
Interview between Erin Coats and Astro Morphs – James Doohan & Bianca Sharkey

Friday 20th March 2020

Erin: It's great to see you guys again, although under slightly strange conditions.

James: I know.

Bianca: Very strange.

Erin: I mean, the biological is really creeping into things (laughter). It's already in your art but now it's everywhere, isn't it?

James: We didn't want it to be too relevant...

Bianca: Exactly!

Erin: Suddenly extremely relevant work. I think your work was relevant already though, yeah.

James: Thank you.

Erin: So I last spoke to you guys in September, when we talked about the work you showed in "Other Suns" at Fremantle Arts Centre. It's great to see how industrious and productive you've been since then.

James: So we essentially wanted to pick up where our characters left off.

Erin: So that's Yow and Sox?

James: I don't know if we mentioned in the talk but we were calling them the Polymorphic Neonates.

Erin: And a Neonate is a new organism. I know you make a lot of props and costumes for your video shoots. In what order do you do things?

James: So we started without a clear plan and then Bianca came up with this idea and it was probably from Star Wars, like the Cantina band in one of the first ones, and we thought ok, this time, because we play music we thought of making an imaginary band so that's where a lot of these costumes began.

Bianca: Yeah, they're our band.

James: So we started with that one there.

Erin: So, this is a poncho that looks like a scaled up micro-organism.

Bianca: Yes, it's actually an interpretation of the rods and cones in your eye.

After Jamie and I had spoken a lot about where Yow and Sox were going to go next, when you met them they were in the process of being remade and looking for a mutualism with the environment around them and hence all the, homages to eyes and rib cages.

Erin: So in a way it's like a world-building cosmology, but on this tiny, tiny biological level. These things are the building blocks of a new lifeform, and we are seeing them hugely scaled up. And glammed up as well. There are lots of sequins. And a sense of flamboyance, of glam rock almost, and a bit of drag.

Bianca: Absolutely.

Erin: Your aesthetic is just... fabulous! I love it. Can you tell me a bit about your aesthetic decisions?

James: After the last the video, 'ascension', we discussed that we wanted to use different materials this time, to continue on with the sequinning but move more into papier-mâché.

Erin: So we've got here papier-mâché, sequins, fake fur, lots of tassels, beading, and a kind of fluoro paint.

Bianca: Each person who would then come into our film would have a costume and the costume would have almost a personality and a function. I was hoping that when they possess it that they themselves would find something inside of themselves that they hadn't before and that's how we would get the personality of the band, I wanted the band to be fun. It's a celebration of life because it's about the making of life.

Erin: So you wanted them to have something that they could draw on for their role inside of this?

Bianca: Yes, and especially because we work with people who don't necessarily come from a performance background.

Erin: That amazing potential of amateur performers and assistants in making films, I'm really familiar with that one. I do feel like, if I was to put one of these masks on that I would be inhabiting a new character, and it would give me a freedom to be something else. Some of them remind me a little bit of Mexican wrestling masks. There's a sense of pantomime and theatre. With any costume that we put, on in a way, we're having a break from the baggage of our own identity and we're able to perform something else.

James: Definitely.

Bianca: Absolutely.

Erin: It also makes me think also about the way that different cells in our bodies perform; they are programmed to do certain things, whether it's a muscle or skin cell, they have a function to perform.

Bianca: Yes, it's funny you should say that because two of the characters that you will see in the film that will wear those costumes...

Erin: .. this costume here with the amazing sequined circles that looks like something a drag queen bullfighter would wear?

Bianca: Yeah! So we call the two of those together Meiosis.

Erin: Just for us ley-people, could you tell me what that means?

Bianca: Basically you have Meiosis and Mitosis, and Mitosis is the replication of the cells in your body that enables you to lose and replace skin on an everyday basis, whereas Meiosis is referring to having half your gametes from your mum and your dad, it comes together and you make a baby, and again referencing that neonate. And someone like, for example Gregor Mendel – he was an Augustinian monk who created all the Mendelian theory behind genetics but he did it all without even knowing and it's so accurate we use it today.

Erin: How?!

Bianca: I don't know! Because he had the time.

Erin: He just thought really, really hard and he just came up with it.

Bianca: But he did two years of setting the foundation that would then follow through with the next years. We still use his work today and I think that's amazing and it also shows what's possible when you *give* people time to develop.

Erin: Exactly, so if you have that period of incubation where you can actually have the space, the mental space to produce things, amazing things can come from it. It's not always about all of the other influences and inputs in your life, sometimes it actually about carving that space to be able to think really hard.

Bianca: Yes, and do the work.

James: Slowing things down.

Erin: Well, you know, we can think optimistically about the self-isolation months ahead for all of us, can't we?

Bianca: I know! Think of Mendel.

James: Everybody has been thrust in to that, yeah.

Erin: What would you like to do with some of these objects here when you get to the point where you are performing and filming yourselves? Have you got a choreography yet?

Bianca: Yes, we've already got some choreography.

Erin: Some of these props, they're like the golden age of early practical effects in TV series and films. They have a beautiful, tactile quality. They're just gorgeous, you know they make me think of early Star Trek and Dr Who and the imagination that is required with having a limited budget and not a lot of technology and CGI to create things, it's just – what can we do with...

Bianca: .. with your hands.

Erin: Yes! This is gorgeous, where did you film this?

James: That's in a black performance space downstairs, we just snuck in there when it wasn't being used.

Erin: I see what you mean about these costumes really, when you put them on, it's like you just know what to do with your bodies.

James: So that was one of the beginning points. That one opens up into wings as well.

Erin: This is so great, I can't wait to see it. And this one is a musical instrument?

James: Yes, so that was the idea, sort of. That was originally based on the cochlear in the inner ear.

Erin: I was going to say it looks a little like a parasitic worm, but that's actually a part of the inner ear?

James: It was supposed to be but it kind of has more of a spiral bit in there and it just proved a little bit tricky with ah, limited skills.

Erin: So do you have lyrics that you have been developing to go with these?

Bianca: Yes we do, we have some with lyrics and electronic music essentially. So, that's our band.

Erin: You've got a beautiful colour scheme going on as well.

Bianca: They make me happy, it's very simple.

Erin: In this one you've got an amazing backdrop of South Western granite. It's a really extraordinary and wild landscape you've used from Western Australia; it's geologically very old so it feels like it fits very well as a backdrop for these Neonates, these new organisms that are entering a landscape that they can then become part of and add to.

Bianca: Yeah, and find some sort of life within it. We're always looking for landscapes that could look a bit Mars-like and foreign, and thinking about different things that you can't see when you're within that landscape and how they might be working. So I think that's how we approach landscape, there are so many ways to talk about it.

Erin: With the way that you use landscape, you can't really tell the scale of things. You're not showing any references for how big it is. These could be tiny organisms or gigantic life forms. Do you know yet when you'll be able to perform and record?

Bianca: We've been so busy making, now it's eased off and we are going to go into recording, we've got a lot of footage and we need to put it all together. We've got a teaser.

Erin: I'd love to see it.

James: So this is still test footage. This relates more to the characters from the end of the last video.

Erin: So have you projected or digitally added a layer?

Bianca: We put them in later.

Erin: Oh I love it. (Laughter) That's great.

(Video ends.)

Erin: I get the sense that your volunteers are really willing, that they enjoy being in that space, even though they are stuffed inside of a green unitard.

Bianca: Yes.

Erin: You introduced me to the notion of horizontal evolution, which I've been so fascinated with this since I learnt about it. Can you explain a bit about that, because I feel like that's still relevant to what you're doing.

Bianca: Oh, absolutely, because there's a type of evolution that exists within bacteria which basically enables them to evolve more quickly.

Erin: What fascinated me was the idea that evolution doesn't have to always be completely linear, that organisms on a certain level can be taking influences or material from other organisms around them, that it's not purely a successive process. We are always trying to understand the interconnectedness of lifeforms, especially things that we can't see. We are learning more about how we are biomes - we're a habitat to all of these microscopic organisms that we need. There's a whole habitat within us.

Bianca: I think that's what inspires our work, if you think about a tap and the water comes out and because it's so easy to forget that it's not infinite in that form. I think sometimes we get so busy we forget how miraculous all these simple things are, like the mind, and relationships between bacteria and all sorts of things like that and the fact that we carry mitochondria within us which obviously came from bacteria and they're very good for us because they give us all our energy.

Erin: Yep, all these functions they perform in terms of our gut health but even our brain function is affected by them. There are a lot of artists who draw on science in their work, but sometime the visual language can be very sterile, which is why I'm so interested in your work. It draws quite deeply on science and does it in this way that is just so flamboyant and such a celebration. You feel like you can be a part of it. I love the feeling of community that the work engenders.

Bianca: It is fun because, for myself science has just given me so much. That's actually where the Agar Project comes from.

Erin: Can I touch one?

Bianca: Yeah go for it!

Bianca: It's just to see the synergy between art and science; if you look at cross-hatching and inoculating agar to grow bacteria, they're actually the same skill set. I think it's incredibly dangerous for people to equate value with money... I've had a lecturer say, "put up your hand if you have an arts degree" and I put up my hand because I'm a bit of an innocent, and then he said "I would have got one but I have toilet paper at home", in which I felt like saying "who didn't use toilet paper today?"

Erin: So was he saying there's less value to the work that artists do because we're not creating concrete things that can be used in the world? What was his point?

Bianca: To be honest I don't know, I mean you can never tell what anybody's thinking and why we say the things we say, half the time I don't know why I'm talking but I just think my reaction to that was of rebellion. I like the idea to take children and to let them open up the doors and get them thinking.

Erin: So these are little plaster pucks that you've given to kids and they've then been able to create the little tiny world onto that.

Bianca: Yeah, basically they mimic agar and for anyone that's probably done science in high school and at university – you grow bacteria in agar.

James: It is the method used to inoculate the agar dish to grow bacteria. You were given a disc, you draw a line this way, crosshatch and then you draw a squiggle this way. Or you could do different designs that they use in the lab to grow the bacteria, and then the children created their own designs.

Bianca: Their own interpretation. So that one would be not quite to scale but to grow something you'd streak out four and then three and then two. The centre is where the pure colony is.

Erin: Oh that's amazing. It changes it so much when you actually realize the generative forms behind these.

James: And we wanted to grow it more but obviously we've hit a little bit of a roadblock with all the contagions.

Bianca: Have you seen agar art? Can I show you?

Erin: No I'd love to see it, lets look at agar art. I feel like I'm about to discover something that's going to change my life.

Bianca: So that's an agar dish and that's actually bacteria. So you paint with bacteria.

Erin: And then it grows on it! Oh my god!

Bianca: Yeah and they have competitions.

Erin: How did I not know about this? Oh look, there's Vincent Van Gogh.

Bianca: I thought you might like it.

[ERIN PUTS ON MUSICAL INSTRUMENT PROP]

Erin: It reminds of the musical instruments in the bar in that scene in Star Wars, when they go to that different planet.

Bianca: And it is inspiring, I love those scenes.

END OF THE CONVERSATION.