

IAN BURNS

Don't try this at home

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In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag famously described the responses of interviewed survivors of a plane crash: one on-camera interviewee stated that the terrifying experience had been so real that it was just like watching, or, more acutely, like actually being in a movie.

This complex phenomenological perception of, response to, or determination of 'reality' is at the core of Ian Burns' work. All of Burns' (born Australia, lives and works New York) practice over the past decade has, to differing degrees, interrogated the screen image, its construction and representation of truth – *lens veritas* – creating fictional worlds in which the elements are more real (in the sense Sontag illustrates above) than those found in the natural world. Burns brilliantly alights upon moments of movie cliché, triggering the viewer's willing suspension of disbelief, wherein we readily jump to visual assumptions, alchemically transmuting plastic bags into mountains or pitching seas, scuffed, motorised wine glasses into passing air, mist and intangible atmospheric, and disco balls into dabbled starlight.

Burns, who studied both as an engineer and artist, brings his engineering background to bear on his highly inventive and darkly humorous mechanised sculptural installations (or what can be more prosaically described as closed-circuit kinetic sculptures generating live-feed digital audio and video footage). His works commonly employ everyday objects and the simplest of means to re-create highly dramatic faux-cinematic visualisations. The scenarios generated by Burns's machines, broadcast to flat screens mounted directly onto the sculptures or adjacent walls, frequently feature life-changing (or even life-ending) moments of filmically sublime fake awe and wonder. Weather moves across monumental mountain ranges, the sun sets over a tropical sea, volcanoes erupt, aeroplanes travail through turbulent skies or fly over desolate, emptied post-disaster landscapes. More recently, Burns has turned his attention to the notional specifics of geographic place, with both the physical components of the video-generating machines and the resultant image relating to an idea of a particular place. Recent works made and exhibited in Australia featured constructional and depictive elements of iconic Australiana, a major example of which, *Down under, where...* (2008) was acquired for a national museum collection. Similarly, here in Dublin, Burns has tuned his sculptural antenna into Irish cultural kitsch...

Burns' installations are also becoming increasingly self-contained and sculpturally self-aware, with the constructional elements chosen for dramatic irony and comic bathos. Burns considers the equation whereby the more 'pathetic' the sculptural components used to generate the awe-inspiring video and audio footage and feed, the more the 'grandiosity' of the resultant imagery is questioned or undermined.

But one should not just assume that Burns is merely concerned with kitsch or visual trickery, nor that his agenda illustrates or underscores Bourriaud's notion that artistic activity is a complex game whose forms and functions evolve according to historical periods and social contexts. These are of unquestionable relevance to Burns's artistic concerns, but even his transgressive side-swipes at production values and pretension do not cloud the central fact that his work displays extraordinarily rare *zeitgeist*. It is constructed of elements of its time, producing images from its time and making comments upon not only its time, but on the nature of time itself.

Ian Burns has exhibited extensively with more than 35 international shows in the past few years. Recent exhibitions include The Dell Gallery, Griffith University, Brisbane; a solo presentation at the xMelbourne Art Fair (presented by mother's tankstation); the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main; Spencer Brownstone Gallery, New York; Espacio Minimo, Madrid; and Hilger Contemporary, Vienna. Notably, Burns' work has been included in major survey exhibitions such as 'New York: States of Mind' at The House of World Cultures, Berlin, and Queens Museum of Art, New York; 'StereoVision' at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum; The Torino Triennale (2005) and 'Greater New York' at PS1/MoMA in 2005, which brought him to general critical prominence. His work has recently been acquired for the collections of the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main; The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Ian Burns is a 2008 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow in Video.