



## JAMES DODD: CYCLES OF INVENTION

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The work bench is strewn with empty boxes of cordless drills, a remote control console and a bag of bits from Jaycar. On the wall are three clipboards; one with test colours in 'pineapple park' yellow, 'real's sublime' green, 'lickedy lick gloss' pink and 'bbq' blue; one with an image of a hacked aerosol spray can, extended like an Inspector Gadget arm for long distance spray action; to a list of things to do 'NOW' including 'modify turnbuckle', 'drill hole', 'drive arm', 'grind top surface' and 'chop knob'. There is a lathe and drill presses, clamps, soldering irons, a welding torch, two strange machines and walls lined with painted canvases hung side by side with bicycle wheels. Welcome to the world of the Shed Wizard, a place where magic and manual labour conspire to build maverick machines for making art.

*Shed Wizard* is an exhibition that unites three discrete bodies of work which track the trajectory of James Dodd's artistic practice over the past five years or so. The artist grew up on a farm in regional South Australia, where DIY jobs in the shed aren't weekend leisure pursuits, but a daily reality. Fixing machinery and upgrading tools is second nature, not a labour of love but a functional necessity. The farm shed has since evolved into Dodd's suburban studio, where tractor parts are replaced with bike frames and paint supplies.

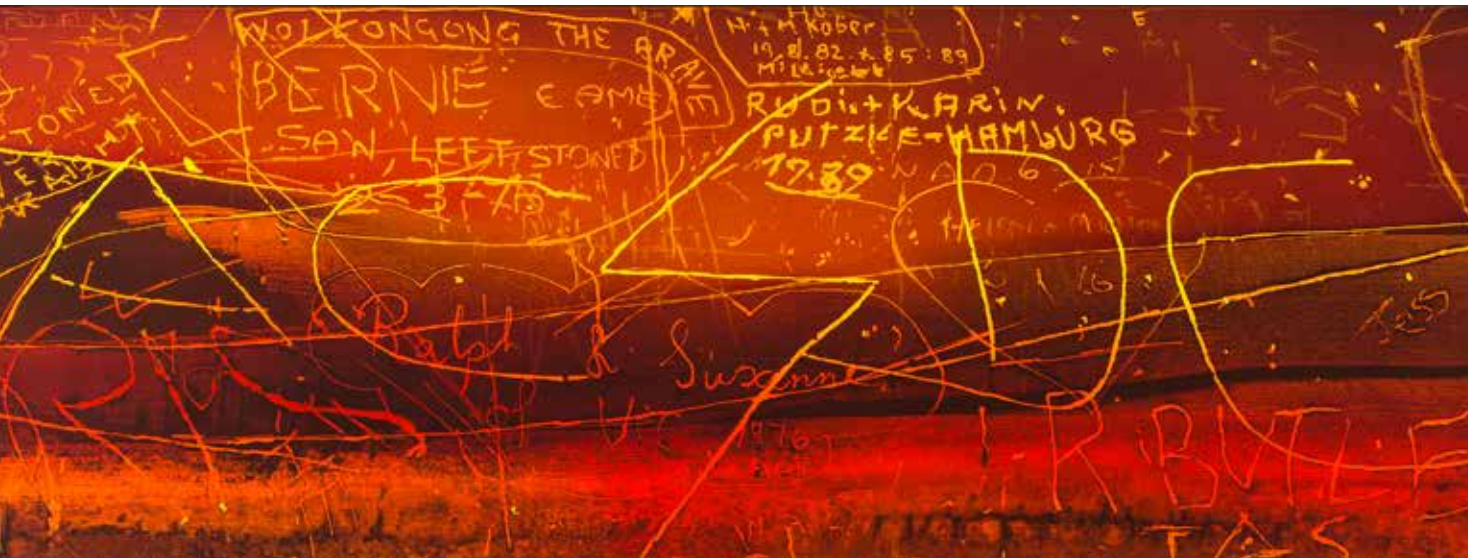
It is with the bicycle that the wheels of invention start turning in Dodd's practice, and from where his prototypes and works evolve. The combined forces of motion, adventure and modification are the key to Dodd's central and ongoing project; the *Painting Mill*. This can be traced back to his forays into tall bikes, choppers and the endless possibilities of 'freak' bikes. From Adelaide's Tongue of Fire to international groups such as the Rat Patrol; a self-declared subculture of bush mechanics, anarchist welders and pushbike obsessives, Dodd found an immediate affinity. But more than that, these bikes become hand-made idiosyncratic vehicles which set the rider a level above the car and the traffic. Freakers, tall bikers and their adventures are the game changers, perspective shifters and power trippers. As the artist says, these wildly modified bicycles (and their actions) are 'an alternative to the system, a resistance to the establishment'. Whilst not immediately considered an art project, these sub-cultures can easily be tarred with the art history brushes of relational aesthetics and social practice that have dominated much of contemporary art discourse in the past two decades. They also reveal Dodd's tendency towards hacking and hijacking and messing with the standard measures. The bike is the symbolic site of domestic dissidence, taking apart something to reassemble it according to a new set of rules.

The altered bicycle offers the potential for creative exploration and then, compounded, a vehicle for exploration and adventure. Dodd has spent a great deal of time riding his bike around suburbia examining and collecting source material for his practice. Predominantly this takes the form of messages, graffiti and other hand-written residues that reside in the public domain. Dodd's various suites of paintings from 2007 - 2012 are constructed from a slow and forensic act of finding and tracing other people's marks. Once photographed and archived, the artist constructs his paintings through a process of merging these found histories of love, hate and existential outcry onto a single image. Building Photoshop compilations with scores of layers, the final composition is then painstakingly executed by hand at a larger scale, on canvas. Paradoxically the building up of his high-key chromatic land-scapes of scratchy text involves acts of translation and subtraction via a hand-made process of painting and writing in latex, reintroducing colour, brushing over in paint, and when dry, peeling away or sanding back the latex to reveal negative space underneath and a mesh of words and signatures. These rips and tears can be peered through to sprayed layers of fluorescent paints in oranges, pinks and acid yellows, the palette of a psychedelic sunset.

*Easel Rider* (2013) is one of Dodd's first art works that strategically combines sport, hobby, rebellion and art in the public space. First shown at Ryan Renshaw Gallery in Brisbane and then as a centre piece in Dodd's solo exhibition *Sabotage* at Contemporary Art Centre South Australia, the tall bike returns as a means of combining painting and motion. Alongside the sculptural but dysfunctional *Juking Bike* (2014), merging a traditional Indonesian boat and a bike, or *Sound System Bike* (2014) which is a portable ghetto blaster, *Easel Rider* alludes to the film *Easy Rider* (1969) and histories of plein air painting from the Australian Heidelberg School, the French Impressionists and also to the speed demons of the Italian Futurist movement. *Easel Rider* offers the potential for aesthetic misadventure in the outdoors: do you dare to paint and ride, or is it a vehicle that transports you closer to your subject? Self-destruction or material collapse is a possible side effect where humour and slapstick are embraced as tropes in Dodd's increasingly absurdist physical theatre. The range of Dodd's investigations is condensed into an online self-portrait video project called *Search online for Jimmy's tallbike adventures* (produced for the UQ Museum's National Artist's Self Portrait Prize). It's like Glenn Robbins in *Russell Coight's All Aussie Adventures* (2002) on stage for Jean Cocteau and Pablo Picasso's *Parade* (1917), where high art meets the high life of the outdoor adventurer and saboteur.





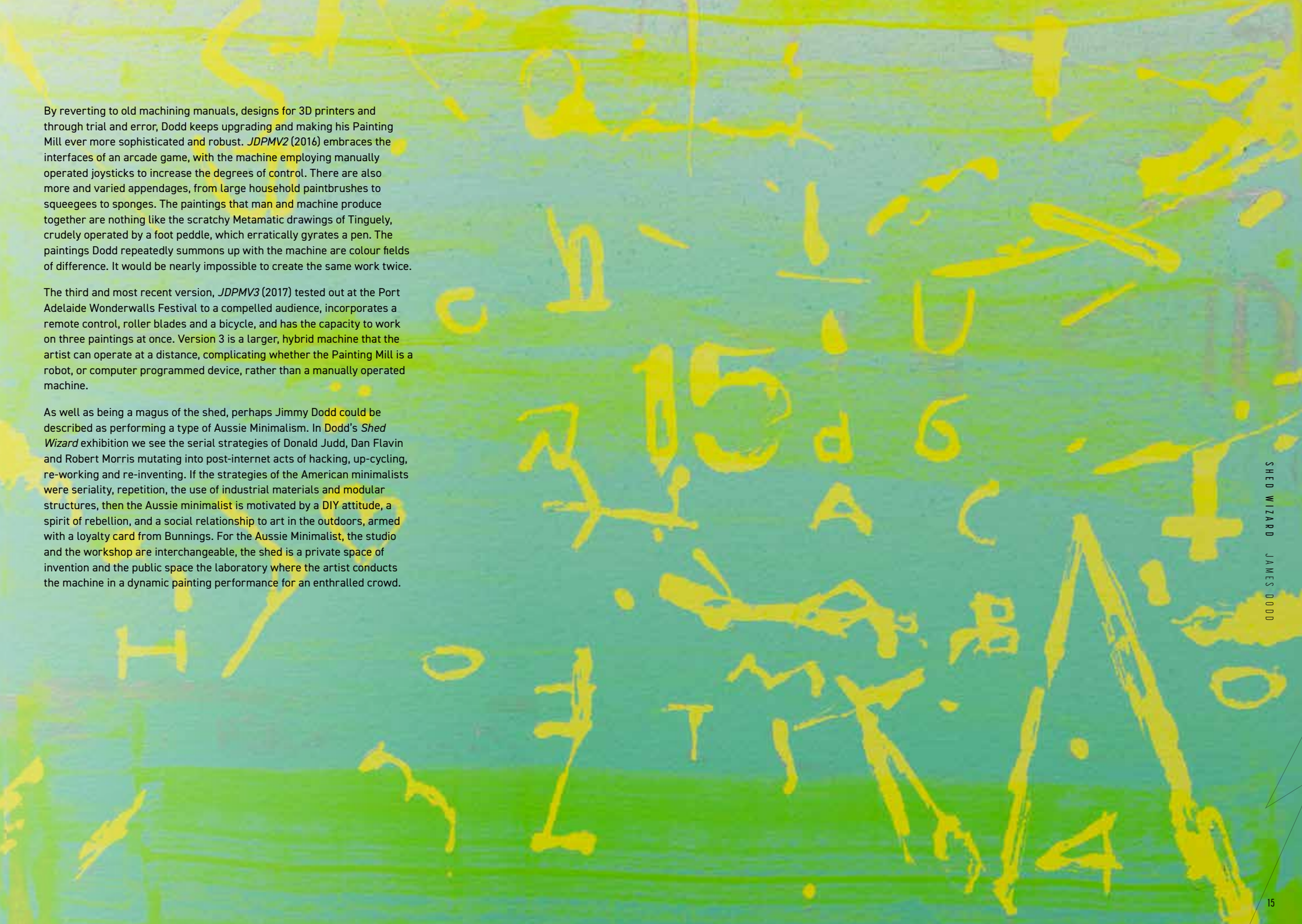


*Easel Rider* gives way to the initial prototype painting-machine, *Painting Mill, JDPMV1* or 'James Dodd Painting Mill Version 1', (2015). The machine is driven via a series of hacked electric drill triggers as the controls, which manoeuvre the carriage back and forth, and temper the speed of the rotating attachments. Dodd considers the *Painting Mill* an evolution from his acts of tracing in a public space, from a love of urban residue, from the scrapes on concrete made by skate boards to the burn-out marks of motorbikes and cars doing donuts in empty parking lots. Its creation was also born out of an exhaustion of the laboured process of his graffiti paintings. It becomes an investigation in degrees of control, proposing regulating, yet embracing the accident and moving away from the manual to the modular.

At first glance Dodd's *Painting Mills* appear to be part of lineage of painting and drawing machines in the history of art. They speak to the likes of Swiss artist Jean Tinguely's contraptions, Michael Landy's *Breakdown* (1991); Fischli & Weiss' film *Der Lauf der Dinge* (The Way Things Go, 1986) or Damien Hirst's *Spin Paintings* (1994). However, whilst Tinguely was obsessed with creating a machine that would self-destruct; Landy with a machine that destroyed everything he owned; Fischli & Weiss a haptic instrument of carefully crafted chaos, and Hirst's centrifugal paint flinging; Dodd's *Painting Mills* share more with that of a MacGyver-inspired mad inventor. His machines are built to paint, but in their carefully tweaked modifications, create an escape plan from the constrictions of painting. There's automation, but they still require the agility of an artist and the drive of a mechanic to make magic with. As such, James Dodd's creative predecessors are closer to the thrill-seeking MacGyver, Bear Grylls, or Australia's self-taught filmmaker and adventurer, Alby Mangles.

James Dodd uses the tools unearthed from the backyard shed or foraged from Bunnings and Eckersly's and repurposed with extraordinary deftness to then capture movement in paint. There is as much satisfaction in the making of the machine as in the making of the painting with the machine, so in the final result we see the artist's creative energies doubled. These are not simple machines by any means. They give the operator (the artist, these are currently not for public use) the ability to harness the brush and whip paint into a frenzy of colour and marks, or control its slow crawl across the canvas. It is a highly calibrated operation that only JD, the master miller, can manoeuvre to great effect.





By reverting to old machining manuals, designs for 3D printers and through trial and error, Dodd keeps upgrading and making his Painting Mill ever more sophisticated and robust. *JDPMV2* (2016) embraces the interfaces of an arcade game, with the machine employing manually operated joysticks to increase the degrees of control. There are also more and varied appendages, from large household paintbrushes to squeegees to sponges. The paintings that man and machine produce together are nothing like the scratchy Metamatic drawings of Tinguely, crudely operated by a foot peddle, which erratically gyrates a pen. The paintings Dodd repeatedly summons up with the machine are colour fields of difference. It would be nearly impossible to create the same work twice.

The third and most recent version, *JDPMV3* (2017) tested out at the Port Adelaide Wonderwalls Festival to a compelled audience, incorporates a remote control, roller blades and a bicycle, and has the capacity to work on three paintings at once. Version 3 is a larger, hybrid machine that the artist can operate at a distance, complicating whether the Painting Mill is a robot, or computer programmed device, rather than a manually operated machine.

As well as being a magus of the shed, perhaps Jimmy Dodd could be described as performing a type of Aussie Minimalism. In Dodd's *Shed Wizard* exhibition we see the serial strategies of Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Robert Morris mutating into post-internet acts of hacking, up-cycling, re-working and re-inventing. If the strategies of the American minimalists were seriality, repetition, the use of industrial materials and modular structures, then the Aussie minimalist is motivated by a DIY attitude, a spirit of rebellion, and a social relationship to art in the outdoors, armed with a loyalty card from Bunnings. For the Aussie Minimalist, the studio and the workshop are interchangeable, the shed is a private space of invention and the public space the laboratory where the artist conducts the machine in a dynamic painting performance for an enthralled crowd.