

“WHITELEY”
The Edit
by Lawrie Silvestrin ASE

When director James Bogle and I sat down to start editing *Whiteley*, not a frame of new footage had been shot for the film. No new interviews, no artwork, no contemporary images of the places Brett had lived and worked or the scenes he'd painted, nix, niente, nada. Fortunately James and co-writer Victor Gentile had spent the previous year trawling every scrap of archival material concerning the Whiteley story. They'd constructed a 65 pages script from newspaper articles and reviews, snippets of old interviews, news bulletins and current affairs stories, exhibition catalogues and most importantly from Brett's personal letters and notebooks that he filled with eclectic musings, jottings, proclamations and confessions.

So we started constructing the radio play.

We brought in actors, friends and relatives; recorded all the written quotes and started laying them up in Avid and about two weeks into what was supposed to be a twelve-week edit, we had a two and a half hour timeline with lots of quotes and caption cards but not much else.



“Self Portrait In The Studio”, 1976 Image from “Whiteley”, Northern Pictures/Transmission Films

James and I had worked together on numerous films over the years. He's a drama director and writer with a keen sense of story and a wild imagination not dissimilar to Brett's (I would soon learn). James had a vision for the film as a wild pastiche, an exuberant celebration of an immensely creative and self-aware (some would say self-absorbed) artist and as much as possible he wanted to tell this story in Brett's own words.

We would start at the beginning and follow his artistic and personal trajectory as it happened, trying to distill a lifetime into 95 minutes. It was a little daunting.

Shortly before starting the edit I'd gone to see a recently released doco about art and artists hoping to be inspired and to perhaps steal some good ideas. Brett himself was a self-confessed artistic thief. "Good artists borrow, great artists steal", he said paraphrasing T.S. Eliot and Picasso. Unfortunately, the film was rather conventional and I took little away with me. I said to James afterwards that I wasn't sure what sort of film we'd end up with but whatever we did, it couldn't be conventional! That would be the greatest disservice to Brett and his art.

Brett's artwork was naturally one of the key elements of the visual storytelling. Originally, James had wanted to use VFX to turn Brett's paintings into dynamic animated sequences. We were fortunate that one of the main stakeholders in the film was Wendy Whiteley. She is the copyright owner of almost all of Brett's work and without her blessing we didn't have a film. Over the years, she's also been the most passionate, diligent and rigorous advocate of Brett's artistic legacy. When she got wind of what we were thinking of doing with the paintings, her response was swift and uncompromising; the artwork was sacrosanct!

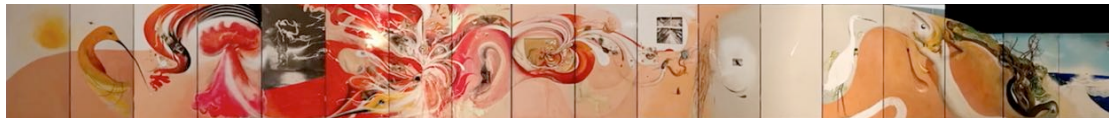
We could show details of his paintings but anything that compromised the integrity of the original work was not permitted.

After our initial disappointment, we soon realized Wendy was right. Brett's art, its complexity, the striking colours, the dynamism of his "sensual curve" needed nothing more from us than to show it simply in all its glory. The prospect of having it projected on a 20 metre wide cinema screen meant we had to source image files of the artworks at the best resolution we could find. Our researcher and associate producer Peta Ayers searched around the world for images from art galleries, auction houses, book publishers and private collectors. Fortunately, most of the photos she found had been taken with associated colour charts so we could faithfully reproduce the artworks during the grading.



"Balcony 2" 1975 Image from "Whiteley", Northern Pictures/Transmission Films

One painting that features prominently in the film is *"American Dream"*. This is an eighteen-panel 22 metre long picture that Brett painted in New York in the late 1960s. James had envisioned a shot showing the painting in its entirety in wide shot before zooming into a tiny detail and subsequently passing through the painting to a lightning storm on the other side. In order to achieve this we needed an ultra high-resolution image of the painting. Fortunately, we had access to the original painting as it's located at the Art Gallery of WA and was on exhibition at the time. Our VFX artist Mike Dunn set up a motion-controlled stills camera at the gallery and shot 990 36Megapixel images of details of the painting. He was then able to stitch these together into an image equivalent to 324,000 x 684,000 pixels. It's one of the most dynamic shots in the film.



"American Dream", 1968/69 Image from *"Whiteley"*, Northern Pictures/Transmission Films

As all of the archival footage we would have access to was shot 4:3 at 25fps, we decided to cut in 2K 25p and only resize the original footage to fit the vertical. Blowing up the archival video footage to fill a cinema screen was already going to be a big ask. Blowing it up even further to fill the horizontal width would have degraded it far too much. The fact that the 4:3 format would be "pillar boxed" didn't seem to matter since there were going to be so many "frames" throughout the film. And we would worry about transcoding to 24fps at the DCP and sound mix stage.

About ten weeks into the edit we were ready to shoot some "stylized" drama sequences for scenes that couldn't be visualized in other ways and to provide a different texture to aspects of the storytelling. We had actors playing Brett, Wendy and Arkie but we didn't want to show their faces too sharply. Director of Photography Jim Frater suggested a technique known as "lens whacking" which we took to calling more appropriately "free lensing". This involves detaching the lens from the camera and holding it by hand in front of the housing. This allows light to leak onto the sensor and gives a somewhat surreal, blurry and evocative image. The danger in this of course is getting dirt and dust on the sensor so it's not to be used lightly or in windy dusty environments.



"Free-Lensing Kiss" Image from *"Whiteley"*, Northern Pictures/Transmission Films

We also used animation in the film. Like the drama, it was to depict scenes for which we didn't have any other footage but more importantly we used it to create another visual texture for the film. These sequences were created by VFX artist Mike Dunn and animator Kristen King. Kristen set up her workstation in my editing room and we worked side by side for many weeks discussing ideas, trawling archival photos for the raw materials and going back and forth adjusting both the timing of the edit and the animations to suit. One of the most striking animated sequences is the depiction of Brett's epiphany in the church when he discovers the work of Vincent Van Gogh. Kristen spent many painstaking hours hand painting each frame of a series of shots in Van Gogh's distinctive style to recreate young Brett's moment of illumination.



"Brett gets Vincent" Image from *"Whiteley"*, Northern Pictures/Transmission Films

As the edit progressed through the various stages of Brett's life it was obvious that the soundscape of the film needed to evolve and change over the fifty-year span from the early 1940s to the early 1990s. As well, it needed to help define Brett's shifts in artistic style over that period. As such, the music needed to change in style throughout the film while having an overall connectedness. Fortunately we had one of the most versatile composers in the country on board. Ash Gibson Greig started working on the score at Rough Cut stage. As he developed the music for each scene this had a bearing on the edit. Ash scored to the cut but often I was able to tweak the rhythm and pace of the edit to suit what he was creating.

One of the first pieces of music that ended up in the edit was inspired by Brett's at times "machine-gun" style of speaking. We listened to an interview of Brett's recorded in 1970 by the wonderful Hazel de Berg. Hazel was a remarkable oral historian who recorded interviews with some 70 poets, novelists and playwrights and about 250 painters and sculptors. You can listen to her interview with Brett here: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-220806580/listen>

It's hard to keep up with, speedy and rambling but I was smitten. It felt like I was listening to a piece of beat poetry. It was so engaging and so revealing we ending up using three sections of it including for the opening and the closing of the film. As we listened to Brett speaking at a million miles an hour, we felt that the musical accompaniment needed to be jazz drumming. It matched his rhythm and spoke to a mind that sparked with creativity. There are several scenes throughout the film where we used this to evoke Brett's wild energy and imagination and his speedy personality. You get the sense that he did operate on a higher plane to mere mortals.

Ultimately, the edit was a very organic process. We started at the beginning and pretty much constructed the story chronologically, the film growing and twisting and changing and taking shape as we explored Brett's journey while he himself explored his art and creative influences. The script was a great starting point but, as is always the case with making films, the edit was the final stage of the writing process and a lot changed along the way.

Suffice to say, the edit took longer than the twelve weeks originally scheduled as we trawled archival sources for the narrative and visual elements we needed and experimented with ways of combining often disparate pieces into something cohesive. Of all the films I've worked on over the years, I think I can honestly say *Whiteley* was made in the cutting room. Eventually, it took twenty weeks working late nights and weekends in order to meet a June 30 deadline.

I have to admit there were many times during the edit that I was unsure of what we were doing. There was a lot of experimentation and many moments of doubt. But for me, one of the most illuminating moments of the edit came when we uncovered some archival film out-takes showing Brett painting one of his pictures. In it, he uses a brush and a rag to "find" the picture he's after; applying paint, wiping it off, applying again and constantly wiping and changing and experimenting with his lines and curves and brushstrokes. As I watched him do this, I realized that this was exactly what we were doing in the edit and that this was integral to the creative process. I suspect that many times during the edit, we were channeling Brett and maybe sometimes, like Brett, getting a little deranged in the process.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OcnHXuHfGk
<http://www.transmissionfilms.com.au/films/whiteley>
<https://twitter.com/ArtIsARealJob?src=hash>