to Perth twice, and also lobbying for an AIDS memorial to be built in Perth. And so I guess, as well, we're seeing a lot in the media people questioning the people and the places that have been memorialised in public spaces. So I guess the etching is kind of also thinking about queer figures being memorialised. So as much as like the work uses the language of painting, it also uses the language of the monument in some ways.

Brent:

I guess what made you decide to make this work? And what sparked your relationship and connection with the Sisters?

Benjamin:

My first personal with experience with the Sisters actually came about from a project that you and I did together last year? I think it was last year. Yeah, 2019. An exhibition called ‘Looking now anyone here?’ And my work was about a glory hole that had been taken from a beat in the ’90s, a door with a glory hole in it, sorry, that had been taken from a beat in the ’90s by a man called Neil Buckley. And it had been donated to the West Australian Museum. And so my work was responding to that and I got in contact with Neil. And over the course of that project, I guess we kind of built a relationship and through that I found out that Neil was the Mother of Perth’s Order. So Neil's name is Mother Greta Amaleta of the Holy Vapours. And I guess that was also a time where I was reading Melissa Wilcox’s ‘Queer Nuns’, and I guess, thinking about the Orders that had been mentioned in that book and the ones that had been left out. So for me, because of Neil, I became really interested in what the Sisters had done for Perth. I know that Neil had been the Mother for 15, 20 years. But I also understood the organisation had existed in Western Australia before him. And so it was really important for me to kind of build a larger picture of what the Sisters stood for and what they had done in Western Australia. And so a big part of that was speaking to other members who had been part of the group at different times.

And I guess what was really beautiful was that they not only had oral histories, because I guess like, the larger picture of this exhibition, of this work is kind of like, what histories have been recorded and how and where? And it's like, none of these things, or very few of these things had actually been documented or archived and so a lot of the information either came through people's memory or through small artefacts like newspaper clippings, or, at one stage, the Sisters had a publication that they were like, DIY-ing from someone's home. And it was really about like scrounging together all of these kind of clues from different people's lives. I mean, as much as it's like easy to talk about the group as a whole, they're also a very small organisation and so it's like, it was personal. Almost all of the Sisters, well all of the Sisters, had been affected by AIDS in some way. A really key figure, someone who I spoke to quite a lot, was someone called Ruth Marshall, Sister Agatha, who was one of the original members. And Ruth worked at the SETA Centre, which then became the Western Australian AIDS Council. So you either had a lot of people working in AIDS health care or people who had directly been affected by the epidemic and so it was like, it was really beautiful to see the kind of really lived, truly embodied activism that that they were kind of participating in and being quite loud about, which was brave anywhere, but particularly, I imagine in Perth in the ’90s.

Brent:

Thank you for joining me today, Ben.

Benjamin:

Thanks for having me.

Brent:

It's been a pleasure.