



*... the ultimate enigma always remains close by; and man's most searching inquiries are always confined within the dark womb of the flexible but impenetrable envelope of the unknown, of that dark, distensible womb that is our prison and our Eden...*

R. and V. Wasson *Mushrooms, Russia And History*<sup>1</sup>

# the Sorcerer's crocs

by Jason Markou

AT THE END of his pre-opening floor-talk for *Morphic Resonance* at the Institute of Modern Art, Hany Armanious marked the occasion by lighting a group of novelty birthday candles placed innocuously in a corner. The staggered lighting of the candles set off a number of out-of-synch renditions of the tune 'Happy Birthday', reproduced by each candle's heat-activated melody-chip, thereby creating a woozy soundtrack for the exhibition. Viewers navigated Armanious's exhibition accompanied by this Doppler-shifting symphony, until the song, rendered as if by drunken cohorts at the celebration's end, faded away like a preamble to a séance following the inevitable failing of each flame. The piece was a stripped-down version of an earlier performance, set in a dark room, with the audience sitting on a cushioned platform meditating on the burning musical birthday candles. Something about the candle is conducive to introspection. For the artist, this quality is encoded in the candle's form: the wick, implanted within like a spine, provides illumination but is also the seed of its unmaking. Armanious's singing candles intone a song of death, suggesting both a poignant requiem and subliminal murmurs from the other side.

*Central Core Component From The Centre Of The Universe* (2005) takes the form of a potter's wheel supporting a massive turned clay column, like a Hindu *lingam* (a stylised phallus). The wax seat of the potter's wheel doubles as a lit candle. This hot seat seems to provide the impetus for the tower-of-power that rises from the potter's wheel to the ceiling, like a fairytale beanstalk. The candle mocks the absurd aspiration of the phallic form: it rises as the candle burns down. The whole apparatus, with its mysterious poise and illusory weight, rests on a wooden pallet cast in expanding foam, that in turn balances on four Styrofoam balls sealed in plastic bags. Armanious's sculpture appears to belie the potency and authority of the lingam, exposing itself as a precarious lightweight construction, hollow at its core.

Armanious's recurring use of the candle as an element in such mixed metaphors highlights his fascination with conundrum and paradox. Candles snuffed and still smoldering add an oracular and

emotional dimension to his trademark confluences of the lofty and the ludicrous. We might imagine the candle as existential fuel, stoking the fire of the will. The message seems simple but becomes ambiguous as the artist delineates paths of illogic to illuminate fundamental human agonies. He induces states of bewilderment to acknowledge our curse and admonish our complacency.

THE 17TH CENTURY polymath Athanasius Kircher used artificial magic to erode popular belief in the 'magic' of the ancient priests. His *Musaeum Kircherianum* included a water clock in which water appeared to pour upwards into 'heaven' (an illusion caused by a hidden mirror) and a Delphic oracle in a bronze sculpture (it dispensed prophecies through a metal tube connected to a concealed speaker). These were serious games that deployed the latest advances in technological wizardry to a moral end; the viewer's challenge lay in guessing the natural causes behind the special effect. While Kircher's machines crafted illusions in order to dispel them, Armanious seems to be more concerned with the magic of devices themselves. In particular lathed and turned forms featured in such works as *The Cult* (2004), *Centre Of The Universe (Central Core, Soft Core, Hard Core)* (2004) and *Turns In Arabba* (2005)

show the artist's repeated attempts to harness the occult power of a simple mechanism: the wheel.

Entering the sheik's tent in *Centre Of The Universe*, accompanied by the artist's bizarre ABBA-cum-Arab soundtrack, one feels like a UN weapons inspector given the spurious task of discovering evidence of WMDs in a deserted Middle Eastern lab. An oversized peppermill sitting on a potter's wheel bolsters the tent at its centre, reading like a defunct centrifuge. The weirdly hybridised sculptural detritus displayed on semi-circular tables around this core suggests archeological artefacts. They are, in fact, the artist's experimental investigations into the metaphysical problem of circles and centres, representing a very human compulsion to get to the core of things. Peppercorns feature heavily in the installation: peppercorn-stalactites act as legs for the



semi-circular tables and peppercorns are spilt across the floor; where they are ground under the feet of visitors. If atomic energy was released, we clearly missed the explosion and the spice is the only remaining active ingredient. Closer scrutiny of the remains reveals only more confusion and ambiguity. Was the artist proposing some sort of grand metaphor for the creative process, or is it more about anthropocentric conceits? Perhaps the most compelling aspect is the artist's enactment of a creative process turned in on itself, caught up and frustrated in attaining some elusive higher goal forever out of reach.

This sense of futility resonates with Armanious' *Wall Rubbing* (2002-) works that use black sandpaper clogged in the sanding of a white wall to conjure pictures of galaxies whirling in deep space. It's a magical transformation, but arises paradoxically in a very physical procedure; a laborious sweaty work upon a wall that imperceptibly increases the space of the room. It's like attempting to escape from a prison cell with a nail file: the action is performed despite its apparent futility. The dramatic 'breakthrough' occurs, but the liberation seems illusory, opening up a seductive yet static beyond, a picturesque cosmos manifested in the grit. The hubris of creative endeavor meets the sublime indifference of the universe and the artist is returned to Earth to share in our fate.

ARMANIOUS'S SCULPTURES *MAGIC Muffin Mountain*, *Blindness*, *The Danger In Extracting Meaning* and *Bubble-Jet Earth Work* (all 2006) share an obvious similarity: they are not sculptures 'in the round', but are overtly two-sided. There is no pretence towards the classic deceptions of figuration, such as the traditional idiom of *contrapposto* that introduced off-axis twists to the human form to add realism and a psychological disposition to figurative sculptures. Armanious's sculptures allude to a different sense of figuration, a realism that is psychological but also mechanistic, distinguished in two flattened frontal planes where the head and tail, or front and rear, are interchangeable. This frontality recalls stone statues of the ancient Greek god-cults, where a forward-facing countenance

allowed the sculptures to 'see' the worshippers and their rituals, and allowed worshippers to interact with the dead and receive the divine in intensely structured experiences. Armanious's sculptures speak of our psychological tendency to flatten out the world, turning it towards our bodies so we face the side of strongest appeal. These sculptures offer two sides of engagement, yet deny access to the entire coin.

*Magic Muffin Mountain* exemplifies this play of front and rear. One side advertises a 'lucky handshake' for nine dollars with a worn aperture to reach through. On the other side we are rewarded with a pile of overripe 'magic muffins' that present mind expansion in obscene proportions. The two sides of *Magic Muffin Mountain* offer blind luck and absurd presentation, a shot in the dark or a fungal bloom. Armanious's inflations also allude to the oversensitive awareness one feels in the chemically induced entheogenic state like being cooked from the inside out, a swollen consciousness too big to entertain.

Self-delusion within the worm farm of reality is demonstrated in *Blindness*. A generic computer desk is constructed in a sleek decorative wood veneer. The desk suggests functional ergonomic office design but its tiered structure is also like a worm farm, a hermetic ecosystem. On the highest tier sit white plastic casts of pot handles with repulsive intestinal textures. The bottom level is a mess of flaccid tequila bottles recast in clear plastic but still bearing their trademark red sombreros. The emptied bottles are like spent cocks, slumped over, having ejaculated their worms but still burning on the end. In the centre, a flimsy manila folder is dressed to resemble a Mac PowerBook. On screen, a web page 'all about worm farms' is illustrated using holographic stickers reminiscent of tacky website graphics. Instead of worms we see a screenshot of spaghetti Bolognese, which looks remarkably like a tangle of worms writhing in dirt. *Blindness* is an allegory of confusion and stupefaction and a tool for the users, oblivious to their entrapment within the matrix.

We have a predator that came from the depths of the cosmos and took over the rule of our lives. Human beings are its prisoners. The predator is our lord and master. It has rendered us docile, helpless. If we want to protest, it suppresses our protest. If we want to act independently, it demands that we don't do so... Sorcerers believe that the predators have given us our systems of beliefs, our ideas of good and evil, our social mores. They are the ones who set up our hopes and expectations and dreams of success or failure. They have given us covetousness, greed and cowardice. It is the predators who make us complacent, routinary and egomaniacal.

Carlos Castaneda<sup>2</sup>



ARMANIOUS MAKES FREQUENT reference to self-proclaimed sorcerer Carlos Castaneda whose quasi-ethnographic books detail his entry into states of ‘non-ordinary awareness’, the cognitive schema of the Toltec Indian shamans. The art of ‘seeing’, perhaps the most important of Castaneda’s new talents, was a practical means for accessing an ulterior dimension revealed in all its terrifying beauty. Castaneda claimed to ‘see’ visions of the ‘energy body’, the life force of human beings: ‘a conglomerate of energy fields that makes up the physical body when it is seen as energy that flows in the universe’. Castaneda compared the ‘energy body’ to a luminous egg connected to a universe of glowing fibres – an idea that resonates with quantum physics’ String Theory. Although Castaneda’s early works followed an anthropological methodology, he could never back up his claims; for instance, his mentor Don Juan Matus would never make a public appearance. Castaneda’s writings offer striking parallels with other metaphysical belief systems, most notably Gnosticism, whose ‘archons’ closely resemble Castaneda’s description of the ‘mud shadows’ or ‘flyers’. Both archons and flyers are said to be forms of a predatory alien intelligence that infiltrate the human psyche as ‘foreign installations’, depriving us of the native syntax proper to our species; their mind becomes ours and they feed on the flares of our awareness. *Blindness* might be reconsidered in these terms: thought for food.

The power and allure of religious cults arises in their construction of totalising self-referential belief systems that explain the world and human purpose within it, but are predicated on miraculous events that are difficult to prove or disprove. In his 2004 exhibition *Stopping The World*, Armanious conflated the cultish worlds of Castaneda and contemporary art to demonstrate how indistinguishable they are. The words ‘fucking cult’ and an interlocking CC logo were scrawled on the back of a Mac PowerBook. Here, Armanious refers to the cult of Apple computers, the ubiquitous art world gadget. In this context the Apple logo reads like a dubious emblem of contemporary culture and enlightenment; forbidden fruit with bite. Exhibited alongside

the PowerBook, a collection of ritualistic objects were recast and recombined so their original purpose became uncertain. Taken as a whole, these elements amounted to neither an assertion of belief nor a disavowal, but represented the artist encircling an inescapable conundrum. Castaneda asserted that ‘stopping the world’ was the first step in ‘seeing’. He said: ‘Stopping the world was indeed an appropriate rendition of certain states of awareness in which the reality of life is altered because the flow of information, which ordinarily runs uninterrupted, has been stopped by a set of circumstances alien to the flow’.<sup>3</sup> Armanious demonstrates that a certain ‘suspension of disbelief’ is often the first step in the acquisition of knowledge, and the articulation of this paradox is his creative territory.

Death is the reality of the impossible, making fictions of us all, and it is only in fiction that we separate ourselves from it.

Adrian Gargett<sup>4</sup>

LIKE MUCH OF Armanious’s work, *The Danger In Extracting Meaning* arises in the hubris of the creative will pitted against its thresholds. In the ultimate debasement of death, the artist’s enactments of the ineffable become abject comedy. Armanious’s cabinet of curiosities imagines the waking state and the dream state in the form of the exterior and interior of an Edwardian mansion in miniature. The exterior houses a snowstorm intermittently whipped up by the winds of an internal fan. The flurry of snow is like the threshold of consciousness we pass through on the way to the world of dreams. On the front door hangs a sign that warns: ‘no junk mail’. This warning is elaborated in a sign on the other side with the message: ‘say no to drugs’. There, a macabre tableau illustrates a possessed anatomist caught in the act of eviscerating a laughing man prone beneath him. The anatomist’s hands are entangled in the intestines as he draws them out. The cabinet’s ornamental base is repeated in miniature within the tableau. Behind this sculpture-within-a-sculpture, another eviscerated 19th century figure, flayed and skewered on a decorative stand, looks on in hysterical

laughter. A chrome object reflects the scene but is completely out of context with the period decor. Its form, an idealised abstracted body, could represent the elusive human soul the anatomist seeks, or perhaps he is making the cavity in the corpse to implant this approximation. It's hard to say, for this image is as loaded and inscrutable as dreams, which stem from subconscious desires or the movements of the bowel.

We might compare the tone of *The Danger In Extracting Meaning* to the black humour of Tim Burton's 1988 film *Beetle Juice*, which derives its title from bug guts and the Baital, a malevolent spirit of Hindu mythology that resides in graveyards and possesses the dead. *Beetle Juice* also references Jean-Paul Sartre's plays *Huis Clos (No Exit)* (1944) and *Les Jeux Sont Fait (The Plays Are Made)* (1947) that are also set predominately in the afterlife. As in *Beetle Juice*, in *Les Jeux Sont Fait* the deceased awaken to an afterlife best characterised as meaningless bureaucracy. The male and female protagonists are sent back from a waiting room for the dead in order to fulfill their destiny; they are offered a second chance at life on the provision that they fall in love within 24 hours. However, the horrible things they witnessed as ghosts consume them and they become enmeshed in averting the catastrophes and misfortunes of the living. Having failed to fulfill their task, they die once more and are eternally condemned to again wander the streets as ghosts witnessing the problems of friends and family who they are now powerless to help. They are unable to participate in life or relieve their own suffering in relation to what they see.

Armanious explored an uncertain terrain between choice and determinism in his 2000 exhibition *Semi-Automatic*, that questioned the Surrealist technique of automatic drawing. A meandering line is drawn without removing pen from paper, forming abstract entanglements without beginning or end. The artist stalks his own volition in this ouija board scenario, without knowing if he deliberately pushed the pointer. Some of these drawings were combined with found imagery then printed onto sections of Chux cleaning cloth bearing op art patterns and perforations. One of these, *Girl In Garden* (2001), shows a child

creating her reality, caught up in her own web. She is hunched over, absorbed in her work, stoic in her sadness, enduring the weight of an impossible present. For Sartre, we are 'condemned to be free', and it is this freedom to choose that inspires our unlivable human condition.

The division of the universe into subterranean hell and perfectly pure heaven is an indelible conception, mud and darkness being the principles of evil as light and celestial space are the principles of good: with their feet in mud but their heads more or less in light, men obstinately imagine a tide that will permanently elevate them, never to return, into pure space.

Georges Bataille 'The Big Toe'<sup>35</sup>



ARMANIOUS'S ONTOLOGY VACILLATES between such picturesque visions as *Girl In Garden* and a seemingly unfathomable dark subterranean cosmology. His work seems to draw power from its proximity to the real inscrutable ineffable stuff of life. The ideal and the celestial are counterposed with the 'base matter' Georges Bataille endorsed as 'external and foreign to human aspirations'.<sup>6</sup> Armanious provokes psychic discomfort with material and tactical diversions: microscopic or cosmic; ornament or rudiment; mist or mud. In fact, in a bizarre twist of the formalist imperative, his work says as much about ideas as the material from which those ideas emanate. He plays with the sensation of distance to jolt us into the realisation that our perspectives are likely provisional and stultifying. This may seem all subterfuge and trickery,



*Girl In Garden* 2000

but it is necessarily so, for artists work through artifice to interrogate the real.

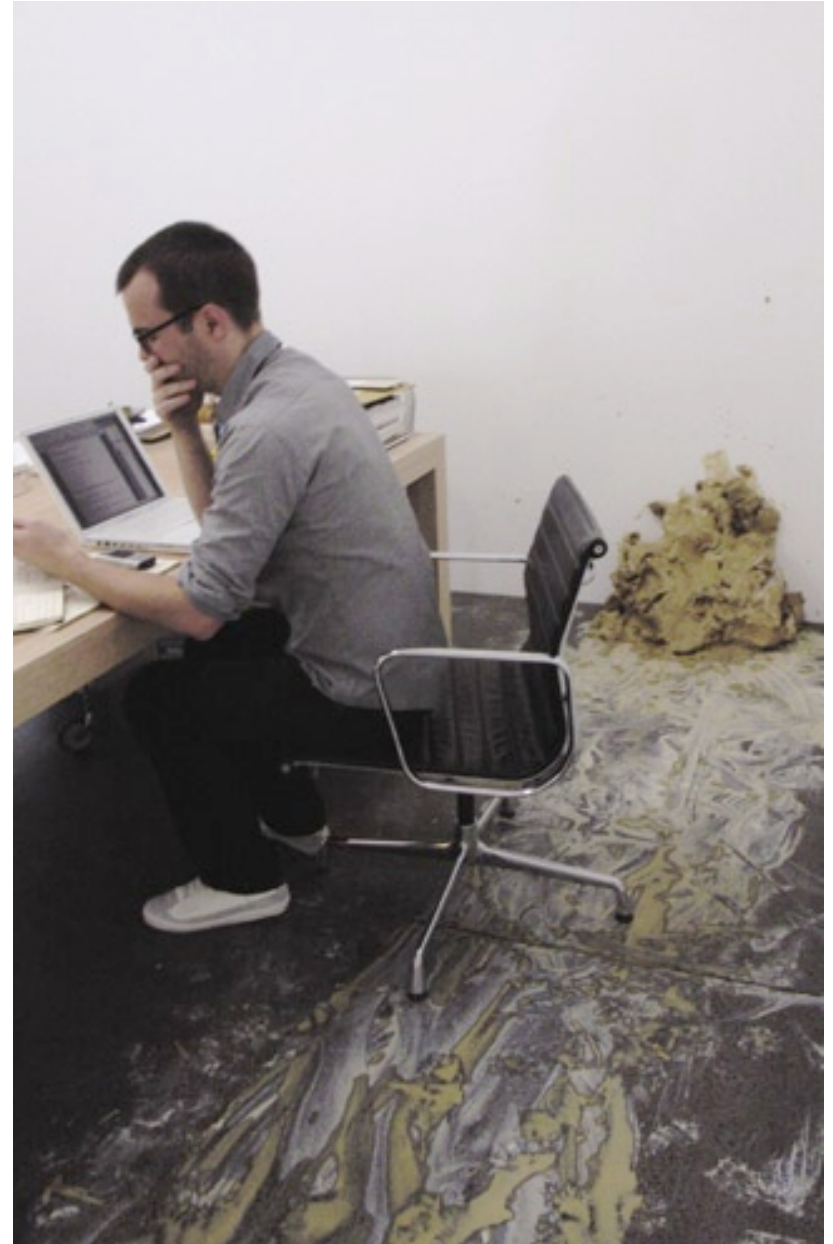
*Bubble-Jet Earth Work* is a printing machine that processes the subterranean, the fecund matter of earth, flicking worm shit onto a moving ream of white paper. Twin chrome canisters labelled 'castings' and 'glycerin' feed an internal bubble-blowing machine. Primordial slime is given temporary levity before the bubbles explode upon the paper leaving brownish stains. Watching these contained explosions we witness a phenomenological feat and pseudoscientific process – a parlour trick that demonstrates anti-gravity or atomic particles crashing into a wall. We are allowed to view the internal workings of an organism digesting and assimilating organic matter. The bubbles fire like our lives: the dirt we are made from, our brief flight, and the dirt we return to. Constantly running, the machine is relentless and boisterous in its drive, spitting out inscrutable data. Meaning is encrypted in the mass of paper, these cast-off remains, piled up for later examination or the recycling bin. Armanious excavates a churning chaotic dimension that escapes reason, alluding to a subterranean reality the mind fails to regulate, organise or grasp.

*Year Of The Pig Sty* (2007) is a frenzied enactment, where debased mud is invoked not as a mere thematic, but as an operational encounter with the real. Inside is another murky scene of chaotic process and experimental disorder. The first part we encounter is formed around 'Crocs', the lightweight one-piece foam shoe that replaced the Birkenstock clog as the last word in functional therapeutic footwear. Crocs are famed for moulding themselves to the wearer's feet, and they are made through injection casting (the artist draws this to our attention, implicating the shoe's aeration holes as potential cavities for casting). We are presented with a shoe-store scenario; a mess of shoes and shoeboxes implies the artist's desperate search for the perfect fit. It features Crocs that the artist has cast around his own feet, shoebox-sized moulds for casting Crocs whole and in cross-section, and variants on this idea. The collection suggests a conflation of art-making,

therapeutic endeavours and fashion faux pas. Some objects are labelled with photographs documenting the process, along with imagery hybridising Birkenstock, Croc and Lacoste brands, adding to the perplexity. Word play contributes to the sculptural chaos of shoes, socks for feet, snooker table 'socks', farm bags and bacon-rasher footprints.

Nearby, 'Noppy Mat', a Styrofoam box recast in white plastic, refers to the Birkenstock walking mat designed to massage the feet. Armanious's version is a mud bath that impregnates the non-slip textures of the Croc undersole to create footprints, moulds of our feet made as we tread upon the earth. The exhibition is filled with these footprints and 'Real Mud' splashed around the room and wedged into walls in an orgiastic spectacle of creation: the artist traces his footsteps to stalk the self. A doormat seems to announce a further stage of the process. Its circular hollows are used as receptacles that receive the mud wiped from shoes and from the 'Feeding Trough', forming mud bricks. In 'First Contact' these bricks are dried under something that is part hydroponics grow-lamp, part snooker table light and part descending spacecraft. From these mud bricks, pool cues are fashioned and the doormat is revealed as a sectional mould of this tool for games. The pool cues recall bamboo spears or the human spine and are exhibited as discreet objects held together between clamps. The artist's searching in the dirt has produced the truffle and, as in *Magic Muffin Mountain*, the abundance of the prize is overwhelming.

Elsewhere we are presented with a gigantic carved polystyrene fruit box housing monstrous dark forms. Initially appearing as the ultimate culinary prize awaiting the chef's blade, these forms come to resemble the 'Gongshi' or Chinese 'scholars' stones'. These intriguingly shaped rocks are formed deep in the earth by unimaginable forces over millennia. The Gongshi were traditionally highly prized in China and displayed on ornamental bases for the purpose of meditating on the spirits of the natural world. In Armanious's formal garden, these grotesques are cast by pouring liquid plastic into an excavated hole. They are presented sitting in their mud, without any attempt to clean





and isolate them for lofty pondering. Yet the presence of so much organic waste and what looks like straw has a strangely animating effect on these homemade Gongshi and we come to recognise the mud not just as the creator but also as a type of adornment in this arena of farmhouse chaos

*Year Of The Pig Sty* offers no linear progression or transcendence but an unending recycling of voids and volumes – matter, moulds and casts. These pool cue mutations of tool and weapon offer diversion or divinity – devices for games or sticks to hit us and wake us up! If this paroxysm yields despair, the artist offers no tranquilliser. Armanious attunes us to a turbulent reality that confounds us, bringing complication of thought to clarity and reason, holding us in the thrall of the impossible. He enacts this nightmare not to remove us but to get us moving again towards paths we can explore.

Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count on no one but himself; that he is alone, abandoned on Earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this Earth.  
Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>7</sup>

Jason Markou is an artist and writer based in Sydney.

1. Pantheon, New York, 1957, pp375-6.
2. *The Active Side of Infinity* Thorsons, London, 1998, pp218-20.
3. *Journey to Ixtlan* Simon and Schuster, New York, 1973, p14.
4. 'Deprogramming The Body' *CTheory* 10 March 2002, www.ctheory.net
5. *Visions Of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl) University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p20.
6. 'Base Materialism And Gnosticism' *Visions Of Excess* op cit, p51.
7. *Being And Nothingness* (1943).