

Velocity: Sasha Grishin review of exhibition at ANU

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Sasha Grishin

This new exhibition explores the influence of speed and the dehumanising effect of living in cities.

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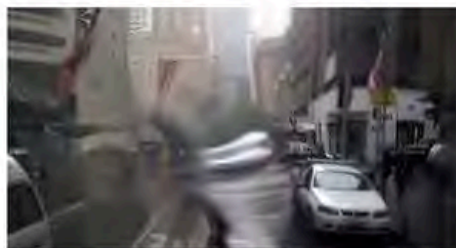
Merilyn Fairsky, Stati d'Animo 2006.

It was Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the leader of the Italian Futurists who defiantly declared: "We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath – a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace."

That was back in 1909. Now, more than a century later, speed in the urban environment has not only transformed our physical world, but also our metaphysical state of being and the way we operate and survive in this environment.

The Russian Supremacists argued that speed of locomotion defined the way we saw the world and the way we depicted it in art. When a person could not move faster than a speeding horse, there was a holistic understanding of the world, which resulted in realism. With steam trains, the world became fragmented to the eye and Futurism and Cubism were the resulting styles. With the speed and complexity of urban life and the advent of aerial photography, this fragmentation led to abstraction.

Velocity is quite an outstanding and challenging exhibition, one of the best which I have seen at the Drill Hall Gallery for a very long time. Terence Maloon, in a lucid catalogue essay, discusses the ideas of Paul Virilio, the French cultural theorist who has published extensively on speed, technology and the urban environment.



In a famous pronouncement, Virilio wrote "The virtual city is the city of all cities. It is each important city (Singapore, Rotterdam, Paris, Milan, etc.) becoming the borough of a hyper city, while ordinary cities become in some sense suburbs. This metropolisation of cities leads us to conceive of a hyper-centre, a real-time city, and thousands of cities left to their own devices. If I am correct, this would lead to a pauperisation, not of continents but of cities, in all regions of the world."

Gilbert Bel-Bachir, Untitled Sydney 2010.

This exhibition to some extent is about the "pauperisation" of cities around the world with the sense of anonymity, alienation and a disconnect between what it means to be human and to inhabit a space which destroys the sense of being human. The idea is not a new one, what is new about the exhibition is the selection of artists which Maloon has assembled through which to explore this concept.

They include the remarkable Russian photographer, Alexei Vassiliev, who has been based in Paris since 1993, and who has built up an international reputation for his soft-focus images. *The Quo Vaditis?* series, from which one of his smaller 450cm long images has been selected (the big ones are life-size 2 x 9 metres), consists of crowd studies, possibly in the Moscow underground, where the whole mass of humanity is shown. As he writes, they approach as "hurried, compact, indifferent crowds that advance, come together, stop, and then continue on their way without ever exchanging glances." It is an eerie image, which is both immediate and approachable, as well as aloof and enigmatic.



Jon Cattapan, Imagine a raft (hard rubbish no. 1)

Jon Cattapan has been an artist who has long engaged with the urban surreal. His images of submerged cities, people appearing through night vision goggles, and the constant overlay of tiers of electronic surveillance and of information systems, have all been central to his practice. His paintings, including *Imagine a raft (hard rubbish no. 1)*, 2011, present an image which is accessible, but simultaneously also mysterious and hinting at a different level of existence.

Robert Boynes, one of Canberra's most accomplished artists, has for several decades been obsessed with people who are transformed through their urban environments and the affects of speed on these people. Displacement caused through by the fragmentation is a theme that runs through the selection of his paintings in this exhibition.

Merilyn Fairsky's single channel, almost half-hour-long video, *Stati d'Animo, 2006-2011*, is an effective and memorable piece which brings to mind Umberto Boccioni's icon triptych *States of Mind: Farewells*, those who go, and those who stay behind. Except now, the scene is not set in a railway station, as was the case with the Italian Futurist, but at the Dubai International Airport. We are dealing with some sort of catastrophe, where passengers are stranded, some are evacuated, while others move around aimlessly in an orderly mass.

Other artists in this exhibition include Gilbert Bel-Bachir, Derek O'Connor and Semiconductor.

I suspect that this is one of those defining exhibitions which will be discussed for a long time after it has been dismantled.

Velocity, ANU Drill Hall Gallery, closes December 14, Wednesday to Sunday, noon-5pm