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Death Watch
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SCREEN SPACE



Death Watch

Jessie Scott



Minor Ruptures

When I step off the number 59 tram, two girls appear and ask me where Kmart is. I take a guess and point in a random direction. The girls skip away blithely, and a small part of me hopes they find the library instead. But as I begin to wander around what the local council calls the ‘retail core’ of Moonee Ponds I, too, fall into the rhythm of recreational shopping.

There are a disproportionate number of beauty salons, hairdressers and nail spas here. Naturally feeling a little insecure about my own “Health & Beauty”, I walk into the Chemist Warehouse on Puckle Street. The latest craze seems to be for Wild Krill Oil, which apparently “assists in the maintenance or improvement of general well-being”. So far, so good. Hang on, do krill have nervous systems? I hesitate, and settle for Men’s Performance Multi, which makes a convincing promise to increase my “energy” and “performance”.

In TSL I pick up a pair of my favourite Bonds underwear before waiting in line while a woman attempts to get herself a five percent in-store discount. “What phone do you have?” the cashier asks her. “An iPhone, okay. Do you have the QR app? No? Okay, you just get the app, then you scan this, then you just like it.” I magnanimously decide not to claim my sixty cents off, before realising my Nokia 1110 probably wouldn’t be up to the task.

It is a bright spring day and, like most people on the streets, I am in a pleasant stupor. I drift around to the back of Puckle Street and (after a visit to Ray’s Top Nuts where a man, presumably Ray, sells me an assortment of nuts without speaking a word) find myself on Everage Street. It feels good to get the Dame Edna reference out of the way so early in the piece. The only street sign bearing her name is tilted up awkwardly, as though someone tried to steal it but gave up half way.

Things are pretty quiet here, except for the insistent bubbling of a deep fryer emanating from Noodle Hut. The Ponds dwellers I know assure me things were different in the heyday of the Moonee Ponds Market, when this street was home to its vibrant Everage Court. Since the Market’s demolition in 1997, a 1.25 hectare site on which much of it once stood has, well, just sat there, while the surrounding commercial precinct has enjoyed a mostly uninterrupted real estate boom.

The site’s owner, Reading Entertainment, was given approval in 2000 to build a twelve-cinema complex, but their plans have continually stalled or been postponed. Regularly attracting the ire of the Moonee Valley City Council and the local Chamber of Commerce, it has become the kind of space locals love to call an ‘eyesore’. One resident, a Mr John Prent, interviewed by the *Moonee Valley Leader* in 2011, expressed dismay at its unsightliness, adding hopefully that “[a] lot of Moonee Ponds people would love to be able to walk to the movies.”

Jessie Scott, who was raised in Moonee Ponds and retains a strong connection to the area, is less anxious to have the opportunity to see *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days* or *Resident Evil: Retribution* in the suburb. What does concern her, though, is the community’s powerlessness in determining a future for the site of the former market. In her three-channel video installation *Death Watch*, Scott shows it to us as it looks today. Although leased as a temporary car park for the past six years, it still bears the crumbling indicators of its past: a once-bloody butcher’s floor, a curved entrance in modestly garish tiles. In front of this backdrop we see cars glide in and out, and people ambling to and fro with shopping bags.



It’s a fair bet they’ve been to *Moonee Ponds Central: A Mirvac Shopping Centre*, the three-section development anchored by two ‘majors’ (Coles and Kmart) that surrounds the site on two sides. Along a beige toilet corridor wall in the shopping centre’s Puckle Mall section a series of sepia-toned montage panels tells the retail history of the suburb, featuring the stern face of Mrs Puckle herself. Unsurprisingly, the Moonee Ponds Market is omitted from this fairytale. Mirvac, the corporation which owns the centre, is obviously keen to be seen as the sole inheritor of this entrepreneurial, self-organised and civic-minded legacy.

Moonee Ponds Central’s Stage II development, completed in 2009, positions itself as a subtle extension of the existing streetscape. Compared to the street, though, the shopping centre is environmentally controlled, more spacious and less unpredictable (read: highly surveilled). It also makes a more persuasive appeal to the contents of your wallet. As I stroll comfortably through Puckle Mall, Kmart Mall and Coles Mall, it occurs to me that the tasteful suburban shopping centre might just be the contemporary version of the suburban market, with potted palms and brighter lighting.

I have a feeling Scott would disagree. While the standard complaints levelled at shopping centres as privatised, exclusionary spaces can also be directed at suburban markets (which are similarly owned by large property developers), there is a key difference in their social implications. Unlike the wide-ranging ambition of the shopping centre, the market is (in principle) a utilitarian space in which the transactional purpose of your visit is transparent. You go there to do your shopping, not to seek personal fulfilment. In practice, this transparency yields an unpredictable set of social relations, which might explain why Scott, her family and her friends valued the Moonee Ponds Market so highly for its contribution to their community.

It strikes me that one of the strengths of Scott’s work lies, similarly, in its relationship to transparency. In *Death Watch* she directly presents us with such familiar and everyday scenery that we are made curious about its underlying history. Whereas photographs alone might have provided a kind of pop-archaeological evidence of the past, Scott’s multi-channel video conveys the complexity of the site’s history. As her cameras encircle and examine the site, people, cars and birds slip subtly in and out of the three screens. These minor ruptures, and the faux-expository use of edge wipe transitions to reveal only more of the same scenery, hint at the opacity of the forces which will determine the site’s future.

In one way *Death Watch* literally keeps vigil over the last signs of the Market’s life: the tiled shop floors in Scott’s videos will be gone by year’s end. Care Park, which manages the car park, has been asked by the council to re-surface the entire site. This is a pragmatic answer to the ‘eyesore’ question, but the future remains uncertain. One outcome is likely, though: on such valuable property, whatever development does proceed will be more about revenue-generation than community-building. As a recently-minted fan of Moonee Ponds, I hope that Scott’s eloquent artistic proposition might help nudge the scales in the other direction.