

VISUAL ARTS

Ric Spencer



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Shining spirit of collaboration

What around you inspires you to create? Who inspires you to push yourself into uncharted waters? There are a couple of shows running in the middle of the city that find inspiration in just these types of questions.

Palm Court is an artist-run initiative set up by Clare Penke and Clare Wohlrik in Hay Street. The space opened with a show that examined the issue of artist-run spaces themselves and they have followed this up with a show that looks at the nature of collaborative art and how artists communicate with and through their practices.

I enjoy the way the work at Palm Court has so far been reflexive, based on the personality of the space itself. It makes the space a kind of think-tank about itself and closely examines what working in an artist-run initiative has to offer and what defines the work produced in these spaces.

Other artist-run spaces in Perth, both ongoing and defunct, like Kurb, Gotham, Jack Sue, Praxis and Media Space, have all had much to offer, defining the Perth art scene in some way and have been distinguished by the work they have produced. They have also, in the way they have individually been run, questioned the character of the artist-run space itself and, importantly, the existence of these spaces within Perth.

It seems Palm Court has taken this history to heart and has, in the best manner of art practice, decided to investigate what an artist-run space does and how it runs through the



Baled up: Video still by Elise Harmsen and Jergen Kerkovius.

work itself — well, at least so far. The current show, *Helping Hands*, sees work from a number of artists involved, either through studio space or through its committee getting inside the concept of collaborative art. The work as a whole is pretty socialistic, built in the spirit of co-existence and pursuit for the benefit of the whole.

Indeed, it's a lot about relationships and the hopes and dreams these involve at their beginnings. Tom Freeman's looped digital video shows bits and pieces of socialisation collected over the past month or so. Some scenes involve meetings, others just of hanging out, but in its documentary style the video engages in the politics of communal creativity and a romantic sense of common purpose.

Clare Wohlrik's friendship bands,

which have been extended into quasi American Indian patterns, described to me the beginnings of a beautiful friendship and the understandings of the start of a journey. The fragile work, joined at the point of the friendship bands, seems the quintessential metaphor for Palm Court in its early stages.

Elise Harmsen and Jergen Kerkovius have offered a couple of performance videos built around balancing on hay bales. *Up, Down*, a collaborative piece in itself, requires further interaction from the viewer. A monitor sits on a seesaw, on screen the two artists climb a hay bale opposite each other, trying to keep the ship right. As you tilt the seesaw, the artist on that side takes a dive. Tip the seesaw the other way and the artist falls off the bale on that side — it's a great piece on the



Combined skills: Ceramic works by Andrew Nicholls and Jacob Ogden Smith at Palm Court Gallery, Hay Street.

nature of dependence. Andrew Nicholls and Jacob Ogden Smith have combined their skills to make ceramics with a unique quality. Nicholls has sketched a series of fairly dark images of fallen angels, torture devices and dancing devils. They look great on the minimal porcelain pots of Ogden Smith.

Helping Hands is at Palm Court Gallery, upstairs at 926 Hay Street, Perth, until July 1.

Garden of Curiosities, Amanda Shelsher's series of ceramic busts and small figures at FORM gallery, is equally about collaborative work — in this case the family becomes central to the artist's inspiration.

The figures are roughly hewn, moulded by hand with withdrawn expression as you might see on a Japanese No actor or mime artist. Indeed they reminded me a lot of puppetry as their gestures seem to extend the artist's emotions, or even replace them, taking on the role of a pseudonym or ghost writer.

Shelsher's figures are in poses which protect the domestic front or give space for growth, generally exploring the boundaries of the home and its inhabitants. They feel displaced, as you might do in the young family zone, but they become decorative in a way that blocks a lot about the artist's medium and its process. The figures have an early modernist feel to them, due mainly to their heavy gait and Modigliani features. The patterned drawings reflect the garden in the title, with images of various flora and fauna, and attempt an engagement with spirituality through environment.

I found the works illustrative rather than intimate, revelling in the theatre of emotion rather than being emotive. In this sense the work becomes a little repetitive but equally, like puppetry, externalises a reminder of the importance of connecting and extending into our surroundings.

Garden of Curiosities is at FORM, King Street Arts Centre, until July 21.

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