



Interview

Ross Manning: unleashing the hidden beauty in everyday objects

Monica Tan

At Dark Mofo, the former Brisbane repairman has channeled his love of gadgets into kinetic sculptures of light

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A network of underground tunnels make an unusual setting for the work of Brisbane-based artist Ross Manning. The walls of Hobart's Prince of Wales Battery, made of big slabs of sandstone, are covered in dust and cobwebs. And Manning's piece, Sad Majick, is like a little spider of light in the centre of one of the spaces. Attached to an oscillating fan, an LED light spins nervously, unleashing shards of coloured light from two glass prisms.

Showing his work outside the "white cube" of a gallery is an uncommon but rewarding experience for the artist. "The contrast is really nice with the cave-like underground, that's cold and dark, and then having these little stations of energy, movement and intensity," says

Manning over the phone.

It is not the only installation Manning has at the Dark Mofo festival. At the Town Hall Underground are three additional works: Dichroic Filter Piece, Double Refraction and Small Spiral. Each displays a love of gadgetry and a sculptural harmony of form, colour and movement, that typifies much of the 36-year-old artist's work.

The works seem to unlock a hidden beauty from ordinary objects. Take Double Refraction, that uses an LCD screen and layers of plastic to alter dimensions of light and expose an optical phenomenon that is normally trapped in the material. The work has a colour and sheen found in a butterfly's wing, and is an enigmatic portrait of a piece of technology omnipresent in modern life, but that few of its users know much about.

Manning's former life as a repairman for data projectors, a job he took in part thanks to his love for technology, has clearly fed into his new life as an artist. He has a surgeon-like passion for the inner workings of machinery. "When you show a video through a data projector you have predeterminants that technology will produce your artwork out of. I like to start with the technology, start with the machine, and then try and get it to do the things I want it to do."

And yet more proof that life experience is essential to making good art, Manning also highlights the years he spent in Japan, working as an English teacher, as a period of great influence on his art practice. It is not hard to draw a line between his art and a city like Tokyo, where there's "lots of sound, and everything is flashing" and his work.

"Japan is where I first started mucking around with electronics. I would go into Akihabara and all the electronics stalls. It was a music focus because I built my own instruments and electronics for audio. In Japan is where I saw all this amazing music and art and also got the chance to start building and experimenting with my own stuff."

Despite his love of technology, there is also a sense that through his work he is searching for a Platonic ideal. "I like to keep it stripped down, cut out as much noise as possible. I'm really interested in movement and light and sound. Those three things seem to effect you on a primal, instinctual level. For a viewer it activates more senses than just looking and thinking, there's movement and light and people become aware of spatial changes and shadow."

But Manning argues that for authenticity's sake, he has also preserved nature's "messiness". He mentions Small Spiral, a kinetic hanging mobile with a double helix shape and reminiscent of scientific dioramas. Manning has kept the chords and power boards of the work exposed, an element many others artists may choose to hide.

"I get a little suspicious with things that are too neat, tidy and clean. Because life isn't tidy and clean and everyone is completely flawed. I like to expose all the workings of things."

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