# Chris Bond audio transcript

My name’s Chris Bond and I’m an artist in the Guirguis New Art Prize 2015. My work is situated in the Post Office Gallery and it’s a fictional installation that takes a quasi museum-like format and I’ve invented a fictional narrative that acts as a bedrock for the works I’ve made and found for the show.

So, in terms of the narrative it goes something like this: in March 1963 in an isolated paddock in Dean, just north of Ballarat stood staring at a blackened, rock-strewn landscape. They’d been drawn to the area by a journal article describing the scientific discovery of what locals had long called The Devil’s Spit, a thirty metre stretch of black obsidian rock formed by a prehistoric lava flows. Led by fraternal twins Ruth and Des Sewell, together with Peter Varga, Gloria Haines and Ian Haas they spent the next year living in a caravan positioned directly over the obsidian in the hope of absorbing what Ruth termed “ecstatic dark matter” spending much of that time crafting objects to be used in elaborate nightly rituals. Some time in early 1964 the five artists vanished, along with all traces of the Devil’s Spit. All that remained was their caravan, discovered in the early 1970’s by local landowners some five kilometres away mired in the muddy riverbank of Birch Creek. Inside the rotting rusting hulk they found homemade ceremonial paraphernalia, sculptural assemblages, carved pieces of obsidian, household items and books all of which were recovered and stored by Victoria Police’s Missing Person’s Unit until their repatriation to members of the Sewell family in the 1980’s.

So I’ve been reading this in the plaque attached to the work itself and the work consists of three plinths that are quite low to the ground and they contain a number of objects, some of which I’ve made, in the form of ritualistic-like objects and some things that I’ve found at markets which have a similar vintage to the story itself.

I’ve worked in this way for a number of years, creating stories that provide structure for me and a way of trying to, not just escape my own practice, but a way of kind of circumnavigating it. Sort of running circles around myself inventing characters or artists or writers or organisations that I work under and who in turn work for me. So this work is fairly ambitious in scale for me. I usually work in a very small format and predominantly as a painter but have made work in institutional setting where I feel it appropriate.

So in terms of this story, setting it in Dean, which is just north of Ballarat, seemed ideal. I’ve driven through Dean quite a number of times and it’s quite a beautiful, flat, empty place which seemed to have the possibility of something like this happening – as bizarre as it sounds.

Talking about some of the works in the show, there are two masks that I’ve made that are based on my face. They’re made of plaster and coloured with what looks like soot, or dirt or kind of washed off paint and they’re quite degraded and filthy – as are a number of other works in the show. There’s an object that looks like a walking stick or cane made of twisted-looking timber painted black which again carries the signs of age: covered in dirt; a lot of loss to the paint.

There are also two structures that appear to disappear into the wall behind the plinths. There’s a set of caravan steps that have almost been kind of sheared off and appear to float back into the wall, and a dagger-like object which is also embedded. So there’s a sense of this work like an institutional museum-like display… somewhat perverted, for want of a better term. And that’s the way my practice operates within this realm of seeming reality but somewhat distorted and it exists really for my benefit as a model for thinking about new ways of doing things and exploring materials that I’d perhaps be unlikely to work with or techniques that I’d be unlikely to explore. And this has given me an opportunity to explore a number of techniques – kind of modes of operation – that I hadn’t previously considered.

The groupings of the works are significant. There are formal groupings of objects. Some of them ritual-like objects mixed with things like axes and saws. Things that follow a certain shape or line are grouped in the display. There are objects that are stacked or arranged in quite elegant formal ways which seem to belie the importance of them to the story I think. There are objects that seem somewhat out of place as well, that perhaps provoke questions about the authenticity of the story. I’ve imported some obsidian from overseas – from Oregon – that I’ve used for a number of the works. I’ve carved the obsidian for certain objects and I’ve used shards of obsidian in one of the clubs that I’ve made, and it’s also embedded into bone in a necklace. It was important to me to actually use some of the material that I’d referred to in the story. There’s no obsidian in Dean. In fact there’s very little obsidian in Australia at all apart from a very very small area in Queensland from my research. So it was necessary to get some from overseas to aid plausibility. It’s a very very difficult substance to work with. It’s quite glassy, it’s brittle, it’s incredibly hard. To sculpt it you’d need to use power tools. In making these works I had to think: how would the artists of that period, living in a caravan, be able to do anything? What materials would they have used? what tools would they have had at hand? So there were limitations on what could be done particularly with the obsidian with hand-tools because when you strike it with a hammer or chisel it usually disintegrates into shards.

So it was a matter of thinking these things through as I was making these works, and also thinking about each of the characters and how they might have acted in the circumstances they were in. So that’s a primary part of the methodology for me is that embodiment – in this case it’s a kind of simulated embodiment – in previous cases I have physically embodied characters and made work on their behalf and this work is as much a test of the power of simulation versus genuine active agency as much as anything else.