

## Venice Biennale 2005 essay series

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### A Weird Melancholy

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Is there another country so fixated on defining itself artistically as Australia? Maybe. But if so I am not aware of it. I never read or hear anyone attempting to describe British art for instance. It just is. It's a given that the Brits continue to develop an art practice out of the fundamentals of portraiture, pastorage and social politic. New British art is part of a legacy that stretches back to still life, Constable's clouds, the rural dispossessed, and the royal visage: albeit updated. It is obvious that Tacita Dean's wonderful, slow moving nocturnes find their place amongst the rumbling broodish skies of Turner et al. And just as clear that Gillian Wearing's or Richard Billingham's stark and unflinchingly real observations of modern life, lived at the edge of despair and hope, are part of a legacy of social realist genre works. British art continues to define the drift from pre-modern pastorage to modern urban alienation -- not to mention the great class-divide.

Scandinavian work, and that of the Baltic countries, continues a fascination with the sometimes peculiar and dark mythologies of lore. Artists like Eija Liisa Ahtila for instance make video works that combine odd surrealist disjunctions of reality with the high key colour of the north blood sky or the bleached out endless horizon of the top of the world.

It seems quite obvious that Ed Ruscha would make noir photographs of gasoline stations along Route 66 and bright kodachrome pictures of scintillating Hollywood pools, and eventually wonderful large spray paintings of end credits and vast vistas in recognition of the new, and modern filmic world that LA represents. He works within and along the tradition of American frontier works that have preceded that 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Despite being new new new, America had little difficulty embracing its own home grown authentic visual culture as it emerged from the technologies of photography, film and commercial design.

Unlike America, which forged its way across the plains - decentralizing the coastal monopolies as it progressed, growing industry and agriculture and townships as it required; creating music from the sacred songs of the disenfranchised workers; capturing its hardships in the relentless lens of the traveling documentary and

pictorial chroniclers; blending its high and low cultures to develop a newly authentic vision of itself - Australia seemed bewildered by its own cultural and artistic identity.

Not a nation wrested from the British, but a happy-enough colony of far-flung discards, colonized Australia formed a sense of itself as being an annex of someone else's empire and culture. Even with its booster higgledy-piggledy of Sydney shanty shelters, and its thin facsimile of neo classical facades in Melbourne, Australia saw itself as a modern replica of the old world.

It therefore formed itself in the mind-set of the suspectly inauthentic. Its colonial pictures were sweet Swiss domesticated country vistas, or Germanic *sturm und drang* mountain scapes. After modernism arrived, via émigré architects like Frederick Romberg, and famously in painter Grace Cossington Smith's suitcase as a poster reproduction, brushes were drawn between Cézanne-esque landscape abstractions and bolder moments of Bauhaus colour experiments. WWII sorted this out, with anything Germanic being viewed as unpatriotic, while vapid literal abstraction was given an outing without great conviction.

Culture in the mid last century in Australia was writ small. Paintings were scaled domestically, buildings remained low: we created the 'tall poppy syndrome' so that we would not get too big for our boots.

Then, all of a sudden, the inauthentic was in. Post modernity, forcing itself into plausible visibility out of the vast reservoir of ideas contained in continental theories such as semiotics, psychoanalysis, simulacrum, structuralism, de-construction, and so forth, gave Australian visual culture a hook to hang itself on. 'Post Modernism 'R' Us', it seemed to blink in bright Pop neons. (Culture became parenthetical). Perfect for a sideways glanced, aside culture such as our own.

That great cultural scavenger, Paul Taylor, usefully coined the phrase 'the second degree' in 1980 for an emerging Australian visual arts practice that combined canny moments of post-Pop with a developing interest in quotation and simulation. Our inauthentic culture became an active Lacanian mirror, and sometimes a disconcerting double vision.

Post modernism seemed like a clean slate, a new world order where all images and culture were for sale in the ready-made bin. Australian artists embarked on a kind of

DIY renovation of its existing imaging: popping feminist commentary into national art icons, combining icons of European modernism and American pop culture with the shaky heroic moments of Australian modernism. We did Po-Mo versions of Warhol, Malevich, De Ciriaco, generic neo-classicism, et al. We popped everything in. Paul Taylor made a show called *Popism*, meaning Warhol, but also recognizing this kind of collage culture that was happening.

Fortunately, Australia, like much of the accelerated world, is blessed with a kind of cultural version of attention deficit syndrome, so our romance with (late) Post Modernism was short lived in some ways. Invention and intuition became more valued, and assured in our emerging art practice.

Even while there is still a certain residual ironic, or humorist post modernity in recent Australian work, and this can be accounted for in our national tendency towards 'taking the piss', I think it is right to suggest Australian visual art has become more at ease with some of its melancholic and thoughtful aspects, while it retains its brash colonial cheekiness.

In some ways this means artists have of late been less inclined to shy away from the regional attributes that distinguish our vision from that of other places. Instead we now find a kind of uncanny cultural intermix, or displacement in certain Australian projects, which tips the weight of what is received culture and what is manifestly inherent.

A good example of this confident double-take would be the works of Callum Morton, who explores the 'transaesthetic' and its effect: the omnipresent visibility of trade marks, PR men, social dialogue and the virtues of communication, creating another kind of anthropological architecture which blends the international with the vernacular and generic.

Mortons' newest works - the glitzy, impossibly synthetic, digital print series *Interbau Wow Wow* and *Local +/- General* - re-picture architecture's groundbreaking moments through a kind of Venturian Learning-from-Las-Vegas treatment. For instance, Gerrit Thomas Rietveld's *Rietveld-Schröder House*, a stunning moment of Dutch cubic modernism, has been made over by Morton into a franchise of the 'Toys 'R' Us' emporia. Rietveld's strict delineations of primary colours are renovated into the plasticine hues of the USA children's toy brand. Rietveld's original plan, which

enabled flexible living spaces and areas in which children's play areas and adult zones were blended or adapted, has become an outlet for another kind of commercial play centre.

Ray and Charles Eames' *Case House*, a pioneering American attempt at designing simple cubic open plan living spaces that used a kind of truth to materials ethos, has been converted to become an outlet for the ubiquitous DIY centre, 'The Home Depot'. The Eames' thesis of creating a form of DIY architecture has been taken to its logical conclusion in this Morton revamp. Mies van der Rohe's *Farnsworth House* has been awarded new status as a 24 hour convenience store: part of the '7Eleven' chain. Alvar Aalto's Berlin apartments have been given the Disney cobble treatment and converted into a Best Western 'Lancelot' hotel. The influence of Aldo Rossi can be seen in a 'Holiday Inn'; Marcel Breuer's failed Venezuelan resort combined with Le Corbusier's *Unite d' Habitation* and Melbourne's own *Southern Cross Hotel* has been flamenco-fied and turned into Morton's 'Tropicana'.

In each instance Morton draws our attention to the adaptability of these classic modernist styles, while he also cleverly alludes to certain concept similarities between the old and the new usage he has assigned. Rietveld made a house for kids to play in; the Eames sought to empower people to build their own kit homes at affordable prices; and, because of van der Rohe's insistence on transparency, you might say the *Farnsworth House* was always 'open'.

The title of these two series *Interbau Wow Wow*, and *Local +/-or General* sound like music titles from the slick disco years of synthetic mixes and scratch, as exemplified by Malcolm McLaren and groups like Bow Wow Wow. Morton acknowledges the Po-Mo moments of creative interfusion and quotation that provided the popular beat to the high falutin' theories.

A sense of place, or perhaps no-place, seems pervasive in the works of some Australian artists. Kathy Temin's works, like Morton's, explore issues of architecture, domesticity and locality versus internationalism through a continual investigation of modernism. As an Australian artist, Temin is positioned outside the traditional home of the art she references. The authoritative museums and collections that house her artistic ancestors -- pristine crypts that memorialize the family tree of art -- rarely, if at all, include the Australian branch. To be an Australian artist is to be an apple fallen further from the tree than most.

This should probably not matter now that art has become a global exchange and there is a certain kind of generic, international, contemporary art idiom in operation a lot of the time. And yet perversely it seems that even while Temin moves closer to being collected into this generic mix, she is compelled to introduce a certain regionalist twist in her references. This is the operation of the person who remains dislocated from the home: the strategy of the exiled.

Into this context of not-at-home works Temin has recently introduced *Auditions for a Pair of Koalas (Blue)* 2002. Made as a studio project at PSI New York, the work has all the elements of unrequited-ness and exile that one might expect from Temin. The koala, that lovable fauna emblem of Australia, is here converted into a pantomime creature, a captive in cultural exchange and dissolute diaspora.

As she commonly does, Temin has attempted to make a kind of place-to-be for her koala participants: a home away from home. A faked up habitat with gum-tree-blue/grey coloured, rough-painted walls, a few desultory gums leaves strewn about. It resembles the forlorn attempts of Zoos to conjure up a sense of place for the fauna inmates, despite the clearly inhospitable and alien circumstances of forced captivity.

'A Pair of Koalas' the audition calls for - and yet we know that koalas are notoriously loner by instinct. Coming together but briefly for a bit of nasty copulation (often a matter of a few uncomfortable seconds during which the male grips the female with his sharp claws), and then, in the case of the male, ambling off in a huff to sit up a tree, growl and sometimes spit at passer-bys. The female is invariably quite antagonistic and aggressive towards the male after breeding: any wonder after being fastened against the tree. Breeding koalas in captivity is fraught with failure and zoologists rejoice at small successes.

Despite good press to the contrary, koalas are neither lovable, cuddly, nor all that tolerant of the hordes of well meaning, camera toting devotees who list the idea of holding a koala and having their portrait taken with one as their most desired Australian tourism activity. It's all hype and branding really. The koala, then, symbolizes all the attributes of contradiction so sought by Temin. A misunderstood symbol of place, a creature whose own zoological status continues to confuse - not a bear, but its own unique thing - a lethargic addict, a nocturnal party animal, but by day a sloth: diseased, defiled, a menace to be culled. A creature displaced by western cultivation of the land. A native no longer at home.

Strange creatures have always been a part of the Australian identity. People from elsewhere continue to be amazed by our unique fauna. They assign a kind of fantasy and magical status to Australia because of this. Post-colonialism made us wary of this assignation of exotica, but more recently a few artists have reclaimed the fantastical to deliberately produce images and things that utilize the potency of the unusual.

This is, along with an interest in bio-ethics, community and ecology, perhaps one of the reasons for Patricia Piccinini's continuing quest to invent new species. *SO2* (Synthetic Organism 2); *Still Life with Stem Cells*, *The Young Family* and the creatures in her Venice project, *Leather Landscape*, are all exotics that appear to evolve from the already strange zoo of animals that have represented Australia to the world. But Piccinini pictures not the creatures of the 'new world', but the newest world, which identifies itself as the next frontier beyond the bio-technological horizon.

Technology can be both futuristic, as encountered and rephrased in Ricky Swallow's early home made dioramas of sci-fi turntable tableaux, or counter progressive to encounter locality and community, landscape and ecology.

Moving image based work, and in particular the technique of animation, has introduced a new sense of subjectivity in recent contemporary practice. In Australia, James Lynch's fragile and poetic animations and installations combine a knowing sense of their legacy within the practice of artists like Ilya Kabakov, William Kentridge, Jean Jacques Rullier and Joao Penalva, and film makers such as Hayao Miyazaki, Kawasa, Akira Kurosawa and Tom Tykwer. But it is his regional sense of place that produces that certain recognition and slippage that new Australian works seem to have perfected. His recent project, *More other people's dreams* 2005, for instance, pays homage to locality through a set of portraits of friends who are inserted into the non specific narratives of dreams.

Meanwhile Lynch himself becomes the main protagonist in a quasi-rustic, rural vignette which references the 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian pastorales of artists such as Walter Withers, David Davies and, perhaps somewhat whimsically, Tom Roberts' famous icon of the shed, *Shearing the Rams*. Without recourse to post-modern quotation Lynch nevertheless manages to allude to local tradition while positioning his practice as part of a wider poetic. His use of the makeshift, make-do temporary

viewing platform, constructed from rough wood and second hand chairs, as a subtle reference to the impermanence of both his own subject matter -- dreams -- and the subjective nature of culture itself.

This particular, yet shifting sense of place is also apparent in the work of Susan Norrie, whose contemporary projects show an awareness of the way Australia has endlessly imagined itself through landscape. In her epic work *Undertow*, Norrie registers that certain weird melancholy that exists within the history of Australian art - - the odd nocturnal fantasies of Sidney Long, the dramatic sceneographies of Eugene von Guerard, and the bleakness of Sidney Nolan's late monochromatic, rusty wastelands. Norrie brings this antipodean vision together with its European antecedents to effect a placeless work that resides most appropriately in our shared space of time.

She continues to work within the historical reference of painting. In *Undertow* the romantic natural ruin paintings of German artist Casper David Friedrich, with their fir-tree cathedrals and relic architecture are hinted at. In Norrie's version a bleaker apocalypse is evoked: the trees glow with chemical fire embers. The tempestuous, yet hopeful atmospheres of Blechen, Koch, and Englishman Turner, haunt us, but in Norrie's vision, the radiant, spiritual luminosity of deliverance is subsumed into a darkness that resonates disaster. *Undertow* delivers us back to the imaging of natural disasters -- the sweeping, out of control bushfires, bloating floods and apocalyptic dust storms -- which are so much a part of the awesome, untameable land that is Australia.

If pushed to suggest an artistic aesthetic to describe Australian art now, one might talk about a certain new Australian noir, a kind of *ennui* that has entered into our picture. It can be felt and seen in recent films like *Lantana* and *Somersault* and is a part of the aesthetic of Norrie and Lynch, Morton, Piccinini and Temin. It can be sensed in Swallow's Venice project *Killing Time*. It is central to the feel of works by artists like David Rosetzky which are full of the languor of the post disco high inherent in post modernity, and David Noonan who pursues a form of Kubrickian surrealism in his films and spooky owl images. It was seen in Venice in the dramatic twilight photo works of Bill Henson.

Much, but not all Australian contemporary art (for this would leave out the huge and steady trajectory of geometric abstraction in works by artists like Daniel von Sturmer)

could be said to be pursuing a weird melancholy at the moment, whether it resides in the awesome landscape, or curious creatures, the evacuated buildings of modernity, the strange dislocations of the post disco generation, or the laborious whittling of time casting its long shadow.

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