



Heavy weather V 2016
epoxy resin, fillers, fibreglass, steel, fittings
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Carl Warner



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FRONT

Charles ROBB
Catacoustics (installation detail)
Metro Arts, Brisbane, 2015
Photo: Carl Warner

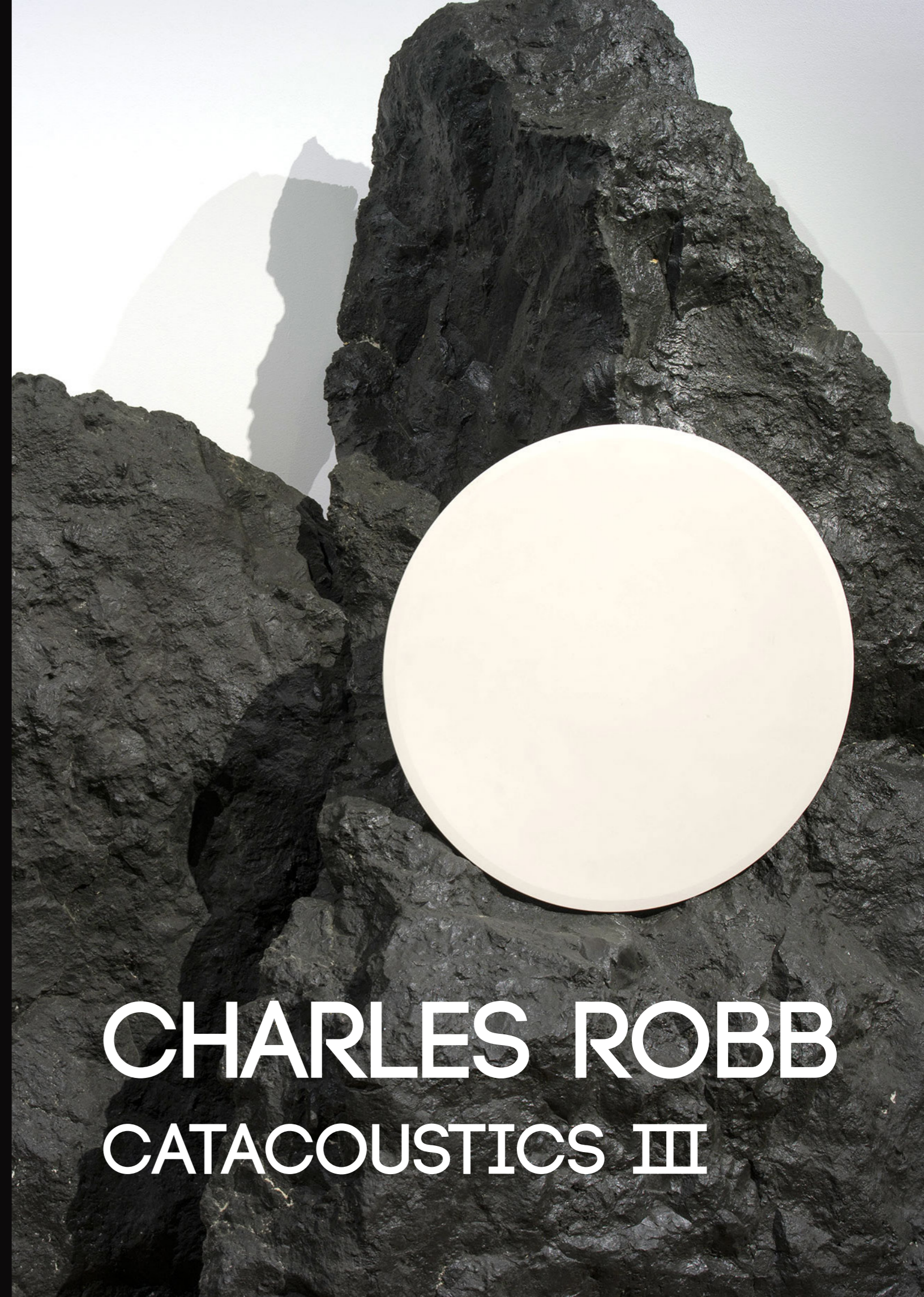
ABOVE

Installation view of *Catacoustics III*
QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, 2016
Photo: Carl Warner

References

- ¹ David Becker, *Crop* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2005).
- ² Charles Robb, artist talk, QUT Art Museum, 5 March 2016.
- ³ Charles Robb, artist statement provided to Metro Arts, August 2015.
- ⁴ Charles Robb, "The ways of things: Objects in the studio" (paper presented at Aesthetics after In/itude Conference, 5-6 February 2015, University of NSW, Sydney), <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/82375/>.
- ⁵ See note 2 above.
- ⁶ Charles Robb, conversation with the author, 26 February 2016.
- ⁷ See note 2 above.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*

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CHARLES ROBB

CATACOUSTICS III

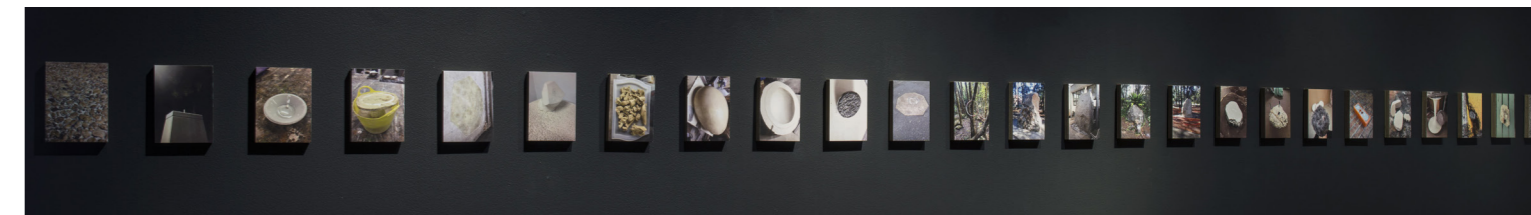


LEFT
Heavy weather V (detail) 2016
epoxy resin, fillers, fibreglass, steel, fittings
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Carl Warner

ABOVE
Soft shoulder 2016
polyester tarpaulin, gypsum-based acrylic resin,
fibreglass, steel, fittings
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Carl Warner



Amorphology-A (detail) 2016
gypsum-based acrylic resin, epoxy resin, fillers,
fibreglass, found objects, formply, wood, fittings
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Carl Warner



Waysiders I-XXV 2016
digital print on matte rag paper block mounted on formply
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Carl Warner

CATACOUSTICS III

Appearing as though it has attempted to escape from its plinth, Charles Robb's full-scale re-creation of the lan Fairweather memorial rock is impaled and clamped in place. Slightly off its heptagonal base and moving onto the floor, the work has a sense of tension that is heightened by the way the laminate pieces of the rock are held together: close, but not united, and under slight duress from being restricted by their clamps. Those who visited *Catacoustics* at Metro Arts in late 2015 will recall seeing these same pieces of the casting being separated and scattered throughout the gallery. They were sometimes close or balancing upon each other, but not in any attempt to re-form their original whole; rather, they existed as individual tectonic masses—fragments of a deconstructed rock.

Certain shapes and ideas repeat and reappear as fixations across Robb's work. Indeed, this is *Catacoustics III*—the second iteration of this body of work, *Catacoustics II*, will happen later this year—and the artist is again using the memorial rock to explore the tension between incident and intention, purpose and chance, as well as the slippages of association and resemblance that occur in the making process. While the repetition and re-working of elements are hallmarks of Robb's practice, those who have long followed his career will note that his recent work shows a significant departure from his previously more mimetic self-portrait works. Writing on Robb's work for his 2005 solo show at the Institute of Modern Art (IMA), an exhibition that featured several sculptural versions of Robb, David Brooker commented, "For Robb, self-portraiture is a litany of

personal, theoretical and artistic problems."¹ This concern remains apparent in Robb's practice, but where the work in the IMA exhibition could be understood within the genre of self-portraiture, his more recent work would be better served by considering it through the *methodology* of self-portraiture.²

In expanding his self-portraiture project, Robb became interested in not just the sculptures he was making, but in the incidental and accidental forms that were by-products of the making process: clay lumps in unintentional shapes as well as the objects and tools used by the artist. Of further interest was how these objects proliferating around the studio relate to each other, and the formal resemblances and resonances between them, object to object, within this contingent space. Robb's work gives form to the tension of these ideas and relationships, which exist "between highly refined, modelled forms and mundane objects and materials".³ With the works installed as an exhibition, the gallery becomes a site to further Robb's explorations from within the studio.

Discussing his work and his expansion within the self-portraiture project, Robb has said;

Given that my practice has used the self-portrait as a foundation for more than a decade, these patterns of 'likeness', whereby two distinct objects are drawn into a state of visual equivalence, can be read as an enlargement of the mimetic program—the representational system central to the ontology of the self-portrait in which the object is forever tethered to an external subject. Here the subject-object dichotomy that underpins the

ontology of the portrait as genre is dispersed across multiple object-object relationships.⁴

The most important relationship is therefore no longer that between the objects and Robb, but between the objects themselves. Old works from around the studio are brought into new bodies of works, entering into relationships with the works around them, and new elements are added through formal similarities and relevance to the project. While chance plays an important role in how these elements may come together, a sense of structure exists through rules devised by the artist that determine what is allowed to enter the work.

For example, the 25 images that make up the *Waysiders* series are united by a sense of shape and movement. They are a combination of process images (some show the actual casting process), images of elements incidental to making or marginal to studio practice, as well as things found on wanderings near the studio that resonate with the idea of shape—sticks on the ground, moulds in process, the rock itself, other rocks. These images give us a further glimpse into Robb's process and how chance findings come into play. The memorial rock itself was a chance discovery for the artist while on holiday in Bribie Island and is very much a reflection of Robb's interest in accidents and the incidental; certainly, his practice seems to be guided by these kinds of fortuitous moments, while still adhering to a strong inherent logic of its own—of resonance and reverberation across objects. With its formal similarity to a bust shape, the rock immediately appealed to Robb, and functioned neatly as a device to unite several of his interests from over the years, including

public sculpture and monuments. Most winningly, however, the rock resembled, on a large scale, the lumps of clay that accumulate in his studio during the art-making process.

Robb cast the actual rock on site at Bribie Island, so the re-creation is faithful in scale to the original, which stands as an epic marker for where Fairweather's hut previously stood. It raises the question of why the location of the home and studio of Australia's great Romantic artist is being remembered by the dense mass of a boulder. The rock itself looks like something out of a myth—it is positively Sisyphean in scale—larger than your average gallery visitor, but not so large that you couldn't imagine grappling with it, ceaselessly pushing it up that hill. Splintered and speared in the gallery, held in place but not fully reformed, Robb's rock is revealed as a shell, contrasting the heaviness and weight expected of a rock (of life itself for Sisyphus) with a sense of levity; "its fractured, lumpen form tamed and converted into a hollow contiguous surface".⁵ Elsewhere in the exhibition, there is further tension between light and heavy masses, and bright white castings contrast with dark tones.

Multiple clamps hold the rock together, dotted evenly along the gaps like a violent rhythm to keep the rock in place; they are the same clamps that Robb typically uses when assembling moulds. Traces of process are also apparent in the other major element of *Catacoustics III*, an assemblage of small sculptural works arranged in a tableau on a large, black circular plinth that raises them only a few millimetres from the ground. With several of them being only a lump on a base, they suggest sculpture being reduced to its simplest form—

after all, what is a sculpture but "a question of lumps?"⁶ The lumps on display here, united by a similar form, show things incidental to the making process; a computer mouse, a chewed eraser, a maquette of the larger rock, along with other recurring motifs from Robb's wider body of work: skull caps, suggestions of a sculptural bust, and white discs.

Those looking closely at the lumps making up the tableau will notice one that appears a little like an upside-down light bulb with a base either side, which is actually a Roto-cast of a trophy awarded to Robb for the Helen Lempriere sculpture prize. The shape of the trophy made it attractive to include—another example of lump on a base—but the trophy also alludes to a sense of achievement and accomplishment, of worth. The idea of a trophy lends a sense of the heroic—how often do artists receive trophies for what they do? However, placed anonymously in amongst the other lumps, it appears as a rather feeble token. After all, it is similar in size to Robb's maquette of the Fairweather rock that is placed nearby, and the sense of recognition bestowed by a humble trophy is radically undermined by the comparison to a whole memorial rock. Ironically the trophy itself is imbued with a sense of failure already, as Robb received it as a runner-up prize; it's a permanent reminder of not being a winner and of narrowly missing more significant recognition.

Surrounding some of these lumps are tubular heptagons. The inclusion of this shape reveals the artist's working methodology when following self-determined rules that dictate what enters into his practice and becomes part of his visual vernacular. When Robb began to consider the

memorial rock as the basis for an artwork, he looked through his own documentation images of the original and noted that the base of the rock was a seven-sided shape. Being an unusual shape to choose, it "looks wrong no matter how you look at it",⁷ as Robb has noted. This initiated a fascination for Robb, who revelled in the idea that there must be some inherent meaning in the choice of a heptagon over any other shape, and thus the heptagon made its way into several elements of the *Catacoustics* series. Returning to the rock to undertake the casting process, Robb was disappointed to realise that it wasn't on a heptagonal base at all, but an octagon, and he had made some miscalculation when looking at the images. Nevertheless, the heptagon had already established itself into the lexicon of Robb's practice; indeed, the artist has commented that this "case of mistaken identity"⁸ only strengthened his commitment to using the shape, since it points precisely to the slippages in process that Robb is so interested in.

Moving off its own heptagonal base, the rock seems to be defying its status as a lump to be positioned. The flight of the rock—perhaps it's escaping the subject-object relationship—gives a measure of agency to the objects, it's suggestive of the individual elements of the exhibition being continually in a state of transition and movement; their object to object relationships shifting with each iteration.

Amy-Clare McCarthy