



Via Ferrata (ACCA)

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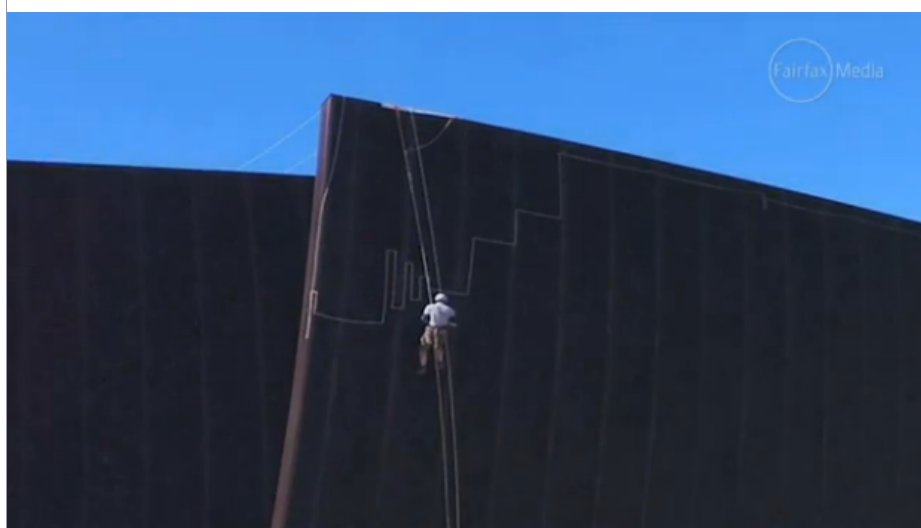
Artist with a higher calling shows ACCA the ropes

December 12, 2012

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Dylan Rainforth

Dan Shipsides has risked his life to pursue his art.

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Timelapse: ACCA installation

Watch the timelapse of Dan Shipsides' installation at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

"ON ONE of these research climbing trips myself and Neal made, we were struck by lightning." Not every art-maker needs to consider the risk of lightning strike when heading to the "studio", but Dan Shipsides does. The Belfast-based artist has made a passion for rock climbing part of his practice for nearly 20 years. Shipsides, who is visiting Melbourne as part of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art exhibition *Desire Lines*, is talking about a 2009 climb to the summit of Marmolada, the highest mountain in the Italian Dolomites. He made the climb, and a subsequent video included in the ACCA exhibition, with frequent collaborator Neal Beggs.

"We knew something was about to spark off because the ice axe and stuff were buzzing - when the static's building up your eyebrows stand on end and anything metal starts to buzz," Shipsides says, holding up his steel-frame glasses. Having only just reached the summit and unclipped from the metal cable of the via ferrata - a First World War-era climbing system he has become particularly interested in - Shipsides took shelter under a purpose-built lightning cone. "I was right under this cone when it sparked off and the whole sky went bright blue-yellow," he says.

Shipsides is in Melbourne to install a rope sculpture on ACCA's rust-red exterior. The work involves abseiling down the sides to attach small magnetic clips, then feeding through rope to form patterns. Called *Via Ferrata (ACCA)*, the work puns on the Italian system Shipsides translates as "the iron way" rather than the more prosaic "iron road". As he points out, climbing and artworks have much in common - a new climbing route will be named and dated and - much like exhibition catalogues - guide books feature images or diagrams of the routes, with each receiving a description and a grade. "Even the little topographical descriptions, sometimes they're very poetic.



Dan Shippies installs his work at ACCA. Photo: Michael Clayton-Jones

"I don't think every route is an artwork ... Oh, probably I do," he says a second later. "But there are good ones and bad ones. Because there is an aesthetic element to it when you're looking at a line ... Throughout the history of climbing there have been breakthrough periods where new styles have developed, maybe down to one or two climbers developing different techniques or levels of boldness," he says in a way that would have an art aficionado thinking of Braque and Picasso. "In terms of style, you do climb in good style. Also, what you tend to find is the classic routes - the ones that get repeated more often and that generate more cultural currency - they're the ones that look great. There's a beautiful line, or a series of amazing moves to it."

Lines, literal and metaphorical, feature strongly in ACCA's new group exhibition, which is titled for the tracks left when planned routes give way to improvised ones made by intuition. Name-checking Paul Klee's famous observation that drawing is taking a line for a walk, Shippies says he is "taking the line for a climb".

The "artistic licence" of his ACCA installation is a recent development for Shippies, much of whose work focuses on historical, geographical or political elements; for example, the role the Dolomites played as an important "third front" in the Great War. For Shippies, climbing is a cultural, or even philosophical, endeavour, rather than a merely physical one. Discussing Matthew Barney - the *Cremaster* creator has integrated climbing in his *Drawing Restraint* series - Shippies draws a distinction between his work and Barney's emphasis on climbing as a sport. "I don't think he sees climbing as an art or a culture whereas I don't see it as a sport. For me it's not a sport: it's a philosophical pursuit or an art."

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