

pompom

Kylie Banyard

Imagining Alternatives

First Draft Gallery, Sydney

27 November - 14 December 2013

Fantasy is a place

In 1992 I travelled to San Francisco alone, unaccompanied and free, I was 18 and desperate to leave the stifling familiarity of the suburbs. I stayed with a school friend of my mother's, Sally. Having taken one look at my fluorescent paisley tights and rose coloured glasses she worked out what particular phase I was in and suggested we visit the Haight-Ashbury. I had never heard of the Haight and had no idea what it represented, but she certainly did; the Haight-Ashbury was the San Francisco neighbourhood at the centre of the 1960s counter culture movement. By 1992 the Haight had become a hippie relic, appropriating and capitalising on its brief utopian history; retails shops were abound with flower power, peace and rainbow paraphernalia. Possessing little by way of experience, or critical faculty, I 'consumed' the hippiness; I was intoxicated by my imagining of a history that pointed to an alternative way of living.

Looking back at this experience one word comes to mind – hope. Whilst 1992 was certainly no historic moment in the history of the Haight, what I saw were people who had and were still trying to keep a dream alive. This brings me to the artwork of Kylie Banyard, in many ways Banyard's work embodies this sense of hope. *Imagining Alternatives* arouses my hippie yearnings. Working across mediums; painting, watercolour, sculpture, in combination with optical devices and geodesic domes, Banyard states:

The outmoded forms given new life in my art hark back to times in the past when it seemed easier to imagine a space and a thinking outside the dominant socio-economic system of modern Western culture; when faith in inventing alternative visions of the world via utopian imagination seemed more vital.

For Banyard, the imagination aided by outmoded optical technologies such as kaleidoscopes, View Masters (a 20th century version of the stereoscope) and The Dreamachine offer a means of expression with potential to invoke transformation on all fronts; socially, communally and creatively. Her artworks function as speculative gestures; as she draws on the glimmer of hope represented in social experiments of the past, she is also aware of the paradoxes and implications of utopian ideals.

When I approach Banyard's geodesic domes (*Daydreamer I*, 2013 and *Daydreamer II*, 2014) I am lured by her proposition to retreat, pause, look, see, move inward, feel. Drawn to its surface, the intensity of colour is amplified by its exact geometry; the face of each triangle, with its faceted precision and cubby house proportions calls me to come closer. I walk around it first, surveying form and structure. Next I encounter the opening alluding to an interior, this is not a

sculpture, this is a place. Like the gingerbread house from the fairy tale Hansel and Gretel it whispers, “come in”, however unlike the danger awaiting the siblings this fairy tale unfolds without risk. In Banyard’s oeuvre, fantasy is a place not of peril but rather of momentary visual illusions. I crouch down and seeing cushions I hear myself say, “sit”. Upon entering the dome the ephemeral image is amplified, as I am oriented towards a spinning apparatus called The Dreamachine causes my eyes to close. Spinning light invites surrender reminiscent of my attempts to meditate and I momentarily forget about my iPhone.

Banyard’s work activates a desire to escape and imagine. I am reminded of Italo Calvino’s essay, *Visibility* (1996), where he writes:

I have included visibility in my list of values to be saved, it is to give warning of the danger we run in losing a basic human faculty: the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colours...I have in mind some possible pedagogy of the imagination that would accustom us to control our own inner vision without suffocating it or letting it fall.[\[1\]](#)

Banyard similarly foregrounds such a value, in *Daydreamer I*, 2012 and *Daydreamer II*, 2013 she invites us to see with our eyes closed. Whilst in her kaleidoscopic (*Domescope & Domescope II*, 2013) and view master (*Imagining Alternatives*, 2013) works we are invited to *look in* with eyes open. But what are we looking and seeing exactly – colour, light, pattern, abstraction? This isn’t simply everyday looking, rather, this is seeing borne through the imagining of our minds.

Seated in front of The Dreamachine with eyes closed brings to light the paradox of looking but not seeing. Taking up Banyard’s invitation to ‘look’ is differentiated from the act of ‘looking at’. By closing my eyes I am reminded that via my imagination, flights of fancy can take me places my camera, my iPhone and my high-speed broadband can’t – inwards. And when I take leave of these devices to engage her work I return to the now obsolete optical devices of my childhood. By accepting Banyard’s propositions I am rewarded with a momentary intoxicating feeling of reverie, reminding me of why at 18 years old I loved the Haight-Ashbury and why I returned there many times. The bright colours, the pink houses, the peace flags and the old tie-dye wearing hippies offered a moment of imagining and like Banyard’s work, an opportunity to escape my usual frenetic disposition.

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[\[1\]](#) Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Great Britain: Vintage Books, 1996). p. 92.