

Working Together Can Lead to a Miraculous Outcome

A Review of *I Lean You My Support*, 24 July to 10 August 2019 at RM Gallery, Auckland

By Virginia Were

Walking into this sculptural installation, which is constructed from modified office furniture and equipment, you get the feeling that the office party the night before went seriously awry. Festive pink streamers fly out on the chilly draught coming from a tall black floor fan; a blue filing cabinet is almost overturned, resting precariously on its half-opened drawers; long chains of joined together paper clips wriggle across the wall like a giant drawing; squishy round balls of blue masking tape spill across the floor; a hectic red vinyl 'pot plant' welcoming you into the space appears disturbingly anthropomorphic.

The usual sense of order, conformity and routine that we expect to find in the office has broken down and instead there is a festive sense of chaos. Someone has been having fun and wasting time at the company's expense – rather than adding value to raw materials, as many employees are expected to do, they have reversed the usual industrial process by modifying useful objects so that they are no longer usable. That 'someone' is a tight collective of three women artists, Java Bentley, Kirsty McNeil and Robyn Walton, who studied together for several years at Elam School of Fine Arts.

The trio developed a template for working harmoniously together in their first collaboration in 2017 at West Space in Melbourne. *In Net-Work: this is not a group show*, they deliberately engaged with risk, working within a pre-determined set of limitations and using everyday materials, which they purchased cheaply on arrival and scavenged from the streets of Melbourne. Their intention was to let go of individual egos and take a collective approach to the exhibition. This turned out to be a successful modus operandi and is evident in their latest show at RM gallery. One of the striking things about *I Lean You My Support* is its sense of democracy. Despite the dramatic material and size differences between the works, no single sculpture within the installation is more important than the others – Walton's delicate paperclip chains and her elegant cluster of cast bronze 'pencils' are equally as compelling as Bentley's 'pot plant' and McNeil's gravity-defying filing cabinet and boulder ensemble.

The project began with the idea of the office and the question of how an artist's practice might be considered similar to, or different from, working in a paid nine to five job. The artists decided to limit their objects and materials to those found in an office. Then, using a series of repetitive and time-consuming processes – stapling, cutting, pasting, casting and soldering – which wouldn't be out of place in many work places, they've transformed everyday objects into offbeat, fetishistic and

libidinous sculptures. Take, for instance, Bentley's decorative ladder attached to the skylight. Covered with pink, metallic paper, it projects down into the room but doesn't touch the floor. In other words, it's going nowhere. Seen in this context the work's title "Sleeping with the Boss" says a lot about how hard it can be to get ahead in the workplace – whether you're a female emerging artist trying to succeed in a male-dominated arts scene, or an office worker trying to bust through the glass ceiling.

The exhibition's title *I Lean You My Support* refers to the close personal and professional bonds between this artist trio *and* to the way their sculptures support and relate to each other in the space. Their arrangement addresses the idea of balance, or the lack of it, messing with physical laws so that many of the sculptures appear to defy gravity. It's possible that the title also namechecks Facebook employee Sheryl Sandberg's phrase "leaning in". In her 2013 book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, she advocates business strategies that she believes will help women get ahead within oppressive workplaces that traditionally exclude women and people of colour. Sandberg's book attracted criticism as well as praise. Some people argued that her strategies exacerbated the lack of work-life balance for women in corporate jobs, and this exhibition certainly seems skeptical about the relationship between work and ambition, and the issue of work-life balance. For instance, McNeil's bunch of swipe cards hanging from the door handle at the entrance to the gallery look convincing, but, made from resin, fabric and webbing, they're not going to open any doors for you. The papier-mache boulders (whose surfaces are constructed from photocopied images of the pavement that McNeil walks on every day) bring to mind the heavy, oppressive feeling you get when the boss gives you a difficult task and an impossible deadline.

This anarchic exhibition is enjoyable because of the way it animates the gallery space and encourages viewers to actively negotiate their way around each work, small and large alike. Walls, floor, ceiling, windows and doors – all architectural features have been activated. It's also provocative on an ideological level. Humans are living in a time of accelerated automation and technological development and the future of work, especially for people engaged in low-skilled occupations, is looking increasingly uncertain. With this uncertainty comes a growing crisis in mental health in many developed countries. *I Lean You My Support* makes the proposition that time doesn't always equal money, and that artists add value in unexpected ways; it challenges and expands our understanding of what constitutes productive work in the post-capitalist era. *I Lean You My Support* is a shout out to work as a subversive, joyful and experimental activity in which individual egos are put aside and collaboration between individuals can lead to a miraculous outcome.