

Nadine Christensen & Kate Rohde

Nadine Christensen
A Specially Built Ruin

Kate Rohde
The Big Chill

Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Gorman House
Canberra, Australian Capital Territory
1 October – 13 November 2004
by Charlotte Hallows

Two recent exhibitions by Kate Rohde and Nadine Christensen at Canberra Contemporary Art Space are particularly engaging to viewers. Both Rohde and Christensen are artists who explore the meaning of cultural detritus and waste, and the relation between nature and artifice. These themes resonate in each artist's approach to the space of the gallery and their use of media and materials. Both artists raise questions about the work of art and its relation to experience.

Kate Rohde's installation, *The Big Chill*, is a theatrical mise en scène of faux creatures. The display is a reconstruction of the prehistoric past when giant animals walked the earth. Rohde has created an epic scene in which a large mammoth-like animal is attacked by ferocious carnivores. This drama takes place with the help of a painted mountain backdrop and snow, which has an imperfect and improvised appearance. Rohde uses trashy faux furs and flimsy materials to construct this environment. *The Big Chill* is a presentation that undermines illusions of realism and naturalism, as the artist implicates the objective, disinterested gaze of art and science in processes of power, domination and control. This is also a scene reminiscent of childhood sensations associated with visits to historic science museums and zoos. The innocent witness is open to the experience of wonder and horror inherent in a reconstructed drama of survival. Moreover, the installation recalls the lowbrow thrills and entertainment of spectacles of science and knowledge that characterise sideshow attractions and amusement parks.

Rohde's work explores the reconstruction of the animal's body and appearance in the practice of taxidermy. The creature becomes life-like but is lifeless. It imitates life but is deathly, still and frozen. Taxidermy is not valued as an art. It is a 'low brow' and seedy craft that produces imitations and copies. The lifeless taxidermed animal is an object associated with hunting and the amassing of collections, in which the beautiful and exotic becomes a trophy. In museum collections the artefact is a signifier of nature and diversity; it becomes an item of scientific classification and nature becomes an artificial and unnatural simulacrum.

Below: Kate Rohde
The Big Chill, 2004
Fake fur, paper, MDF, oil paint and craft components
Dimensions variable
Image courtesy the artist, Kaliman gallery, Sydney
Photo supplied by CCAS



In *A Specially Built Ruin*, Nadine Christensen explores the loss of depth and feeling that accompanies hyperreality. Experience is mediated by the screen effect of technological equipment such as digital cameras, TV and DVD technology, mobile phones, computer games and the internet. These technologies record the world and manipulate appearances. The data of experiences produced by these techniques actually erodes experience and artifice creates immediacy as an effect of reproduction in mass culture. In hyperreality, visual technology – far from encouraging belief in the reality – promotes the discovery of sublimity that underlies it.

Christensen explores these ideas in a new series of paintings that trace the changing possibilities and conditions of perception through technological apparatuses. She refigures the spatial reduction of surface and depth to a uniform plane. There is an undercurrent of the sublime and of melancholy in the artist's concern with ways of dwelling and structures of everyday life: of being at home and of being homeless. Plus there's the tension between immobility and mobile transience that



*Left: Nadine Christensen
A Specially Built Ruin, 2004
Dimensions variable
Image courtesy the artist, Uplands gallery,
Melbourne and Kaliman gallery, Sydney
Photo supplied by CCAS*

characterizes contemporary travels assisted by new visual technologies.

American art critic Clement Greenberg, in his writings on modernism, argues that the reduction of painting to a surface preserved the autonomy of art. Greenberg argues in defence of high art against the superficiality of mass culture and the commodity. In Christensen's work, painting is a means to explore the demise of late modernism and formalist aesthetics. She presents a cool, lifeless and controlled aesthetic that departs from the glamour and myth of David Hockney's paintings of Los Angeles. In Christensen's work the architecture associated with the International Style and its ethos of total living is brought down in ruined artefacts of the everyday. There is a tension between a weary worldliness and backward, immobile provincialism. Nature is signified by ground patterns: fields of wood grain, stepping stones, grass. This artificial and unnatural construction of nature suggests a desert of the real. Christensen's theatrical paintings implied the subject's imaginary relationship to the real – a surface appearance or screen, a scene framed by the gaze.

Christensen includes everyday objects in her installation, adding to the work's sense of reductive and redundant lifestyles and of constructed artificiality. A constricted pot-plant hangs from the gallery ceiling, a decorative door

is situated on a wall, and striped awning also protrudes from the wall. Three deck chairs contribute to the sense of flimsy elegance. These items express the function and excess of the outmoded that accompanies domesticity and dwelling. Their theatrical presence contaminates the pretensions of formal purity.

Rohde and Christensen encourage me to consider the meaning of cultural detritus and waste and the relation between the nature and the constructed world. Rohde's approach to installation and materials resonates with Anne Friedberg's ideas of 'machines of mobility' and 'machines of visibility'; whereby the experience of the modern city is influenced by the mobile gaze and virtual mobility of arcades, department stores, zoos and museums that prefigured the cinematic apparatus.¹ Christensen's approach to the virtual is marked by speed and entropy reminiscent of Paul Virilio: amongst the work's fragments and ruins is a sense of the isolation of existence. Modernism grows empty in an effort to transcend itself.

Charlotte Hallows is a Melbourne artist and writer.

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¹ Anne Friedberg "The Passage from Arcade to Cinema" in *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993) pp. 68-94

un Interview with Simone LeAmon

November, 2004
by Paul Andrew

Paul Andrew: You work as a designer and a contemporary artist too, in what way, with what concepts, theories and style of practice?

Simone LeAmon: This question pretty much sums up my practice, there is often a little confusion around who I am professionally because my work pops up in both art and design contexts. Everything I do is informed from an evolving set of principles and concepts. I studied fine art at the Victorian College of the Arts in the early 90s and for the last 12 years have conducted an exhibition practice exploring narratives that are inherit within craft and design. So naturally the deeper the interrogation, the further the work travels and sometimes the work crosses over contexts. I recently completed a Masters in industrial design and so I find that some of the institutional codes that as an artist you are expected to work within are starting to unravel in view of servicing a larger conversation. But I guess this has always been my aim, to expose how the institutional and cultural frames of art and design process notions of desire, value and function in view of shaping meaning. Hence, you have to move around a bit, as unfortunately this style of practice is less visible in Australia and to call yourself an interdisciplinary practitioner is considered a bit wanky, so this is why I am increasingly presenting my projects in Italy.

PA: You seem to enjoy crossovers between business or corporate and the more 'philosophical' realm of art. Explain some of these crossovers.

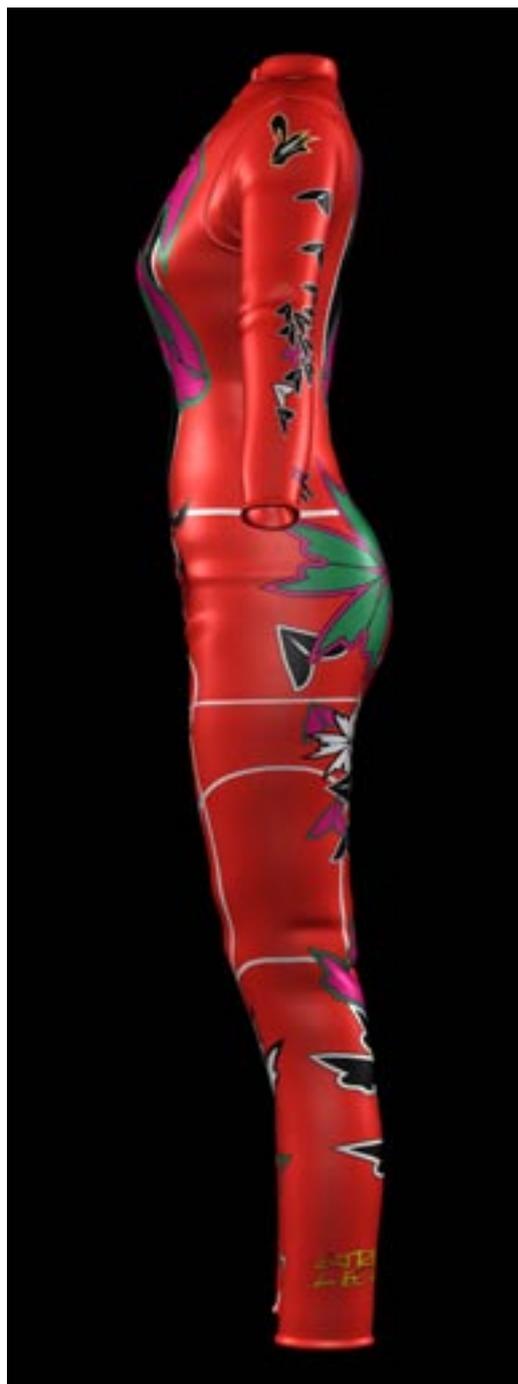
SLA: I always imagined conducting a practice where for half of the week I could get grotty in my overalls and for the remainder sport a power suit and stilettos. This dichotomy has always played out in some way and while I find myself spending more and more time in front of the computer, it is meaningless to me unless it too has the potential to connect with the concerns of my practice. I recently gave a presentation to a small table of executives at Ducati in Italy and I recall getting extremely nervous the day before. I started to doubt the relevance of the meeting and my ability to communicate the concepts I



was intending to pitch. My friends and fellow artists 'Nat & Ali' both happened to be in Milan on the Australia Council residency, so I asked them to hang out at key traffic intersections with me around Milan and record me from afar while I ran up to motorcyclists and asked if I could kiss their motorcycles. We did this for about five hours and, while it appeared a little absurd at the time, I knew that we were on to something. The next day in the meeting, I presented the DVD and images not knowing how it would be received but from reading their reactions it hit me that this footage was connecting. Perhaps it was mirroring their unutterable love for their products and tapping into a culture, which for the best part is fuelled by desire. Regardless, the meeting turned into something greater than I could have anticipated. It is on occasions such as this that I couldn't imagine working without the knowledge and thinking afforded by such spaces as philosophy and theory. Similarly, the context of the corporate world makes such connections visible. I think many artists and designers forget this stuff and try to hold on too tightly in lieu of taking risks. 'Innovation' is a big buzzword at present in design but until we have a culture that sees the value in cross-disciplinary dialogue, I suggest we will just scale greater heights of sameness.

PA: Do you see your work developing into both an object-based practice (for example, photos prints or 'editions') as well as new media (animations and video)?

SLA: Yes, I often produce both. *Bodywork* was originally exhibited at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces in the form of large digital prints, and to scale, so people could imagine being in the company of such a suit on chick who



*Left & across: Simone LeAmon
Bodywork, 2003
Image courtesy the artist*

is 5'2. The suite of works in the Gertrude Street exhibition embraced a sophisticated use of technology because it served the aspirations of the ideas. Other works do not use such technology because their message or meaning is better conveyed via other means. I think in a cultural forum it is important to understand the difference between illustrating what technology, and specifically software, can do as opposed to harnessing it to speak of creative and artistic imperatives which can only be made apparent in the company of the technology. This is why digital technology is so powerful in the area of design. It can explore the shape and space of hyper-theoretical constructions and speculations can be analysed toward less virtual outcomes.

PA: Finally that ultimate question: design is supposedly about functionality, making things easier and looking good too (ah taste – very subjective) what do you reckon?

SLA: The critical thing here is that somebody must ask: functional in view of what context and for whom? For example I love beanbags, they are great to flop in and watch TV but if I were my grandmother I wouldn't see the sense in them because I would desire a firm, elevated chair that I could get in and up from easily. The risk of using functionality as a benchmark for good design is that context changes – like fashion. However there are obviously standards that are implied and also regulated to maintain performance, for example, its pretty important that traffic lights function and we have developed an entire system that evolves around them. But I think interrogating the area of function is more relevant now than ever before, especially in view of assigning meaning and value. I like to think of vinyl; it obviously wasn't initially designed to function in the way that Grand Master Flash used it but heck, where would a whole artistic and cultural genre be without it?

Gee... *looking good*, it slips into the realm of taste, cultural prerogatives and is manipulated by fashion. Style is essentially disposable and industry counts on this. New styles mean new products and fashion implies that you are either in or out-of it, so most of us may do something about it and go and buy something sooner or later, whether it be clothing a car or a new tattoo. Looking good in the market place has one purpose – to seduce. To seduce mass markets, general benchmarks are sexed up to appeal to as many people as possible. For this reason, I look forward to seeing manufacturers launch their new cars because they are the ultimate experiments – if a car bombs and does not look good in the face of their target market, it fails as a vehicle. It is also possible to say that some things fall outside this equation – things which are rare, and have inherit appeal because of their rarity, often become amazingly desirable and adored. These things can also assume 'looking good' status but in actual effect, they are just exotic in a landscape of sameness (do you really think a Ferrari is a good-looker?) The wrath of beauty is damn near impossible to escape but there are certainly different ways to incite desire...

Paul Andrew is a Melbourne based writer.

Contemporary Art & Cultural Critique

Cycle tracks will abound in Utopia
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA)
6 August – 26 September 2004

New Social Commentaries
Warrnambool Art Gallery
4 September – 17 October 2004
by Christine Morrow

Across: Dmitry Vilensky
Installation view
Negation of Negation, 2004
Photo: John Brash
Image courtesy the artist

Two recent exhibitions displayed work that foregrounds social and political critique: a curated show at a metropolitan gallery (*Cycle Tracks will abound in Utopia*) and a regional gallery's prize exhibition comprising entries submitted in open competition (*New Social Commentaries*). These exhibitions followed two similarly-themed shows from 2003, *Utopia Station* at the 50th Venice Biennale, with its series of scrappy installations featuring heavy-handed politics and, closer to home, Monash University Museum of Art's *Feedback: Art, Social Consciousness and Resistance*. The concern with overt critique expressed by self-consciously political work may represent a new mood in contemporary Australian art.

While the theme of the *Cycle Tracks* exhibition was 'utopia', it had a much looser structure than this concept might suggest, drawing on a wide pool of references from economics, political protest and activism rather than simply showing works that depicted or critiqued utopian visions. Utopia comes in a wide selection of flavours and the principal one served here was socialist. If there was a single concern addressed by most of the works that gave the exhibition its logic, it was communality and collectivity, particularly the power of collective action to engender social transformation. For instance Dmitry Vilensky's work *Negation of Negation* presented a series of videos, that examined the idea of social protest, in particular what it means to act as a dissident. In Raquel Ormella's piece *130 Davy Street, Hobart* she recreated a space that appeared to be an office, or campaign headquarters, for the Wilderness Society, an organisation devoted to environmental advocacy.

To locate or construct utopia demands an imaginative rethinking of the world or creation of new worlds and for this reason it offers fertile ground for exploration by artists and writers. But although utopia can involve creative re-imagining it can never be simply reduced to fantasy. Despite the sense in which utopia is always just slightly out of reach, it is projected as a possible future. For the place it describes is always either already out there somewhere and only needs to be arrived at, or else it can be created following a set of rational instructions.



Above: Guan Wei
Home of Dream, 2004
Acrylic on wall
420 x 14000 x 800 cm
Photo credit: John Brash
Courtesy of the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

Of all the arts, literature has proven the most sympathetic medium for exploring utopian themes and if utopia were a book, you'd find it under both Travel and DIY. It is no accident then that the most compelling work at ACCA, the one that provided the richest insights into utopianism, was also the most literary: Guan Wei's lush, narrative wall-painting. It depicted a series of scenes much like book illustrations designed for an epic poem, an *Odyssey*, a *Gilgamesh* or a similarly vast allegorical tale of natural disasters, mythic events, population movements and struggle. Not appearing to depict any specific legend, it functioned as an allegory for the very notion of 'epic', sharing with epic poetry the form of a panoramic account of life and society in which various deeds and legendary events are objectively recounted, one following the other in seemingly endless succession.

Wei's painting engaged with the theme of the exhibition – not only because it narrated experiences that befell a group rather than being told through the exploits of



individual agents – but also in the way it offered a kind of foundational myth recounting how a society came into existence. Its title, *Home of Dream*, sign-posted utopia's geographical co-ordinates: straddling the boundary between the real and the imaginary. This work was particularly astute in revealing the colonial expansionism that is one of utopia's dirty little secrets. While the concept of an ideal society has an ancient pedigree stretching at least as far back as two of Plato's dialogues, *The Republic* and *The Laws*, most utopian theorising took place during the enlightenment period. Utopia operates on the limits of the known world and this was a time when these limits were being pushed ever outward by Europe's then recent discovery and colonisation of the Americas (followed by Australia), partly driven by the belief that new forms of social and political organisation might be found, or founded, there.

Set in some archipelago, Wei's painting unfolded across a series of pictorial islands. It portrayed groups of people setting off in boats and travelling to new shores. Its form even adopted the spatial logic of colonisation:

spread across the surfaces of several walls, the painting achieved a dominant mass in one area before breaking off, traversing the gap of a doorway in the gallery and continuing in another section as a kind of satellite image, related to the main painting but cut loose from it in space.

Among the plastic arts, architecture has the greatest affinity with the concept of utopia because both are concerned with the elaboration of space and three works in *Cycle Tracks* took high-density apartment blocks as their subject. With their vertical mastery of space, tower blocks are often viewed in terms of the Enlightenment project, representing the triumph over gravity by human intellect and achievement that began with tall buildings and presumably ends with space travel. But when considered in terms of housing, these buildings are the subject of tired and tiring back-and-forth utopia-dystopia debates.¹ One camp claims that high-density housing serves communitarian principles: it is a tool for social engineering, facilitating positive social interactions through sheer proximity, as detached housing cannot.



The other camp claims it encourages only negative social interaction leading to sad ghettos full of criminals, crack-heads and junkies.

The three works by Alban Hajdinaj, Martin McInerney and Callum Morton edged towards the latter position. Each conceived such buildings as drab, colourless, soulless, even ghostly since the works were neither concerned with the actual people who might live in the buildings, nor what lives they might lead there.

Voting in the recent federal election, I spent half-an hour in a slow-moving queue that snaked its way around Carlton Primary School, nestled at the base of the very Carlton flats that Martin McInerney depicts. The classrooms and corridors were wallpapered floor to ceiling with pictures, many of them drawn by the kids who live in the high-rises, with images of their homes looming large as subject matter. When Australian children first learn to draw a house, they usually draw a box with two windows and a door, a pitched roof and sometimes a chimney. It was fascinating to see that the Carlton Primary School children were reinventing and adapting this pictorial

schema to accommodate some of the features of the high-density flats they call home. In most cases they simply drew a box with a door, a pitched roof, a chimney and tens of windows in grid formation where you would often expect to see only two.

In Hajdinaj's video, an artist comes along and paints a drab apartment building in rainbow colours, but at Carlton Primary School, the children's drawings of the flats were already rainbow-coloured. One astonishing drawing was a night time view of the block of flats, rendered in thin lines of primary and secondary colours jammed up against flat areas of black paint, achieving within its pictorial space the kind of intense, electrifying energy as can be seen in Joan Miro's paintings. In this boy's image, a flying saucer was lit up in the night sky directly above the flats. Try telling him that he lives in a building that is cold and lacks soul. This boy perceived his council flat to exist in the same contiguous space as that magical, transcendental realm where UFOs were to be found. *Home of dream* indeed.

I think the children exercised not just sight but insight,

Across: Emily Floyd (Callum Morton's work in background)
Installation view
My Notions, My Concerns, My Intentions and Callum Morton's
The Heights
Photo: John Brash
Image courtesy the artist & Anna Schwartz Gallery



Above: Alban Hajdinaj
Eye to Eye, 2003
Video on dvd, colour, sound, subtitles
4 minutes, 30 seconds
Courtesy of the artist and gb agency, Paris

perceiving what the three artists in *Cycle Tracks* could not: that a building, especially one that occupies the subjective conceptual category of 'home', is not just about how it looks but also about how it is learned, lived, known, and felt. The little kids at Carlton Primary School were able to achieve what none of these three artists could: performing acts of transformative imagination, finding visual metaphors for how the space is felt and lived in and represent it as being occupied and animated by the imagination as well as the body.

Despite the proliferation of video work in *Cycle Tracks*, none exploited the potential affinity between utopia and the moving image. Film's very form mimics the features of utopia: a projection of imagined world that is utterly convincing, positioned in a spatial relationship to the viewer that appears at once tantalisingly close and impossible to enter because, by definition, it always lies elsewhere to the perceiving subject. In *Cycle Tracks* there was nothing cinematic in scope, but instead the usual forms adopted by art video: brief narrative sequences, spoken text married to mostly static images, mock and real documentary and stuff that mimics amateur footage, all of these filmic approaches much more suited to the mundane and the quotidian than to the projection of utopic worlds.

The curator of *Cycle Tracks*, Juliana Engberg, struggled to integrate the numerous video works within the space and resorted to stylistic gimmickry to vary the presentation, incorporating projections, multiple screens and the

placement of monitors at various heights on the wall, on the floor and stacked on top of each other. In both Edward Bellamy's and Samuel Butler's 19th century conceptions of utopia (in *Looking Backward* and *Erewhon* respectively) machines were banished because of their tendency to tyrannise and enslave the humans that made them. I found a little unintended irony in the odd spatial arrangements the monitors were forced into, designed to overcome the tendency of each to look exactly like the clunky, squat, black plastic monitor next to it.

The best video works tackled economic themes head-on. A deceptively straightforward video by Katya Sander called *What is capitalism?* documented a series of staged interviews. The interviewer stopped passers-by as they traversed an otherwise empty stretch of scrubland. They were asked the same question in turn, "What is Capitalism?" and they gave the various off-the-cuff, and not particularly insightful answers you might expect. What was intriguing, though, was that the video's staging – interviewer and subject encountering one another in the country – rehearsed the motif of Courbet's famous painting *The Meeting* (1854), which depicts the artist encountering his patron, Alfred Bruyas, and the wealthy man's servant while out walking. Sander's work echoed Courbet's concern to put the social, economic and political relationship between artist and patron under the spotlight by insisting that the artist's role is to interrogate the political and economic system in which he or she participates.

It was a theme that resonated successfully with another work in the exhibition, a video by Carey Young. In it, an artist wearing a suit and standing on a rostrum addressed the camera. She gave a speech that documented the gradually changing nature of the relationship that had evolved between her and the corporation she appeared to be addressing. The artist recounted that they began by sponsoring her exhibition, then invited her to give a talk, bought her paintings, contracted her to devise a series of creative thinking workshops, reproduced images of her work in their annual report and finally put her on the payroll. Throughout the speech she referred to the corporation in the second person, giving viewers the uncomfortable feeling that she was talking to us, that we were part of the corporation that so smoothly absorbed her. As of course we were; each one of us spectators was just another of the corporation's functioning units. A shrewd work it documented capitalism's ability to assimilate all works of art, including those with seemingly oppositional content.



*Left: Tony Schwensen
Video still
Banging your head against a wall
Image courtesy the artist*

It was more honest than the work by Christian Capurro, comprising a copy of *Vogue* magazine whose pages were erased through the combined efforts of over two hundred people. Capurro presented this as an act of negating consumer culture, and an attempt to gauge the true value of labour. It was about labour in that it laboured an avant-gardist gesture (Robert Rauschenberg's erasure of a drawing by Willem de Kooning) while failing to either reinterpret Rauschenberg's work or say anything new. Plus it performed an erasure in that Capurro claimed the work was collaborative yet only his name appeared on the wall label (which read: *Christian Capurro et. al.*), indicating that he really only considered himself its author.² I think Capurro tried to have it both ways: calling the work a collaboration, yet taking all of the credit for it. A Marxist reading of the work would determine that he was skimming off, for himself, the surplus value generated by all that volunteer labour.

If most of the works in the exhibition explored ideas of collectivity, then the works that seemed out of place were the solipsistic ones suggesting anxieties that remained resolutely private. Tony Schwensen's video

portrayed a man continually banging his head against the wall, replicated – for no reason I could fathom – on three stacked monitors. The image did not open itself to any readings except the literal interpretation that it expressed: frustration, boredom or anxiety. Emily Floyd's work *My Notions, My Concerns, My Intentions* was an essay in self-expression, asserting the primacy of the individual ego. The artist presented a sculptural installation centred on three receptacles stuffed with alphabet letters in the form of large pieces of moveable type. The tangled piles were a lovely visual metaphor for frantic, inarticulate thought or shattered speech. However, by its very title, the work betrayed itself as exercising the twin capitalist shibboleths of individualism and ownership, rendering it antipathetic to the exhibition's themes of collectivity and socialist utopia.

An exhibition can never be exhaustive of its subject matter but an obvious omission haunted *Cycle Tracks*. You cannot hold an exhibition anywhere in Australia with the words *utopia* and *tracks* in the title and avoid the issue of Aboriginality. For Utopia is the name of an Aboriginal community north-north-east of Alice Springs that has produced some of Australia's greatest artists in Emily



*Above: Entrance to New Social Commentaries exhibition
Image courtesy of Warrnambool Gallery*

Kame Kngwarreye and Gloria and Kathleen Petyarre. And tracks can refer to the mark humans and animals leave in the landscape, a dominant motif on many Aboriginal paintings, ceremonial body markings and cultural artifacts. The absence of any work by Indigenous artists was experienced as a real lack within the exhibition, an omission that was named and amplified in the exhibition's title.

If utopia can sometimes act as a distraction from the real problems of the present by seducing us with the promise of some shiny, pretty world somewhere just over the horizon, then it is equally true that artists and intellectuals can couch criticisms of their society within their visions of utopia. Moreover, constructions of ideal or better societies that may exist in the future can be the impetus for making incremental changes to society in the present. Projections of utopia, as well as rejections of utopia, are just one way, among others, in which artists can engage effectively in cultural critique. Other examples of artists adopting positions of cultural critique could be seen in the exhibition *New Social Commentaries* at Warrnambool Art Gallery. This exhibition's approach was more varied than ACCA's because of the wider scope for interpretation offered by the theme of

social commentary and because no one can predict what work will be submitted in competition for a prize.

Social commentary is hard to define. It is easier to either identify it when you see it, or give examples of artworks that feature it, than attempt to prescribe it from scratch. With this in mind (and to create a dialogue between the *New Social Commentaries* exhibition and the gallery's permanent collection) curator Brenda O'Connor highlighted a work from Warrnambool Art Gallery's collection, *Second Class* by Douglas Green, reproducing it on the printed announcements calling for entries. This was done in order to give potential entrants an example of what was meant by social commentary and to invite the artists to respond to some of the implications raised by the work. Green's painting, an image of commuters in the second-class carriage on a suburban train, highlights social inequalities in the post war period in Australia. Its theme is not restricted to the years immediately following the war but transcends the time and place in which it is painted, broadly resonant with a message of equality for all human beings.

Second Class was also displayed at the entrance to the prize exhibition. I think the strategy was very commendable

Below: Tracey Allen
Boundaries, 2004
Black and white photograph, Edition 1/2
58 x 40 cm
Photo credit: Photoforce



because it raised the important question: In the half-century since this work was painted, how has Australian society changed? An exhibition entry that engaged closely with the themes of Green's painting, was a photograph by Tracey Allen called *Boundaries*. It depicted a group of aboriginal men on a sidewalk in front of the corrugated iron fence of a backyard in a built-up area. Looming large in the foreground of the photograph were the words 'NO STANDING' stencilled on the footpath in front of the men. Some fifty years after Green painted *Second Class*, Allen's work showed how prohibitions, social distinctions, and the corralling of people through systems of social control might still be in operation today. But her image was not defeatist. The men were not going anywhere in a hurry. One man was seated, another kicked a ball, and nearby there were three didgeridoos propped against the wall or laid on the ground as an act of claiming territory. The image portrayed defiance (if only of a nonchalant variety) and highlighted the diffuse forms that acts of political resistance can take.

Mostly, the subject of social commentary was well understood by the artists themselves and adhered to by the selectors, with some of the various themes encompassing commentary on family relationships, consumer culture, asylum seekers (including detainees) and the war in Iraq. But there were one or two odd inclusions. Marcel Cousins' painting *From Shinagawa* depicted what appeared to be an enlarged Japanese train ticket. The work was accompanied by a text that identified the creation of cultural identity as its theme. What exactly a Japanese train ticket might communicate about the formation of cultural identity was left unexplained.

Even more of a stretch was Marian Crawford's art work *Acropora* depicting a piece of coral. Beautiful though it was, rendered delicately in cut paper, it had no business to appear in a show about social commentary. To be social commentary, it firstly has to be social. If a depiction of a piece of coral counts as social commentary, then there is potentially no art work that this category could possibly exclude. The only thing more bizarre than the artist submitting this work as an instance of social commentary is that two judges accepted it as such.

Which is not to suggest that a work has to portray people to constitute social commentary. Sometimes human absence communicates more powerfully. David Keeling's painting, titled *4 closed 4 sale*, conveyed the economic struggle of a nameless young family not through the individuals or their dwelling but by depicting a small cluster of furniture and possessions put out for sale on the front lawn. In fact, the absence of people was necessary to convey the idea that the householders were in some sense already gone, brushed aside. Keeling's painting avoided an attitude of easy pathos or even melancholy by its crisp and coolly observed details and its high-key colour. It was not an image of struggle, defeat or loss; it provided no elegy. The world it portrayed was blank and sanitised as if the presence of the departing family was barely registered. The symbolic evacuation of the householders performed by Keeling's painting signalled their utter expendability. It was a more forcible image of dehumanisation than any of the three works in the ACCA show that featured high-rise buildings.

There were several instances where artists made claims about social commentary in the text accompanying their work, claims that the work itself simply could not sustain. Merrin Eirth presented a large-format oil painting featuring geometric motifs and chemical names and numbers. The explanatory text elaborated a consumer's

*Below: Elizabeth Newman
Soul..., 2004
Installation view
Image courtesy the artist & Warrnambool Gallery*



fear and confusion when faced with chemical additives listed on food packaging. As the painting had none of the forcefulness of the text with its qualities of wild diatribe, I wondered whether she ought not to have submitted the text alone in the form of concrete poetry.

Elizabeth Newman was another artist whose explanatory text made unsustainable claims. Her installation *Soul...* was selected as the prize-winner and comprised an installation of glossy magazines on a coffee table, a clock on the wall, a mattress on the floor, a painted hessian banner, t-shirts and posters. The artist's statement implied that *Soul...* critiqued the way in which, under capitalism, the human subject is constituted through acts of consumption. However the installation was conceptually underdone, possessing no overall coherence except as décor. The loose, theoretically disparate elements failed to convince the viewer that their conceptual disconnections were deliberate or necessary. If this installation of furniture, posters and t-shirts was intended as the locus of some anti-capitalist resistance, then it was one that could only have been conceived within the pages of an IKEA catalogue.

The artist's priority was the creation of a hip ambience generated by laid-back consumer items and a slacker aesthetic. You could almost see the quotation marks around the ironic slogans on the posters and t-shirts. I think the title gave it away. The ellipsis signals an omission in a sentence; in this case, it was social commentary that Newman avoided. Newman's used all the right jargon but failed to live up to the claims it made for itself. It seemed to lack the courage of its own convictions.

By contrast, a collaborative photographic work by John Bodin and Penny Jensz, entitled *Visceral*, fulfilled and even exceeded the claims the artists made for it. Its concerns were enumerated as 'race, deception, fear and primal instinct'. The photographic portraits employed the techniques of montage to create grotesque distortions of the subjects' physiognomies. They spoke of the deception of everyday appearances and hinted at discontinuities and ruptures that lie beneath the surface of the faces we show to the outside world, revealing the evil, torture, madness and existential terror that skulks there.

*Below: John Bodin and Penny Jenz
Visceral (detail) 2004
Type C photographic colour print collage
36 x 264 cm
Image courtesy of the artists*

The work was presented as a series of double portraits. In each pair, the left-hand image was a traditional studio portrait of the subject, presenting each head on bare shoulders. There was sense in which the physiognomy of each face was laid bare to our scrutiny. This gave each subject a sense of vulnerability, but was balanced by the tenderness of the photographer's rendition that bathed them in soft tones of gold and apricot. On the right hand side of each pair was another version of the same portrait, reworked as a photomontage. Through the collage of small – apparently torn – sections of photographs over the faces, the artists created grotesque and sickening distortions of the subjects' physiognomies, as if giving material expression to something dark and disturbing that normally remained hidden.

Like the best of art works, it didn't play all of its cards at once but slowly revealed its insights, sustaining repeated viewing, and leaving traces that resonated long after the work was removed from sight. It seemed to speak of the discontinuity or rupture that lies beneath the surface of the faces we show to the outside world and the deception of everyday appearances. This discontinuity or rupture could suggest a number of different things: malice or evil in a person's character, mental breakdown, existential terror, or perhaps a misanthropic view of fellow human beings, their unbearableness expressed through physical repugnance. And despite a roughly similar treatment performed across a number of figures, the work was not formulaic, for each of grotesque portraits seemed to identify a unique distortion in the figure, to locate strange hidden qualities borne only by that individual.

If photomontage is mainly thought of in terms of building something up (a constructed image) these portraits, by contrast, seemed to tear themselves slowly apart. The visual discontinuities in the photographs were like open wounds. The images seemed to involve the stripping down of each face in the visual equivalent of some slow and sickening vivisection. In tearing away the surface skin and showing us these raw wounds the artists left us with some uncertainty about whether we had witnessed some act of cruelty in which we might even be complicit. This cruel dismemberment that we were asked to witness spoke to each viewer of the brutality we might be capable of watching, and hence of inflicting. Bodin and Jenz's entry was a work of powerful social and political critique, despite the fact its social commentary was not easily identified, explained and assimilated. Indeed, its rich, disturbing and powerful resonances could not possibly be encapsulated by such a short explanatory text as the artists were asked to provide.



The paradox raised by a competition focused on social commentary is that it will principally attract works that the entrants self-select as being 'critical'. Social commentary is a much more elusive concept than 'landscape' or 'works on paper'. Sometimes artworks readily identified by their authors as social or political commentary are only the most unobtrusive; sometimes those works that offer the richest insights or are the most powerfully oppositional do not trumpet their own claims to critique the loudest.

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<notes>

¹ For a recent discussion of this debate, focusing on Callum Morton's work, see Peter Timms, *What's wrong with contemporary art?* Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004, pp 82-86

² To find out more about the work I followed links from the ACCA website to the artist's own website at www.christiancapurro.com. There he listed this work titled, *Another Misspent Portrait of Etienne de Silhouette* 1999-2004, under the heading of 'solo exhibitions'.