

Driving with Henry: The HMS Experience

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ABOVE: HENRY JOCK WALKER & MICK NEWPORT
HMS & BOARDART, 2014, Photography: Che Chorely

The Van

From one side it looks like a normal Toyota Hiace, a spot of blue paint on the rear tyre the only indication of anything amiss. From the other side it's a work of art or a crazy mess, depending on how you see things. Half covered with blue and orange paint, HMS elicits both smiles and expressions of disdain from drivers as they pass.

There is paint on the van's inside too, remnants of the adventures that happened long before I arrived. Fat blue brush strokes cover the steering wheel, window and roof, but only as far as Henry's reach has allowed.

The dashboard is a showcase of objects, given or collected en-route. Drawings, sculptures, feathers, brochures, books, cassettes and a stack of paintings left to dry. A woven plastic disc hangs from the mirror and sways back and forth with each change of gear.

Sounds

The thunk of the central locking as I unlock Henry's door. The slam of mine as I pull it shut behind me. The silence and click of a tape changing sides.

An unexpected bang as the van backfires.

Driving

Me, seated on the left. I am barefoot and have been for days, my feet covered in sand. I alternate between placing them on the floor and folding myself up so they can sit flat against the glove box, feeling the pressure of my knees against my chest. My elbow rests on the door frame, my fingers out the window, the sunlight warm against my skin.

Henry, in the driver's seat to my right. Sitting straighter than I do, one hand on the wheel, the other on his iPhone, checking Google so we don't get lost.

Mornings

I wake when the sun does, its light turned blue from the tarpaulin I've been sleeping beneath, un-stretched canvas paintings making a surprisingly comfortable bed. I lie quietly for a moment, looking at the details of the weave glowing above me, before extracting myself and greeting the day. I disturb the peace in the process; the rustle of the tarp is loud in the early morning quiet. Henry is stretched out in relative luxury on his mattress in the back of the van. I slide the door open slowly so as not to disturb but find he is already awake, or good at pretending anyway. We walk to the top of the headland to watch the sunrise over the Pacific and eat our cereal with water because we forgot to buy milk.

Coffee

The best places to buy coffee have surfboards and resident chickens.

Music

Henry's music collection sits on the bench seat between us. The cassettes have been separated from their plastic cases which sit in a box in the back, awaiting their turn to be painted. The tapes are piled against one another in a couple of containers, The Beatles with Nirvana, The Power of One with the Chipmunks. I lean on them gently to prevent them from falling off the seat, but despite my efforts they occasionally fly forward, spilling into the foot-well and losing the vague sense of order they were in.

Making

I stand on the beach with a camera as Henry paddles into the surf, a canvas clenched firmly in his jaw. I wait patiently until he finds the right wave and snap pictures as he paints, explaining the project to an interested stranger. There is a brilliant flash of blue as the canvas disappears beneath the water.

Everything Out

First the bike, then my suitcase, then a folded wooden table with colourful stripes.

I soak up the sun in the park as the van is emptied, a pile of books forming behind me, paintings to my right. A hat is placed on my head, clothes fly through the air and I finally understand the extent of what's inside.

To the people walking past it looks chaotic but even the smallest of things has its place. A cardboard frame from Albany; scraps of paper collected in Darwin; a tarp found on the side of the road. Every item a moment, an encounter, a collaboration with someone from the past six months and Henry's the only connection.

Friends arrive with beer and we settle into a Sunday afternoon of making. If home is where you lay your head then a studio is...wherever you make your art I guess. Who knows where we'll be tomorrow but today it's Kingscliff Beach, at sunset, with the ominous threat of rain.

Henry's Mobile Studio, Henry Jock Walker
11 April – 11 May → West Space & other locations