

Lounge and Listen: Marion Conrow's *Museum of My Friends #1*
(Lismore Regional Gallery 2019) by Moya Costello



Photo by Natsky

The deconstructed family has been a feature, at least of western culture, for some time: single-parented, blended, same-sex, friends as family etc.

The Northern Rivers, in regional New South Wales, Australia, is a home for queer culture, art, community, and the environment and sustainability. It hosts the annual Tropical Fruits LGBTIQ festival; it hosted last century's Aquarius counter-culture festival; it is a major centre of the anti-coal-seam gas movement.

Marion Conrow's exhibition, *Museum of My Friends #1*, the first in a series, Lismore Regional Gallery 2019, is emblematic of the queer and artistic culture of the region. Gallery 5/Jenny Dowell Gallery was darkened, like a tent in a side-show alley, except for peep-hole apertures in two of its glass walls – hence the peeping into something queer or private.



Conrow produced short videos of her seven of her creative friends and professional peers. AñA Wojak, Beau Dachs, Devi Thomas, Jeremy Hawkes, Roger Foley-Fogg, Stephen Allkins, Edda Lampis, and Marion and Oscar Prince Wilde (cat). responded in a personal, revelatory way to five stimuli, represented by an image on a screen-for-selection in the Gallery. Viewers/listeners select from these icons – art, brain, world, disco, kangaroo (random) – in each of the visual-audio portraits, and focus on life or art practice. Conrow wanted an intimate not interview mode: a lounge-room piece, the family home, even the mundane – but the portraits are far from that, as the artists talk with wit and poignancy about their lives ('None of us are getting out of here alive,' says Hawkes), and perform their art (we see Wojak in mesmeric, meditative, intuitive movement-dance as a living sculpture).

Conrow has been working with video-media projection and sculpture since the 1980s, for over three decades. Initially studying sculpture, she always loved film and was the first music-video student in the original incarnation of what was to eventually become Southern Cross University whose campuses include Lismore. She was the National Coordinator of Community Television in Australia and has exhibited internationally and nationally, including with Blast Theory (UK), and Lines in the Sand as part of the cultural program of the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games. Her parallel practice is in club and event work in projection installation, and *Museum of My Friends* brought that club work and art together.

Museums are about categorisation, selection, collection, preservation, and memory. Conrow asked: in 100 years, what would you say in response to these friends' lives and art practice, brought to you in a virtual presence? Conrow has suffered a severe car accident, the recovery period and process initially isolating her, and her home was affected by the 2017 Lismore flood. Collection and preservation are life-enhancing processes, storing examples of what has largely disappeared. In 100 years, her friends will be present when they are no longer here, but held in virtual reality.

At the centre of the exhibition is a stainless-steel sculptured mesh screen layered and shaped across a large, open pod or capsule, egg-shaped, something eerie but familiar, uncanny but arresting. A monolith, appearing from some other world, that we need to attend to. Eggs represent potentiality, fertility, fecundity, a home or shelter for forthcoming birth and life. The capsule of the brain is an ovular/egg shape. The famous Fabergé egg is a luxury item, bejewelled, a royal gift. The egg is not a new image for Conrow. She used it in *Unravell Egg* (exhibited at Artstate Lismore; *The Re-authoring Impulse and Decade of Catharsis*, Northern Rivers Community Gallery, Ballina; and Bonalbo Arts Show in 2017), where its symbolism is clear: representing healing in removal from the outside world, in isolation, sleeping like a foetus in the womb. The dark grey, almost matt steel of the *Museum#1* pod is also reminiscent of amour, used for protection. And the mesh produces a holographic or three-dimensional effect for the videos, not unlike dioramas in museums. On each of the two metallic legs of the pod are cast-aluminium rhinoceros beetles (*Xylotrupes ulysses*). Insect populations are among the things museums preserve, and insect populations are under threat on our degrading planet. Beetles are an ancient, surviving species; for the ancient Egyptians, scarab beetles represented the cycle of life.



Photo by Natsky

This is a technically, technologically and aesthetically sophisticated exhibition. For example, the pod's beetles were obtained from a scan by the Engineering School at Southern Cross University. Conrow received an Australia Council grant for development of the show, and was mentored by Suzon Fuks who herself works across media and disciplines; and Urban Arts Projects for the fabrication of the screen sculpture. In the past, Conrow has also collaborated with other major figures in the art world, such as Judy Watson. *Museum of My Friends#1*, in its art, technology and science usage, reminds us that our flourishing is dependent on our connections with others, with otherness, with the other-than-human as well as the human.

Moya Costello has four books: short, creative prose (Kites in Jakarta (Sea Cruise Books) and Small Ecstasies (UQP)); short novels (The Office as a Boat (Brandl & Schlesinger) and Harriet Chandler (Short Odds Publications)). She has creative and scholarly work, including art writing, in journals, magazines and anthologies. She has received grants and fellowships from government; held a residency at Monash University; been a guest at writers' festivals; and judged several literary competitions. She is an adjunct lecturer at Southern Cross University.