AMALA GROOM
X
ANDREW BURRELL
CAN’T BUY ME LOVE

UTS ACKNOWLEDGES THE GADIGAL PEOPLE OF THE EORA NATION, THE BOOROOBERONGAL PEOPLE OF THE DHARUG NATION, THE BIDIAGAL PEOPLE AND THE GAMAYGAL PEOPLE UPON WHOSE ANCESTRAL LANDS OUR UNIVERSITY STANDS. WE PAY OUR RESPECTS TO THE ELDERS BOTH PAST AND PRESENT, ACKNOWLEDGING THEM AS THE TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF KNOWLEDGE FOR THESE LANDS.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1988, UTS has supported contemporary artistic practices through the activities of the UTS Gallery & Art Collection. The UTS Artist in Residence program was initiated in 2021 to extend the university's commitment to Australian artists and support the development and presentation of experimental new work.

The residency program sought to acknowledge the community of practices, knowledges and pedagogies that shape UTS, and provide a supportive framework for knowledge sharing and cross-disciplinary collaboration of mutual benefit to NSW-based artists and university research.

Amala Groom is one of two artists supported by the inaugural UTS Artist in Residence Program to develop and present a new work in collaboration with UTS research over 12 months (2021 – 2022). Over the course of her residency, Amala worked with Dr Andrew Burrell, a senior lecturer in the UTS School of Design and a practice-based researcher and educator. Across disciplinary lines, they have made a virtual reality environment that articulates their mutual interests in the intersection of knowledge creation, popular culture and new technologies. *can't buy me love* is the result of their cross disciplinary partnership and marks the culmination of their residency research period.

The UTS Artist in Residence program demonstrates the value of embedding contemporary art within a research institution: to enable artists to make work they wouldn't otherwise be able to make, and to showcase the innovation of the university in new ways. These artists have exemplified this benefit through this milestone new work.

I would like to thank the 2021 UTS faculty partners who supported this program, the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building and the Faculty of Law, and express my gratitude to the Anita and Luca Belgiorno-Nettis Foundation and the Faculty of Engineering and IT, whose generous funding made the 2021 Artist in Residence program possible. My gratitude and thanks most of all to Amala and Andrew, who have committed so much of their time and knowledge to a speculative period of enquiry that has yielded valuable returns.

Stella Rosa McDonald
Curator, UTS Gallery & Art Collection

AMALA GROOM AND ANDREW BURRELL IN CONVERSATION

Amala Groom [AG]: My whole life I have followed my feelings over my intellect, and this has led me down the path that I am on. This is the way that I have been 'taught' by my Elder Teachers (I prefer to use the term 'reminded') as the traditional cultural way to exist in the world. But this is not the way that we get taught to exist in the Western world and this is not what we are taught in the institution, or in the Academy or at school – by anyone really. Everyone's always like 'what's your five-year plan?' And I'm not like that – I don't think about my life in soundbites. And it took a lot of 'time', for lack of a better word, for me to be able to understand and rationalise that within myself and be strong about my own ontology.

When I was a student at UTS I was only two or three years out of a full blown IV drug addiction. I was here doing my law degree and then next minute I was at the United Nations in New York advocating for Aboriginal rights and freedoms. I was still in the early days of recovery and getting the healing that I needed to integrate properly into myself and society and I was staunch AF about my Indigeneity. And being in a western institution learning about an illegal, immoral, corrupt system that has been forcibly imposed upon my peoples (and all peoples) was traumatic; it was a really horrible thing for me to experience and I was just upset about it all the time and I couldn't detach myself from it.

I didn't know how to rationalise my own place within the institution because the institution was like "here's this thing; learn it, regurgitate it, spit it back out, and apply it to all these other situations." And I had so many questions that I didn't feel were getting answered about the system, mostly around sovereignty and legal authority. Where does the Crown's sovereignty actually come from? How did you guys get to have it? And nobody in my classes had these questions and people would look at me like I was an alien because they hadn't asked those same questions because they didn't have a comparative experience or because they lived inside of the system, and they couldn't see outside of it.

Under the instruction of my Ancestors, I ended up leaving my law degree and started to make art. And ten years later I had the opportunity through this program to come back to the same institution as an artist. What a turnaround.

And now I feel like I've graduated from university because I have occupied space within the Academy for a whole year and that's also been a really healing process for me. I never would have thought all those years ago that I'd come back to UTS and that my ontology would be accepted and even supported and that I would get to spend a whole year collaborating with you on this project about knowledge systems and ways of being.

Andrew Burrell [AB]: I came to academia the long way round; I did my undergraduate in Fine Arts specialising in New Media (as it was in the early 90's) and progressed through my Masters & PhD where I moved into a sculpture department – so I find many things I do now are informed by both these New Media and sculpture backgrounds. My PhD looked at the way found and collected objects can act as vessels for memory – both personal and cultural, and I think you can see that coming through` in this work. The "new" in New Media is in constant flux, and my move to Critical Design (a space that shares a lot with collaborative New Media Art practice) has allowed me to explore this field with a strong ethical and sustainable framing for engaging with current and emerging technologies during a global climate crisis.

I've always been interested in academia – and there's perhaps an idealised version of what that is – but I've always been interested in it as a place of sharing knowledge and bringing in your own ways of being in the world to influence learning. Amala, you don't describe your knowledge as being your own; how do you describe it?

AG: I articulate my creative process as a collaboration with my Ancestors because that's what it genuinely is; it's my ontology, my way of being and my lived experience. But I don't think that that my processes or these kinds of epistemologies are exclusive to Indigenous peoples. These are human ontologies and human ways of knowing that as Indigenous peoples we've always had and have the responsibility to practice and maintain. I feel like these are essentially human traits, but the longer you've been indoctrinated or acculturated by Westernism's the more you forget the way that you really are or the way we are supposed to be. I feel like people who don't have that Whakapapa or genealogy that's so close to their lived experience have just forgotten. So in my practice at the deepest level I am looking at universal knowledge systems that are in unison with Indigeneity and those relationships that have manifested through countless religions, epochs, philosophies, and movements.

AB: The initial stages of our collaboration felt very comfortable for me. When we first started working, we would say things and they would align, perhaps not 1:1, but things we were thinking about in our respective practises started aligning very early.

AG: I think so too. Now, a year later, there's no way I would have anticipated that we would be so much on the same page. It's very fortunate and serendipitous, but that's the way it works when you follow your feelings.

AB: There's definitely been a shift in the way I approach storytelling in virtual environments that has come from working with you. There's something that has come out in this process in moving from the space of imagination into a virtual space and how that gets realised. Your ability to know something beforehand intuitively and be sure of it has really helped bring to light, for me, some of more "hidden" aspects of a creative process.

AG: From the first email to you where I thought this is a great opportunity to work with technology that I never would be able to afford to do so, I saw it as an opportunity for total experimentation. The fact that we found we had so much in common was great, because potluck mate you could have been anyone!

AB: One thing that is important in my collaborative work is that the technology does not dominate the process or the outcome. It is the platform, the material and the media, and a deep knowledge of this material is needed, even more so when we consider the ethical questions of working with emerging technologies. But we know that except in the most formal of investigations, the material is only part of the final work, it is not everything. It's easy for people to get wowed by the novelty of the technology and then that becomes the thing that they see. It's important for me to manipulate it as a material so that it becomes more of a carrier of meaning for the work; so, it wasn't important to talk technically with you in the making of this work.

AG: Thank you for that!

AB: I think we had a shared interest in the way that we wanted to tell this story; the way we wanted to piece together this narrative from various elements of popular culture and history. When you started talking about this vision you had, it was very much in line with the way I was thinking about how to create a narrative in VR that's guided but not imposed.

AG: We are presenting a world for the audience and giving them freedom around the way that they choose to experience it. You can't tell someone what it's going to do to them; the way people read anything will always be through the lens of their own experience and associations. But we've populated the VR world with a lot of different cues to lead the audience on a journey.

AB: VR is interesting because we're trying to guide people through a space that doesn't physically exist. If people choose to go off that path they might end up in a void. But generally, it's interesting to see people respect the laws of the physical world in the virtual world. In traditional 3D video games, a lot of effort is spent ensuring that people can't put their heads through walls and see what they're not meant to see. It's one of the biggest challenges to control people's agency without them realising they're being controlled. But we haven't done any of that because we're not pretending this isn't a virtual world. You can choose to break those rules because we want you to discover things.

When you first enter the world that we built, you're in an outdoor space with a cloudy sky above you. Anyone who has ever opened the *Unreal* game engine that this is made in will recognise that cloudy sky; it's the default sky that you see when you make a new empty scene in *Unreal*. It has the same qualities in many ways as Magritte's clouds, it's a pixel and light version of the generic blue sky. It often will be swapped out for something else as people begin to build their games or worlds but sometimes it remains as something that's shared across virtual environments. That sky speaks to the more formal elements of the material space that we're working in; the default sky has strong visual connections to surrealism and connects the virtual space we have made to the worlds that many other people have created. I like the poetic notion that two people, in two very different worlds, constructed under this one shared sky, can look up and share a moment.

AG: In that opening scene, you stand on the street outside a Chanel store, and you hear all of the foley and streets sounds, horns and chatter, and I thought it needed to have the sound of an ice cream truck whizzing past playing Greensleeves. There was no intellectual rationalisation about why it should be there; I could just feel and see the ice cream truck. There was something about nostalgia triggering a moment of reflection inside of people for them to remember and associate. And then you described Proust's Madeleine to me.

AB: Yes, the example of something in the world triggering a memory and transporting you through time to that place. And it's more than a memory, it's the actual feeling that you had at that place returning to you – you are actually transported to that moment, if only for a fraction of a second. Famously, Proust experienced this as an older man when he dipped a Madeleine cake into tea and was transported back to his mother's house as a child. All the triggers we've placed in the work at the level of pop culture aren't going to work for everybody, but some of them will.

AG: And I had no idea about this bloody cake, but I knew that Greensleeves had to be in there because I could feel it. And the mouse!! Remember it was one of the first things that I wanted in the back of the shop? I had no idea why and that was nearly a year ago and it wasn't until much later that the reason for that became clear.

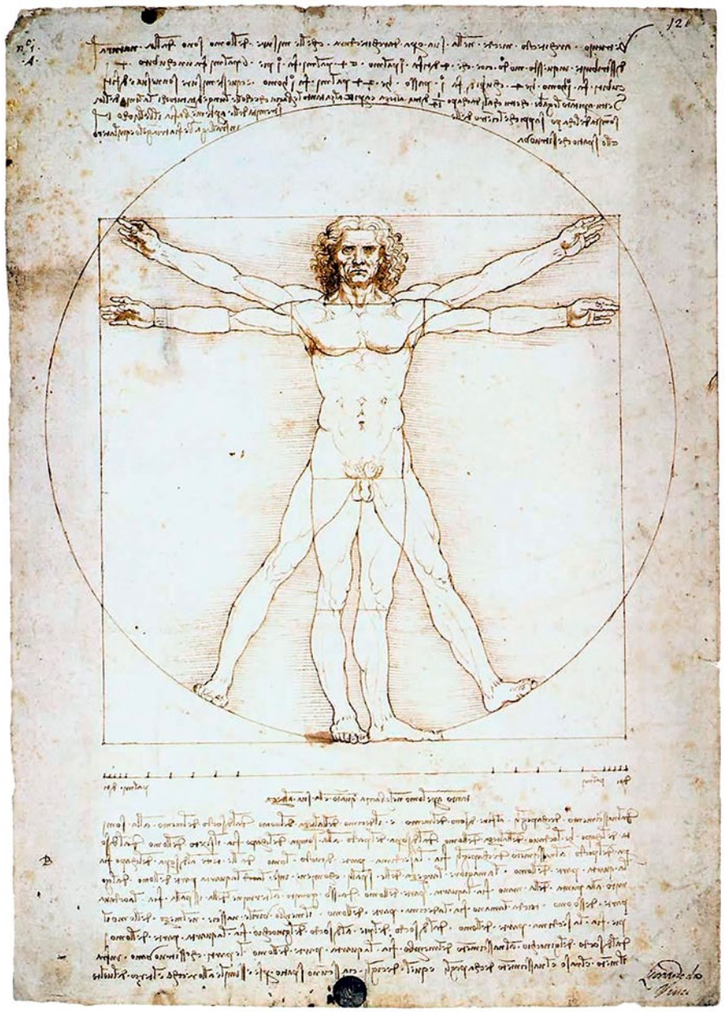
AB: The storefront in the work has the number 42 on it and that's a reference to *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* and the "Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything". In that book, the mice ran the computer that generated the number.

AG: I might get a tattoo of a mouse just to remind me that trusting what I get (or what I can 'see') is the most important thing. And look, I hope that people have fun when they experience the work.

AB: I hope that people feel enticed to explore this world, and that people who are willing to explore it want to be there and make discoveries.

AG: The work is about the individual remembering their own self-sovereignty on the path of spiritual enlightenment. The way you get to "Nirvana" is by being a completely authentic version of yourself. But some people might not want that; they might just want the world's most expensive handbag.

Super mario coin. Illustration with elements for the game. o_obolenskaya /Shutterstock.com



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Proportions of the Human Figure (Vitruvian Manek)*, 1490, Pen, ink and watercolour over metalpoint)

Raphael, *The Triumph of Galatea*, 1512.

Amala Groom X Andrew Burrell,
can't buy me love, digital still, 2022.
Courtesy the artists

Chanel, 31 Rue Cambon, Paris.
Vivy Garbelini/Flickr.

René Magritte. *The curse (La malédiction),* 1963. Ixelles Musée des Beaux Arts. Jean Louis Mazieres/Flickr.

ON A STAGE AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

Madeleine Collie

Amala Groom is a Wiradyuri conceptual artist, whose work questions the epistemic fallacies on which Western constructions of social life are based. In her recent performance lecture *Myths and Legends: a didactic* [2022], she recalls her experiences of the otherworld. She reminds me often that the fourth dimensional space through which she travels will never be colonised. Andrew Burrell believes in monsters. In a memory from many years ago, he recalls visiting a steam train with his dad. In the distance a cloud of smoke appeared, within the smoke, he saw monsters crawling all over the train. This memory is as vivid for him as any other. He says if he doesn't believe in monsters he can't believe in his own memory.[1] It's here, in a belief or knowledge of things we can't always see, that these two artists meet.

My experience of *can't buy me love* begins before I climb inside the headset. The rhythmic, minor tones of the Beatles song, from which the work takes its name, plays in my mind. I pick up the Oculus headset and attach it to my head and enter the world through a portal of tiny stars. I collect my first coin, a sound—from Mario Brothers—rings like a cash register. The platform on which I appear to be standing is a piece of road in an endless digital sky. The muted noon sun behind light cloud makes me I wonder why all digital skies look so familiar. I look up at trees built from pixelated turf, the music of a passing ice-cream truck gets louder, but the truck never arrives. I can hear screeching birds and I feel like I am standing on a stage at the edge of the world.

In front of me is a shop which the artists propose is designed to sell "spiritual enlightenment." The façade is constructed of distinctive long bricks that simultaneously recall the world of Minecraft and somewhere in Paris I must have been once. Everything here feels like something I have seen or heard before. Over the shop is the number 42, and it's one of many signs or inside jokes that signal this is a place for making meaning. I am looking for clues. I search the platform and discover the only way forward is into the shop.

Forming an arch within the entrance are the words “can’t buy me love” in big rainbow balloon letters. The letters remind me of Ugo Rondinone’s own large rainbow letters that I saw once above a public square in Zurich; his phrase “Love Invents Us” drifts into my mind. The balloons are within reach of my hands, and I reach up and punch them. They fall gently onto the spikes of grass below. Beyond the balloons, Magritte-like clouds hang alongside two cardboard cherubs plucked from a Raphael painting. As I reach out to touch them with my virtual hands, they swing above head height. Beyond that, two panels of painted clouds conceal the next ‘level’ of the ‘experience.’ When I get close, they part, trundling back on heavy rollers. I feel that I am slipping further down the rabbit hole. An object comes in and out of phase at head height, a love heart shaped, diamond-encrusted bag. Here, expensive bags and famous works of art are parodied side by side.

I arrive at a painted stage backdrop depicting the scene from Salvador Dali’s *The Persistence of Memory* [1931]. The melting clocks, boneless faces and metal-eating ants are stripped away to reveal what looks like a desert. The layers peel back, another dimension appears, and Dali’s infamous work is collaged in a gesture of appropriative justice. It’s well known that Dali considered Sigmund Freud’s writings on dreams hugely influential to his artistic work in which he exploits dream images to destabilise the rationality of Western thinking.[2] Freud, in turn, was influenced by reports emerging from Western anthropologists in Australia at the turn of the twentieth century.[3] His writing on dreams coincides with Western encounters with Aboriginal practices of “dreaming.” *can’t buy me love* establishes a retort to these recursive relationships between surrealist practices and Indigenous ontologies. Surrealists like Dali were using dreams to access experiences of other visual dimensions, perhaps unknowingly inspired by the cultural practices of trans dimensionality that anthropologists had gleaned from First Nations peoples in the place we now call Australia. Works like Groom and Burrell’s might ask us to re-examine the invisible way these ontologies have transformed international modes of thinking and contributed to what we currently think of as ‘Western’ histories of art.

My hand comes forward and the painted Dali backdrop falls back to reveal a liminal space behind a red curtain. The red curtain is a dream symbol that I associate with David Lynch films. This space within the shop is filled with different registers of meaning making: a mouldy book sits atop a pile of boxes; a child’s wooden mouse toy squeaks across the stage; an ancestral figure in the shape of a giant Moai head from Easter Island; Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man lies abandoned behind a ladder (half sprayed with blue paint from the making of the painted backdrop clouds). I walk over to the pile of boxes and squat trying to look at the title of the book. Everything here reminds me of something and belongs somewhere else. This ‘level’ within the experience feels like the backstage of a collective mind.

There are two more coins, so I collect them and teleport myself to stand in front of the giant TV in the corner of the room, as I get close credits begin to roll: Clouds, Bag, Shop, Cherubs. Each collaged item that appeared in the shop is credited. I’m reminded of Michael Taussig who said, “to outlaw magic is to admit to its presence and even its efficacy.”[4] Perhaps naming and crediting these things renders them powerlessness and reveals their inadequacy in creating spiritual meaning. A rope drops down to the side of the screen, in true *Alice Through the Looking Glass* style it has a little tag attached that says “Pull Me.” The curtains open.

I step into the light and find myself on centre stage. The world goes black and suddenly I am looking down from a vertiginous height at my own disembodied Mickey Mouse virtual hands. A jaunty piano plays the beginning of a cartoon Western theme. I feel a little sick, as though I am out of my body and in my body all at once. In the end, I am far above looking down on a stage at the edge of the mirror world.

ENDNOTES

1. Andrew Burrell “I believe in monsters!” blog post, https://andrewburrell.net/blog/i-believe-in-monsters (accessed 21 March 2022)
2. Dali visited Vienna three times before finally meeting Sigmund Freud in his London home in 1938, Freud’s influence on the Surrealists is documented in David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p 100*
3. The third chapter of Freud’s widely discredited book *Totem and Taboo* used accounts of anthropologists Francis James Gillen and Walter Baldwin Spencer to formulate early theories of animism as it related to dream states. Spencer and Gillen documented art and language from the Central Desert people of Australia, the Arrernte, Anmatyerr, Kaytetye, Warumungu, Luritja and Arabana people, from 1890-1910. Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2001.
4. Michael Taussig, ICSI Lecture, New School, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5YbdYQ7jQo (accessed 21 March 2022)

CONTRIBUTORS

Amala Groom is a Wiradyuri conceptual artist whose practice, as the performance of her cultural sovereignty, is informed and driven by First Nations epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies. Her work, a form of passionate activism, presents acute and incisive commentary on contemporary socio-political issues. Articulated across diverse media, Groom's work often subverts and unsettles western iconographies to enunciate Aboriginal stories, experiences and histories, and to interrogate and undermine the legacy of colonialism. Informed by extensive archival, legislative and first-person research, Groom's work is socially engaged, speaking truth to take a stand against hypocrisy, prejudice, violence and injustice.

Andrew Burrell is a practice-based researcher and educator exploring virtual and digitally mediated environments as a site for the construction, experience, and exploration of memory as narrative. His process is one of worlding in virtual space—visualising otherwise unseen connections and entanglements. His ongoing research investigates the relationship between imagined and remembered narrative and how the multi-layered biological and technological encoding of human subjectivity may be portrayed within, and inform the design of, virtual environments. Burrell's practice ranges from traditional academic research exploring the creative potential for virtual environments to visualise complex relationships in information to large scale projects (often collaborative) in virtual environments. This practice is always framed by an underlying concern for developing ethical and sustainable methods for engaging with current and emerging technologies during a global climate crisis. He is a Senior Lecturer in Visual Communication, faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology Sydney and lives and works on Gadigal Country.

Madeleine Collie is a writer, artist and curator who lives and works on the unceded lands of the Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations. She is a PhD candidate and Teaching Associate in Curatorial Practice at Monash University and holds a Masters in Curatorial/Knowledge from Goldsmiths College in London. She has produced curatorial projects with Wellcome Collection (UK), Whitstable Biennale (UK), Liquid Architecture & CAST (Aus) and Live Art Development Agency (UK), Connexiones Improbables (Spain), Australia Council for the Arts (Aus). She has published texts with Performance Philosophy Journal, Art Monthly Australasia, UnMagazine, Real Time, MUMA, Centre of Visual Art, and Live Art Development Agency, Unbound as well as writing for numerous artist catalogues and experimental publications. She has worked on the edges of performance practice since 2001 including through research residencies with Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Pact Zollverein, and has presented performance work internationally in Singapore, Finland, Germany, Spain, and Indonesia. She co-founded Panther (2004-2009), and Mimic Mass (2002-2008) and the Food Art Research Network (2020 - ongoing)

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