

# Archie Moore discusses *Dwelling (Victorian Issue)* with Paris Lettau

By Archie Moore and Paris Lettau

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Installation view of Archie Moore's exhibition *Dwelling (Victorian Issue)*, presented at Gertrude Contemporary, 2022. Photo: Christian Capurro.

*Paris Lettau: Where are we, Archie?*

Archie Moore: We are inside the memories of my childhood home. Like the objects in the home, the memories are accurate, authentic, false, vague, and absent. They're triggered in visual, auditory, haptic and olfactory ways. I have tried to place the viewer into my shoes, to experience my experience. It is impossible to know if another has the same experience as you—and this is a kind of metaphor for the failure of reconciliation...and more so personally, the failure of others to understand me. The whole show is a personal history butting up against official, Anglo-Celtic-centric history.

*PL: How do you remember your childhood home?*

AM: The house was fairly run-down and inadequate on many levels. Too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter. My door didn't lock, there were holes in the walls, the house would sink a little after a heavy downpour (my father says this is because it was built on a "melon hole"). Every member of the family had separate bedrooms (my father and mother never married). It was positioned on the fringe of one side of the town, with bushland behind it.

The kitchen ceiling and fibro walls were covered in black smoke from the wood stove. Every crack had a cockroach in it. I remember being sick a lot with colds and flus, but I liked it sometimes as it felt like an altered state, and I remember lying on the floorboards out the back of the house in the sun dreaming of things.

Other children would shame me out with statements like "Pooooohhh! Your house is shit," "You are poor," etc. I rarely left the house. I preferred being inside its ugliness to the ugliness of racism outside its walls. I read books, drew pictures, and listened to music rather than interacting with other children.



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*PL: What did your parents do?*

AM: My mother only had four years of schooling before being taken out of school to work “stick picking”—picking up branches and bits of trees that have been bulldozed into piles to burn. I believe her father made her do this but am unsure. My father worked on plants earthmoving, building dams and roads etc. Mum told me recently she met my father when she was cooking for the workers. My father was well-educated and serious but every other adult I had contact with was like a child: doing erratic and silly stuff.

*PL: You use olfactory memory, or odours to suggest recollection. It has an unsettling effect. In the bathroom there is a subtle smell of Dettol for example.*

AM: I use Dettol because I remember having Dettol baths. Our water was brown, fresh water from the lagoon and bore water on alternating days. It represents for me the fear my mother had of having her children “taken away”—if we weren’t looked after, clean enough. I assume this was a very real fear from her parents or her mother at least. She used to say I had “ground-in dirt on my elbows” and my skin was “scaley.” I think these were exaggerations and cemented the idea that Aboriginal people are “dirty” and can never be clean enough.

I didn’t have enough time to think everything through while I was in Melbourne, and I wish I had put another bedroom in the bathroom—this was how my bedroom was. A bed in a very long room with a toilet and bathroom



at the end. My father slept at the opposite end of the house in a room the exact size. I also forget his red plastic "piss bucket." It would be litres full of piss in the morning. I did not suspect at the time anything was wrong with him but since learned this is a symptom of prostate cancer.

*PL: There's also your grandmother's home in the exhibition. The home is a rusted tin shed with dirt floor, steel barrels, and a mattress-less, wired bed frame.*

AM: The hut in the show is an example—a feeling I get looking at scrap metal as a home rather than what my grandmother's home looked like in reality. She did live in a corrugated iron hut with a dirt floor but it was better made than what I have conceived for the show, which would not be too far removed from some Aboriginal people's living conditions.



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*PL: You place your grandmother's home in the same room as the schoolroom, with a theatre screening a mining propaganda film from the mid-1970s. On the wall is a colonial print titled "Natives of Carpentaria." An old school desk with inkwell holders sits beneath it. What is the relation of the things displayed in the room?*

AM: The mining film is exactly the type of film we would occasionally watch at school on 16mm film. I'm relating the film's narrative about the virtues of mining to the scrap metal that is used to house my grandmother: the disregard for someone else's land for profit or progress. The school setting also contrasts the Western education with someone who was illiterate in English and European knowledge. Neither of my Grandparents could read or write.

*PL: You were born only 3 years after the 1967 referendum affording constitutional citizenship rights to Indigenous people in Australia. You belong to the first generation to be born with this formal constitutional "equality." How did you experience the continuation of white Australia in Anglo-Celtic education? Do you remember your education well?*

AM: My entire school years are a bit of a blank up until High School. I continued to year 12, but I realise now I must have hated it. I was paradoxically invisible and conspicuous. I kept very quiet and did not want to bring attention to myself. The year 6 teacher on the first day of school got all the class to hold hands and one kid at the end to hold a pair of bare wires. The teacher then wound up an old manual generator and gave us all a bit of an electric shock. His icebreaker for the year.

There was lots of discrimination for anyone who was different from the white, male, hetero, christian...the Romanian refugees copped it, as did people with mental and physical disabilities. To be fair, a couple of teachers did try to encourage me to stand up to racism, but there was no way I could do that because of being targeted afterwards. There was even an Aboriginal counsellor who visited and I wouldn't go and see. I didn't want to admit that I was Aboriginal or needed help, I guess. There was no mention of Aboriginal history in the curriculum.

PL: What do you think of nostalgia, Archie? Is it there in the show? Is there “homesickness”?

AM: If nostalgia is the desire to return to an earlier time in life/ I don't think I have it unless it is to work out who I am now. The decision to do my HouseShow again was that it was easy to do again and something I didn't need to think about too much. I had two other shows to do this month. I also thought Melbourne should see it. There was a hidden agenda in the last version. I put objects and text to connect with people and for them to contact me if they knew my family. And it worked! I posted pictures on Instagram of the smoke-lettered place names where my father lived and a lady messaged me saying, “I lived in Coolatai and my mother knows your father”. She connected me to her 75 year old mother and now we regularly talk. She shared with me some old photos from the 30s of my father. I never saw him before as a young man, he was born in 1908 and was 62 when I was born. This lady was very young when she knew my father, about 6 years old. I got involved in Family History Research about 3 years ago and have since then learned a lot about my father. I never met anyone from his family; only two brothers when he was sick in hospital with prostate cancer. The people who knew my father are either dead or too young to have a strong recollection. I also contacted a person in Armidale who was the son of a landlord of a residence my father lived at when he was trying to make it as a musician... He told me a story of being in his father's car and picking my father up hitchhiking from Glen Innes to Armidale. The recollector was 15 at the time and remembers that my father talked about music the entire trip and shouted them all dinner at their destination. Quite rare to get something like this as the 15 year old is in his mid 70s now.

I guess the interest in the past is the secrecy and big hole of information. I also wanted to find out who my father was and why he was seemingly ostracised from his family.



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PL: Can I ask, what did you want to be when you “grew up,” Archie?

AM: I didn't have any idea of what I would be when I got to adulthood. I didn't think I *could* be anything. My father did encourage me with my drawing/art and said I would be famous one day. I never really had a job before getting into art. I had small jobs here and there but never stayed long... I just couldn't stand it... and I didn't like people (or how I could never behave in the way they wanted). I could be someone with undiagnosed autism. I spent a lot of my childhood wandering around in a dream... not a very nice dream; a rather banal dream that felt otherworldly. I had a bit of disassociation with the world.

PL: Is art a way to process the past?

AM: I usually only really care for the work while I am making it and don't give it too much time afterwards. In this way I think it is a cathartic process. Not every piece of work is about my past but may be about the past history of the site where the exhibition occurs. I don't work in a studio constantly trying to resolve a question or where I am reworking an idea. Some shows I read the rationale and respond to that directly. I have a lot of formal ideas in my head and I can select from that as a starting point.



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*PL: You said your father said you would become a famous artist, and you have! There's a drawing of a Dalek and a boy with a "Highly Commended" award from the Tara Show and Rodeo Society. What's going on in this picture? Having won a prize, did you have positive associations with art making growing up?*

AM: It is a scene from *Dr Who* which I loved watching at the time. Winning an award can also be an anxious event as other people would tell you that you didn't deserve it or that they challenge you that they could do something far better. So it provided some wanted and unwanted attention. I am ambivalent about awards, accolades and positive reviews.

*PL: You finished a Bachelor of Visual Arts at Queensland University of Technology in 1998. What led you to choose to study art? Why did you choose QUT?*

AM: Ha! As I said earlier, I kind of wandered through life without any real purpose or direction. The overbearing feeling of apathy on my shoulders. I've glimpsed the outside world and life through the corner of my eye all the while not being totally convinced I want to be any part of it. I "studied" art because I had to do something and art was the only thing people said I was good at. To be honest I didn't do much actual study and am surprised I made it through University.



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*PL: By exploring the family home you raise the theme of intergenerational trauma. There are no visible signs of violence in the show, but you can feel a weight that hangs over the home like a heavy cloud. Is it there?*

AM: There is definitely intergenerational trauma. It was passed on via both parents—not so much transgenerational joy. What happened in the household was mostly banal, apathetic, or dysfunctional. I had an uncle who we used to find funny because he would yell out crazy things. He would do a lot of things violently, even buttering a piece of bread to eat. He would smack the lid off the butter container while saying something like, “Get off there you cunt!” Then he would stab the butter with the knife yelling, “Argghh!,” and slam the thickly buttered knife onto the white bread. “Fuck ya!” he would say, flicking some of the remainder onto the ceiling.

My uncle never went to school. He used to act out on me, my brother, and a few friends who dared to visit, violent things he wanted to do to the local police man like twist his arms behind him. He would do this til he went too far and made us cry, then he would suddenly try and make it better by making jokes. A counsellor told me once that I was surrounded by adults who were children. That was true with the exception of my father, who was serious and educated, and people acted in a respectful manner in his presence.

My Aboriginal grandfather was also a horrible person and did some very serious damage to every one of my uncles and aunties. The uncles and aunties all were dispersed in various locations in the state, hundreds of kilometres from my grandparents’ town. “The Devil” was like a bomb which scattered them away from the devastation. There is a well-known story of my great-uncle being killed by his son at a “blacks camp” on a station called Welltown. My teenage grandfather, according to the newspaper articles, was present at the time. I have read accounts of my grandparents being pursued by the Protector of Aborigines and Police across many towns. They were not allowed to associate with other Aboriginal people and needed permission to get married. I can’t find a lot of information on my grandmother’s parents but I have seen accounts of massacres in the area of her mother’s people near Mungindi and also her father’s people near Warwick. I remember relatives mentioning “Mungindi” and “Cherbourg” as places where you wouldn’t ever want to go. I believe some things can be passed on genetically like, if your mother is stressed and anxious during your birth...or if the whole affair from conception is distressing.

*PL: There’s a tension there between personal memory and collective memory, and between different kinds of collective memory such as the recollections told by the nuclear family and other deeper collective or cultural recollections.*

AM: I remember reading about “Archaic Residue.” I believe it was an idea of Carl Jung’s, but I can’t find mentions of it anywhere now. He thought that some knowledge was passed on from your ancestors. I have emotional feelings sometimes when I am in the bush and look at a pile of rocks, a path, or a group of trees etc, it feels like the landscape is trying to communicate with me. But the disruptive impact of Settler Colonialism has meant I don’t have the tools to decipher it. I didn’t have any traditional upbringing, which severed me from any connection. Only a few dirty words in Kamilaroi language survived.

*PL: There is throughout the home all kinds of cultural sources from the outside world. There are some intriguing publications strewn around the rooms, especially the bedroom. The Illuminatus, OMNI, various paperback books. What is their significance?*

AM: I got into the Illuminatus books quite young, picking up *The Masks of The Illuminati* from a bargain bin at a service station. I didn’t understand any of it but was intrigued by the writing and the form. Some pages are like a film script. Robert Anton Wilson wrote about Secret Societies, drugs and disinformation by the media/conspiracy theories. I didn’t really connect this reading material with my father’s membership with the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes at the time. Wilson made it feel like the whole world was a conspiracy and even stating that it was so was some kind of premeditated form of disinformation that worked in the establishment. I remember his earlier books repeating the significance of the number ‘23’ throughout the novel being self-aware that the reader would also suddenly see 23 everywhere after reading the book. I remember walking around the town once and finding a book on another secret society, the Rosicrucians, on the ground. I felt like it was placed there by someone for me to find. Those Illuminatus books would talk of such things and they made me question everything.

OMNI was a weird magazine that was a mix of science, science fiction/fantasy and pseudo-science. It now feels like it could have been published by one of these secret societies. I was drawn to all these books and magazines



by their graphic design initially. Some of them I have never read. I just liked the covers. All of those in the show I have read through. I got into the role-playing books a lot. Choose Your Own Adventure and the more complex, later versions of this type of book. Escapism.

*PL: What about music?*

AM: I didn't really like any music or follow any artists until someone gave me two cassette tapes of *The Cure* - one being a singles collection with the more interesting, experimental B-Sides on Side B. Somehow this white goth guy from England resonated with an Aboriginal teen in a small town in Australia. I started to source all of their albums and whatever other bands *The Cure* fans liked: *Joy Division*, *The Smiths*, *The the*, *New Order* etc. I bought music magazines to read about them and connect with some Pen Pals. There was no record shop or radio station that played any of this music... I would order from Rocking Horse in Brisbane and get them mailed out. Everyone who I played this music to hated it which I liked sometimes as the alienation meant these people could be kept at a safe distance from me.

*PL: There's other materials we find strewn around the house. I opened a drawer and found an old newspaper with the headline "Stalin is Dead". On the television there is Dr Who travelling time and Astro Boy flying from metropolis to space station.*

AM: Stalin and the other USSR paraphernalia is to do with my father's love of Socialism. He would sometimes say Communism but would correct himself to say that true Socialism was better.

Some of that seepage from the outside was reconfirming my negative thoughts about myself and Aboriginal people. The *Dr Who* episode has an alien called Monarch who was collecting cultures, one being Aboriginal people. The Doctor's assistant, who in the narrative is from Brisbane, can naturally speak the gibberish that was said to be a universal Aboriginal language. The actors were not Aboriginal but looked Indian to me. A scene from *The Goodies* where Bill Oddie doesn't want to go to Australia because it is "full of Abos and Dingos." It's conflicting with *Astro Boy* which was all about equality (between robots and humans) and fighting discrimination.



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*PL: Is there a part of you that is Astro Boy?*

AM: I'm not sure if I got what *Astro Boy* was about at the time, but as an older person you can see it is quite obvious. I guess it gets in subconsciously/subliminally.

*PL: Did you identify with any other cultural figures?*

AM: I think I admired any kind of art that experimented with the form. Robert Anton Wilson in his books (his later Illuminati series would regularly have footnotes that got longer and longer until an entire page was a footnote/passages written as film scripts). I also like Robbe-Grillet and his New Novel idea, where the plot is of secondary importance to the objects. *The Cure*, although not much of an experimental band, was a good introduction into what music could be and also introduced me to Camus and existentialism via their debut single *Killing An Arab*. TV shows like *The Goodies*, *Vision On*, *Max Headroom*, and *The Kenny Everett Video Show* which played around with camera tricks, special effects and self-reflexivity also affected my thought. I guess you could say the ABC was a great station for artistic production... They had so many children's shows that were much more than cell animation: one was animated sand, another was paper/origami, plasticine.



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*PL: British humour seems like a big influence, which combines sarcasm, self-deprecation, innuendo, and wit. But instead of BBC-like commentary on the British class system, you transpose it into a commentary on what you might call the Australian racial system. You combine that style of humour with an existential mood. It's everywhere in little details. The "One Dollar and Twenty Cents" Gold Lotto prize or the drawing of a "fly squatter" come to mind. What is the value of humour to you?*

AM: Humour relieves the psychological tension in your brain and abates or disengages you from power structures. It is fairly absurd to send a cheque for \$1.20 as that amount may be the cost of cashing it in.