



All images: Tobias Richardson
24HR Art front window, habitat installation
250 x 250cm

Images courtesy the artist & 24HR Art

Above: *Welcome* (detail), 2005

Photo credit: Max Bowden

Tobias Richardson

Welcome

24HR Art, Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art
(Box Set series)

16 September – 22 October 2005

Article by Hayley West

Set against the backdrop of a utopian South American jungle, ten live cane toads spent their final blissful weeks in the front window of a Darwin art gallery. Looking majestic in their confidence, the toads seemed oblivious to the slanderous debate that existed on the other side of the glass.

It has taken cane toads seventy years to reach Darwin and their arrival is a source of loathing laced with excitement for locals. Consequently, the public interest in *Welcome* was enormous. The Box Set – a small exhibition space in the front window of 24HR Art – allowed for unlimited viewing and twice weekly feeding sessions ensured frequent visits by the curious and the repulsed. *Welcome* was an exhibition for Darwinians, enabling them to view and consider the work

outside of the often-intimidating gallery sanctum. Richardson also managed a mammoth ten interviews on local and national radio, making up for the lack of written reviews in Darwin that would keep the public informed. As expected, the focus of the interviews was on the politics and science of the toad's imminent arrival, rather than the work's visual elements.

One of the successes of *Welcome* was the shifting attitude of people towards these animals over time. The piece existed for five weeks, allowing people to revisit and follow the progression of individual toads and to develop relationships with them. It was important for Richardson that the gallery staff became involved in caring for the toads. It gradually





Above: *Toads at home*, 2005
24HR Art front window, habitat installation detail
Photo credit: Fiona Morrison

became apparent that the staff and director genuinely wanted to nurture and even befriend these beasts. And testament to Richardson's own sympathetic and knowledgeable actions, Frog Watch North (the leading cane toad control in the NT) was asked to support the work. The professional treatment and eventual humane disposal of the toads was crucial in opposing the widespread callous killing methods that exist in this country.

Consequently the cane toads became a popular attraction. Viewers witnessed the gorging of cockroaches, monitored the toads' growth and learnt about these maligned amphibians. *Welcome* was a spectacle for the people. On opening night, punters were horrified to watch one of the toads shed its own skin, carefully peel it off and then systematically consume it. It was one of the most grotesque events I have ever witnessed.

Richardson knows that the consensus is that cane toads are ugly and he has played on this belief. As humans tend

to be anthropocentric when it comes to nature, judging nature's values by aesthetics rather than function, the difference between native and introduced often equates to good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Richardson's question for viewers, then, was: How is ugliness qualified? Once it became obvious that the toad had failed in its mission to eradicate the cane beetle, it was instantly despised and deemed deserving of a torturous death. Yet, ironically, the toads came equipped with many of the traits of a similarly successful species: *Homo sapiens*. Both thrive in Australia and, like humans, toads have a titanic fecundity, occupying and exploiting almost any niche, colonising the globe with a vigorous drive, out-competing other organisms and generally running amuck.

Inside the gallery two images plastered on the wall reinforced the sense of anthropomorphism, innocence and violence: an image of an icefield soaked in the blood of a freshly bludgeoned white seal pup, set beside a picture of Schapelle Corby, tearful in her distress. Confronted with these familiar



Above: *Welcome*, 2005
24HR Art front window, habitat installation view
Photo credit: Fiona Morrison

and emotional images, we questioned our perception of what innocence actually is. Would we be so troubled if the baby seal and Schapelle were brown and warty?

The lighting of the toads from above compounded this uncertainty, allowing them an aura of regal halos at any time of day or night. This effect, together with the painterly diorama that successfully immersed viewers in a lush tropical jungle, also tied *Welcome* back to classic museum displays and their parallel with more recent displays of art. Both environments involve viewing, decoding, learning, narratives and presenting materials; in short, art borrowing from science and science borrowing from art.

Ultimately, *Welcome* arrived at a time when many are unwelcome. It was a subtle and subversive political piece that questions the concept of acceptance. This is not an acceptance of the introduction of these animals – or their invasion and impact on the environment – but a realisation that they are living things finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Hayley West is an artist and arts worker living in Darwin, working closely with Tobias in the local arts community.