

## Byrd: Art as Pictographic Space and Field Work

A conversation with [Anna-Sophie Jürgens](#) and [Blake Thompson](#) | Section: [Interviews](#)  
Series: [Street Art, Science and Engagement](#)

*Abstract: Byrd explores the power of art through many facets, commonly through social criticism and environmental commentary. Through street art and other media, he observes and makes connections in the environment his art exists in. Inspired by science, his art conveys social and environmental messages by interacting with the space and resources available to it. Byrd is interested in evaluating why people think in certain ways, and how these thoughts change over time. He commonly features animals and nature as main characters that comment on these behaviours in his works. This not only allows a deeper understanding of human nature, but also acknowledges the agency of animals and nature themselves. The conversation explores how Byrd's art frames narratives into a palatable space and perspective for the viewer.*

**Byrd, I am delighted to welcome you to the online journal w/k. You are a multifaceted freelance graffiti muralist and artist based in Canberra, Australia, who started out as a graffiti painter more than 20 years ago. Some of your commissions include works for The National Portrait Gallery, the Hindmarsh group, the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation and The City of Sydney. Your works can be found in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, National Museum of Australia, Canberra Museum and Gallery and various other galleries and private and corporate collections, both locally and in Europe. You teach, do workshops, curate and mentor and you collaborate with other muralists and artists in Canberra and interstate. Many of your artworks are dedicated to non-human animals and explore the interface between urban life and the state of our (natural) environment. All this is very interesting for w/k, and in this article, we would like to invite you to reflect on how environmental themes, research and engagement inspire and shape your work, with the aim of better understanding the artistic concept behind your environmentally themed art and activist art practice.**

Hey. Thanks for the opportunity to yarn about this stuff and what a fantastic introduction!

### **Urban art, pop works and art exploring the environment**

**Byrd, you are a street artist whose canvases are the places where we live - an artist of, and in, public space - but your spray-painted art can also be found in private collections. Your commercial art has been called "urban pop works" (Grishin 2020). We are interested to know what you think about the role of these different mediums in your creative work and whether you yourself would describe your art as "urban pop works".**

Sasha Grishin is not entirely wrong, but I think that's an accident. It's nice when writers and critics take the time to think and talk about your work rather than *cut/paste* whatever context you have provided. But that's kind of a longish discussion more about art criticism than art content. Grishin is most likely responding to the stylised nature of the animals in this body of work, rather than the intent or sources. Part of my attraction to the field of street art is its relationship to the use of resources: figuring out what

space is available and the best method to intervene, who will witness this intervention and what can be communicated. That these interventions are ephemeral is also deeply satisfying, as it defies neoliberal ideals of constant growth and democratises access to these spaces. An extension of this resource use pivots on the axiom *think globally act locally*. Street Art is primarily a pictographic space, and exotic others are an easy attention getter. I work to use local content to talk to larger themes, labouring to produce *worthy* pictures from local sources. So if Pop Art can be said to draw from popular and mass culture in the style of comic book advertising and mass-produced objects, then my efforts to draw from the place where I am – to create works that use multiples on reclaimed materials – are *Urban Pop Multiples*.

**How would you define the power of street art and gallery art in their respective environments?**

Street Art has the benefits of a context built into its existence and therefore reception. A well sited work is amplified by the place. Gallery works are more like islands, they need to carry context within them. They need to hold their intent against the place, to be unaffected by other paintings in the gallery and the trappings of whatever household they may land in. Contrarily, Street Art is primarily sprung on the unsuspecting viewer, left available in the hope of being witnessed, of carrying meaning. Having an audience in mind and refining the production towards this is paramount.

**The themes of your work relate to, among other things, the pitfalls and promises of capitalism and the art industry, gender and racial politics, but also the natural environment. What would you say if someone called you an environmental artist?**

Well, everything is connected; the more I look, the finer the connections. I'm wary of the title *environmental artist* because I'm not missionary in my stance. I bear witness, I observe and make connections, I try to behave well, but ultimately what other people do is what other people do.

I guess it shows a finer reading of my practice to call me an environmental artist than it does to say "urban pop"; in an expanded sense, any of my work produced outside exists in the environment. It's a little like the language around being "on country" – we are never off country, less connected perhaps, less attentive definitely. But never not on, and in, this land.



Byrd: *Sponsored  
Influence Operation*  
(2020). Photo: Byrd.

**The *Nancy Sever Gallery* wrote about one of your exhibitions in 2017:**

**“The themes of byrd’s work have grown out of a longstanding relationship with Australia’s natural environment: its fragility, management and the traces of human passage through it.” (Nancy Sever)**

**Indeed, Australian wildlife and natural beauty play an important role in your art – including as a witty reflection of the human condition and social situation. Can you tell us a bit more about your understanding of nature and non-human animals (for example, birds) in your work? How would you describe the environmental message or approach of your art?**

From the subjects I choose (local birds) and themes addressed (local settler politics) to the grounds I work on (the resurfacing of a building or reclaimed materials) the message is embedded in my actions. It’s funny that as humans we can now admit to being part of the ecosystem (rather than apart, or even above it), but we still struggle to let other beings have their own agency. I see the difficulty in, say, balancing between anthropomorphising the study subject and cataloguing a foreign or alien culture. We have historically sequestered large chunks of language for the description of humanity, and it is hard to shake the old meanings loose enough to include others. Take the phenomenon of play: modern science still works very hard to find other motivators to explain situations in other species that could fall into this descriptor.

Aside from this is the difficulty of shedding one’s humanity in order to inhabit the space occupied by another species. Creatures like parrots no more move through the world like us than they do crows.

Each group has unique physical and cultural modes, which, measured from outside, becomes invisible.

As an art maker everything I encounter is run through a set of frames. It starts with an emotional response and becomes more and more analytical: Do I like it? How was it done? Why was it done? Is it something I could do? Is it something I should do? Etc.

Here is an example: Let's say, I come across a poster. It starts with "Do I like it?" Then "Why do I like it?" Is it the message, the placement, its construction, its production? Then "Who did this?" and "with what intention, how, to what end?" – and so on. Then I embark on a broader reading of the context: "Is it a) advertising, b) political, c) a lost pet?" This leads to more questions – such as "Is it alone or part of a larger context?" (Is it referencing a historical precedent, does it mean to?) – and other subsets of queries. Finally, it is also run through my own set of internal maps and enquiries.

All of this breaks my experience of the world and things in it into a kind of elastic taxonomy and lets me map unconnected systems. For example, settler political language becomes a method for grouping inferred hierarchies of native parrots to produce compositions.



Byrd: *Room View* – Nancy Sever Gallery (2020). Photo: Byrd.





Byrd: *Fragmented Attention* (2020). Photo: Byrd.

## Art and research: Exploring the complexity of our environments

**How does your work address and enable a deeper understanding of environmental fragility and the urgency to protect it? And to what extent is your work inspired by research and science?**

So, my recent work is an attempt to give attention to what is around us, here and now. A lot of Street Art falls into the trap of lazy ethical aesthetics, leading to lots of pretty girls and *Nat Geo exotica*. As I said earlier, I try to make worthy pictures sourced from or speaking to the local environment. From here. For now. An example is the body of works responding to/with observations of sulphur-crested cockatoos and what they are doing around the city (of Canberra) and how this marks a time of year. Just now, winter is ending and there are groups of varying sizes working their way through every remnant grassland eating the yams. Before this was screaming and clearing out nest hollows in remnants of suitable trees. Closer to summer they will be in the street trees just above eye level, and so on, across the year.

I am, I guess, an amateur naturalist; it's an extension of being present in a place. My *knowing* is based in both reading and observation. I lean on those with the resources to give good time to research, but test and supplement these with my own limited field work. And I enjoy the overlapping of unrelated fields.

I do read and watch research and science about nature (and other fields) when I can. For one, it's been interesting to log the shift in "voice over narrations" of nature doco's in parallel to the expansion of the relevant science. From the extractive resource-based readings, through a feminist lens, towards a multispecies communities kind of approach. Even the plants are now granted autonomy and agency! My fascination is as much in the shifting science as what the shifts reveal about humanity.



Byrd: *Looking forward – Looking back* (2020-2022). Photo: Byrd.

## Art, environment and engagement

### **How have your environmentally themed artworks been received by the public, researchers and other artists?**

People need narratives. The science of this plays out in things like *song lines*. Cultures that rely on memory over writing, embed facts in fictions. It's just easier to recall the parts within a relationship. Think of what songs you know and can sing; whatever nonsense they are, you would struggle to hold that set of words outside this structure ... Anyway, for artists the choice is to illustrate existing narratives (think religious [biblical] or cultural [Shakespeare]) or build your own and hope people watch long enough to grasp and value yours.

Environmentally themed work allows the audience access to existing narratives, so they have a frame of reference, and the artist can then redirect, expand or question these accepted positions. People like naturalistic looking birds and green spaces. On the one hand, there is a respect for the technical achievement, on the other these things are inherently more restful than the built environment. There is a lot of science around the recuperative qualities of time spent in natural spaces, and murals of the same come some way towards these outcomes. (In the same way as lunchtime meditation classes offered by a stressful workplace, instead of structural change, provide hope but not real change!)

**To what extent has your relationship to the places where your murals are created changed in recent years? For example, with the increasing interest in Street Art, to what extent are street art designs now co-produced with communities?**



In a way, it has never mattered *what* happens in a place as much as *something* happens and that whatever happens is sensitive to place. This hinges on the premise that *place* is the accumulation of multiple factors: the physical space (the wall), its relationships to adjacent spaces (other walls, the street, fences etc.), the effect of time (night/day, how the sun travels through the area, who is there and when etc.), but also how the space is used by the local community or not (is it already actively painted? Who gathers here and why?). Community co-production is more the outcome of funding models than direct intent. Engagement is the culprit. Where it was once a metric for measuring outcomes (after), engagement is now a gateway requirement at the proposal stage (before). This slippage allows the funding bodies to *achieve* their key performance indicators at the start of any project, but indirectly leads to engagement becoming performative rather than quantitative. “You give me the money if I get bums on seats” – but this falls short of what the bums take away from being seated ...



Byrd: Scullin Forrest (2021). Photo: Byrd.



Byrd: *Gum Leaves* (2022). Photo: Byrd.

Ownership of place also plays a role in co-production. When someone invites you do *something* to their place, they quite often have some sense of that *something*! Hopefully they come with some awareness of one's previous output and a conversation can be had about the possibilities. This of course is all addressed to the permissioned at scale end of the scene. Those providing gifts unfunded and unpermissioned collaborate more directly with the community. The feedback is often both prompt and explicit. What lasts is difficult to assess, in spaces of low engagement ...

**If someone were to ask you to invent a science, what would it be?**

If the sciences form around the organised pursuit and codifying of knowledge? Then any new science will naturally grow out of the expansion of our existing knowledge. Within this framework, perhaps the expanding field of understanding around the other lifeforms with which we share this planet will crystallise into new science? The overlapping of biology, sociologies, psychology would coalesce into a new field.

**Byrd, thank you for this wonderful conversation!**

Details of the cover photo: Byrd: *Scullin Forrest* (detail) (2021). Photo: Byrd.

**References**



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## Tags

1. Anna-Sophie Jürgens
2. Blake Thompson
3. Byrd
4. science-related art
5. Street Art