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Bee Project

a publication about bees

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Publications for Pleasure



Honey Fingers

*Beekeeping as a contemplative
and meaningful creative practice*

Words by **Nic Dowse**
founder of **Honey Fingers**

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There is a beautiful synergy – a mutualism – that exists between these animal architects (the European honey bee, *Apis mellifera*); and human architects – who are also beekeepers. It is a relationship that contributes to the well-being of both species. It is a story about how the interconnections between design, farming and science that, if done in a considered and gentle manner, are so much greater than the sum of the parts used to build a typical beehive.

Honeybees are animal architects. They create beautiful and complex honeycombed structures from the repeated use and ordered assemblage of a simple of building module: the hexagonal prism. This basic building block is made from bees' wax glands; is highly flexible; can be adapted at any time by the bees; and is repeated again and again and again in unique and bewitching ways: in straight rows, in complex geometries, from the top down, or bottom up, from side to side. It is an all-purpose building unit: it provides the infrastructure for the honey bee superorganism to live on and in; it can be arranged to provide shelter from the elements; facilitates thermal mass in winter; regulates ventilation and cooling in summer; it acts as a nursery and cocoon system for the brood; and it is, of course, the storage system for the fuel of the colony – honey and pollen.

A. mellifera are, for the most part, cavity nesters. In most of the world, particularly in temperate zones, bees require a cavity, or hollow, in which to build their architecture. There are always a few exceptions but, given a choice, *A. mellifera* prefer to build their colonies in a shelter rather than in the open. And it is here that we see the beauty; the synergy with human architects and designers:

Bees need to build their architecture within another architecture. And we humans can provide that architecture, that shelter, for them.

This may sound obvious, but we ask that you consider it for a moment. As beekeepers we can either treat the beehive as some type of static solution to beekeeping: an off-the-shelf, kit-of-parts; a production facility for housing bees and producing honey that we just take for granted as the only way of doing things. But we think it can be more – much, much more.

As architects, or designers, we can partner with honeybees to make this ‘architecture within architecture’ a meaningful practice. We can take the time to think about what bees are looking for in their homes, to experiment with materials and concepts. And we can

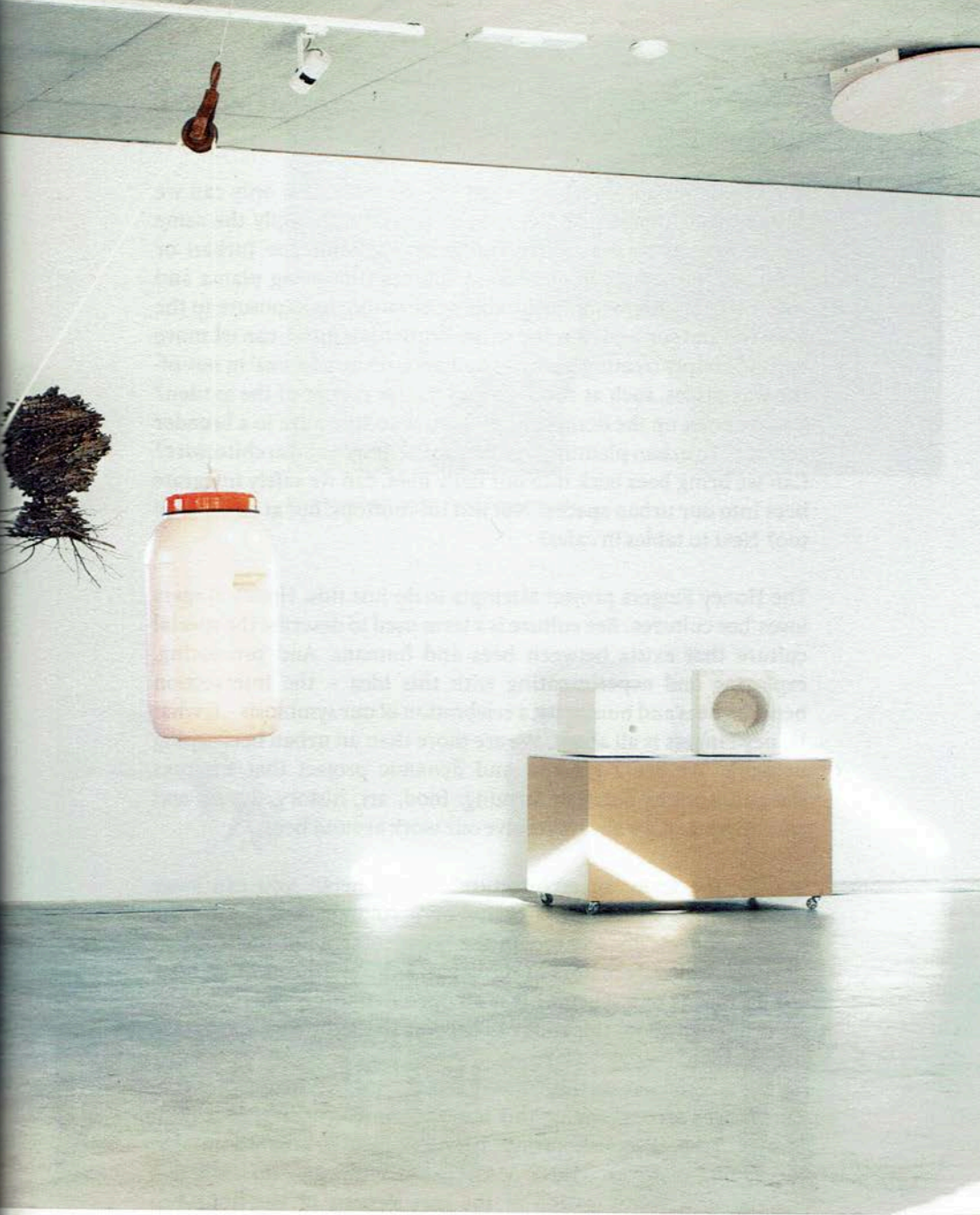
All images belong to the Swarm Trap exhibition that took place in Hotel Hotel in Canberra, Australia, in June 2016. Photography (unless otherwise stated) by Charlie White / Molongolo Group.



From left to right: Beci Orpin, Madeleine Mills, Ben Blakebrough, PAM Studio x Honey Fingers, Soft Baroque



From left to right: Honey Fingers, Loose Leaf, Field Experiments, Many Many



treat the whole design process as a kind of shared culture with bees, a considered tribute to them.

And the design of a beehive is just the first step. Not only can we design hives for them to live in, but we can also apply the same considerations to the apiary site itself: its landscape (urban or rural); its proximity to good food sources (flowering plants and trees); a cool water supply; suitable orientation; its exposure to the wind and sun and rain and so on. With this in mind, can we move beyond simply treating beehives and apiaries as 'add-ons' in out-of-the-way-places, such as rooftops and the far corner of the garden? Can we open up the design of bee-centric architecture to a broader context? To urban planning? To landscape design and architecture? Can we bring bees back into our daily lives, can we safely integrate bees into our urban spaces? Not just on rooftops, but at street level too? Next to tables in cafes?

The Honey Fingers project attempts to do just this. Honey Fingers loves 'bee cultures'. Bee culture is a term used to describe the special culture that exists between bees and humans. And promoting, exploring and experimenting with this idea – the intersection between bees and humanity; a celebration of our symbiosis – is what Honey Fingers is all about. We are more than an urban beekeeping network. We are a creative and dynamic project that explores the connections between farming, food, art, history, design and education; and we always revolve our work around bees.

We use the term 'an architecture' loosely here: you can swap it out with 'a shelter' or 'a cavity' or 'a volume'. And we use the term 'architects' loosely too, in the broadest sense of the word: as devisers, makers, creators or designers – the architects of an idea, the architects of a scheme. It is an open definition. Anybody who cares enough about this stuff can become the architect of an apiary, of a beehive.

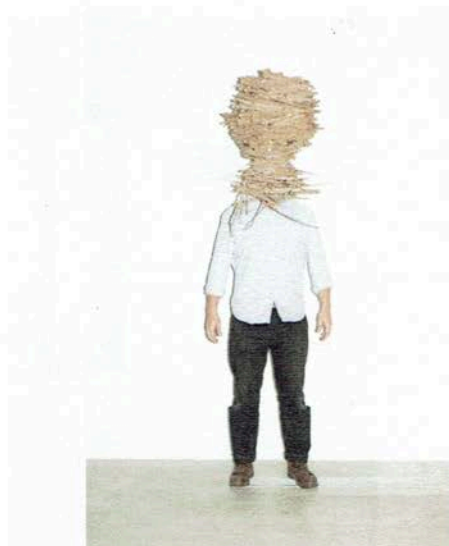
The images accompanying this text are from a three-year project, Swarm Trap, a collaboration between creative curatorial and publishing platform MANY MANY and Honey Fingers. In many ways it is an investigation of the very genesis of the honeybee colony – swarming. Eleven graphic and fashion designers, artists,



Paul Marcus Fuog of Field Experiments



Honey Fingers selection of raw, single-source urban honeys



Nic Dowse, Honey Fingers founder, with Loose Leaf's 'Pat'



Field Experiments



Honey Fingers (top)
Field Experiments (below)



Ben Blakebrough

florists, plant nursery owners, creative producers, and architects were briefed on the science behind spring and summer swarming – the reproductive process of the honey bee superorganism. The science was based upon the lifelong research of esteemed biologist Professor Thomas D. Seeley. The artists were given a brief based upon his findings as to what bees are looking for in a new home when they swarm and produced these ‘swarm traps’. As I type this paper plans are being made for these temporary bee hives to be placed out into the urban and rural wilds for the coming swarming season in spring. This process will be documented and a second exhibition held at the end of the honey season, in Australia’s autumn of 2017.

But Swarm Trap is just a first step. We are also investigating ways in which we can use our various design and research skills to reintegrate bees and beekeeping into our daily lives. Historically, hives were built into the fabric of village life – bee boles in garden walls, under eaves, in bee huts. We are excited because beehives are appearing in our urban villages, our cities, again. And we want to continue our partnership, our mutually beneficial relationship with *A. mellifera*, in new, educative and meaningful ways.

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