



John BARBOUR

born The Netherlands 1954
arrived Australia 1957

Inherent Vice, 2005–06

ink, acrylic and silk thread, cotton, on cotton voile
265.0 x 245.0 cm
Museum of Contemporary Art
Purchased 2006
2006.43
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Inherent vice is apparently a term used by museum conservation experts to describe the susceptibility of an artwork to damage and disintegration from within—i.e. as the response of materials to the effects of light, atmospheric conditions and so on. A sculpture made of steel, bronze or stone presumably has a low index of inherent vice. An oil painting might have a medium index. Artworks made of fabric or paper, in being particularly fragile, have a high index. A human being, as a work of art, presumably also has a high index of inherent vice.

I learned of the term from listening to a radio interview on the ABC's *Deep End* program in 2005. The curator being interviewed referred during the discussion to one of Damien Hirst's glass vitrines containing animal parts, which had apparently been recently sold for a great deal of money despite leaking. The curator said something to the effect that the leak was an 'inherent vice' consistent with the artist's longstanding interest in physical decay and mortality.

My work is a banner which publicly declares itself to be 'infected'. It is extremely fragile. The voile fabric is delicate, the inks

used are not lightfast, and the needlework is loose and unstable. These aspects of its construction reflect a similarly longstanding interest on my part in 'unmaking', both as an acknowledgement of mortality and as part of a muted politics of resistance.

Inherent Vice is also a 'meditation' in that it brings to mind people I've known and loved. In a far from obvious way, it is an autobiographical map or web of personal relationships.

The circular mandala formed by the letters spelling out the words owes allegiance to a spiralling neon work by American artist Bruce Nauman. The letters in Nauman's work spell out the words, *The True Artist Is An Amazing Luminous Fountain*. Nauman's statement is ambiguous. To my mind, it makes a circle in entwining a statement with a question—a tautological circle. Q. How do we know the true artist? A. Because the true artist is an amazing, luminous fountain.

John Barbour

Written on the occasion of the purchase of *Inherent Vice* by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, December 2006.