

Machine

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Machine

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Tiffany Shafran *Intricate soul* 2003 Gouache
and graphite on fabiano paper Courtesy of the artist

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lino print on paper

All images Courtesy the artist and IMA Freshcut 2006

Machine is a free bi-monthly visual arts
publication. Machine has a focus on emerging
Queensland artists and writers but
publishes the work of artists and writers based
outside Queensland.

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Black Eye = Black Viewpoint: A Conversation With ProppaNOW Archie Moore



Vernon Ah Kee *Still* 2006 Charcoal, pastel and acrylic on canvas Courtesy of the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery

This interview was conducted by Archie Moore on 21 December 2005. Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee, Jennifer Herd, Tony Albert and Andrea Fisher were present while Jenny Fraser responded via email.

Archie Moore: Ok, ProppaNOW, what is the state of Urban Aboriginal Art in Queensland?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, it exists.

Richard Bell: It exists outside the parameters of Western Art.

Jenny Fraser (via email): I'm not sure what to compare it to? I see artists like Fatu Feu'u who takes up offers of gallery exhibitions simply to be able to show with an emerging artist from the Pacific—it's not about his work, he's a successful senior artist with little to prove—it's about supporting the arts and other countrymen. This kind of nurturing and reciprocity has fallen by the wayside in mono-cultural Australia in general lately. If we didn't live in this oppressive environment we might not make such great comments in our work.

AM: Are you comfortable with the label Urban Aboriginal Art?

Tony Albert: Yes.

RB: Yeah, I am.

AM: So, you're comfortable with the label Urban Aboriginal Artist?

JF: I'm not convinced... 'Urban' is determined on the context—I think that a German urban person would have little experience outside of a concrete jungle—I grew up living with a much wider experience than that, from Mareeba to Perth to Tennant Creek to Cairns to Darwin, and I would hardly call those places urban, sub-urban maybe and that's just sad, so I'd rather think of myself as a bush-baby or kissed by nature and that informs my work.

VAK: I'm an Aboriginal artist.

RB: Yeah.

Jennifer Herd: Yeah.

VAK: I'm an Indigenous person but I could be making anything.

AM: Do you make Aboriginal art then?

VAK: Yeah, all my work is Aboriginal art.

JH: Art done by Aboriginal people is Aboriginal art.

RB: I think that is a terrible fucking definition, that if you're Aboriginal you make Aboriginal art. I think that's bullshit.

VAK: Anybody can make Aboriginal art.

AM: So you don't agree with the label?

RB: I've never been happy with that definition. You know, when we all had these Aboriginal artists denying that they were Aboriginal artists and saying that they were just 'artists'. They were having two bob each way. They wanted their work to be seen as Aboriginal art, Aboriginal art being the phenomenon created by anthropologists and the fucking art advisors and that sort of thing... the popular image of Aboriginal art as everybody around here knows is fucking dots and bark paintings.

VAK: I reckon those people that say they make art and not Aboriginal art cannot be Aboriginal. Because for me it is like Jackson Pollock saying he's not an American artist when he can't escape being an American artist.

RB: Yes! Any blackfella woulda said, what are those cunts saying they're not Aboriginal for?

Black Eye = Black Viewpoint: continued

JH: [They took that position] because they thought that people were saying that they only got where they are because they're Aboriginal.

RB: Their work wouldn't have gotten fucking looked at in the same way otherwise. It wouldn't have gotten the same attention. It's because we're fucking Aboriginal we get the scrutiny.

TA: Maybe by doing that it made their work more desirable. It might be nothing more than a great marketing scheme.

JH: They didn't want to be labelled as such, because they would be pigeonholed.

RB: Well yeah, fuck it. If two people take a photograph of the same fucking subject matter for the same fucking reasons, why is one, then, Aboriginal? Ok, see what they call Australian art? It's just fucking European art. Right? That's all it fucking is.

AM: So, have we got any further ideas of what exactly IS Urban Aboriginal Art?

RB: It's the inauthentic art being produced by Aboriginal people in Australia.

All: Yes. That's Urban Art.

AM: And do you think it is being accepted more by institutions, galleries and critics?

RB: I don't give a fuck what they think.

VAK: People think it's art made in an urban context.

TA: If you can't call it Urban Art, what then do you call it?

AM: Ok, what about a life span of this genre?

RB: They're [already] trying to kill off the concept of Urban Art.

JH: As if there is another form of Aboriginal art.

RB: Yes. See, like, Ooga Booga is almost dead and we're the next thing coming through.

JH: We're just separating it by saying Urban Art and... "whatever".

VAK: What is Ooga Booga? It needs a definition.

RB: Well, Ooga Booga is the stuff made by real Aborigines for white consumption.

VAK: Who are the real Aborigines?

RB: Well, ask any fucking anthropologist, they'll tell you.

JH: [Ooga Booga's] not talking about real ceremony and stuff like that.

RB: No, there is some of that, it's called ethnographic art. That thing about authenticity is for them to maintain their supremacy. That's one of the things I wanted to talk about here at ProppaNOW, developing something that absolutely describes Urban Art from our perspective like how...we sit around and discuss and explore these things to try to overcome the fucking inherent racism in the system that is offered to us, right. We have to, I think, offer them an alternative. That's what they presented us with: authentic Aboriginal art, then inauthentic Urban Art. Now they're trying to backpedal.

AM: That is to suggest that what is being said now has more relevance to your audience and peers?

RB: Absolutely! We're the ones doing the real dreamtime paintings, you know, our art is the authentic Aboriginal art. Because we're talking about our experiences now, which will in a couple of hundred years be the fucking dreamtime.

VAK: The reason I say that the art that we make is Aboriginal art is because the way we live our lives is an Aboriginal experience. Now what happens in the deserts and remote communities is that people create art and they try to live their lives in a way that correlates to this romanticised idea, and it's a white construction.

RB: We should stick to Urban Art because that's the fucking label they gave to us, instead of inauthentic art. So let's fucking stick with it...fuck these half white cunts down here.

VAK: That's why I say that the only authentic Aboriginal people in this country are the urban Aboriginal people, they're the only ones that behave autonomously. We're the only ones whose lives aren't wholly and solely determined by white construction. I don't care about Urban Aboriginal Art, whether we're called that because, at least we're here and in the beginning of the definition. And we have a chance to have influence. Other than that my mission is



(below) Jenny Fraser *Raw Roo* 2005 Installation with light box
Courtesy the artist, Raw Space Galleries and Fire-Works Gallery

to redefine Urban Aboriginal Art in terms that Aboriginal people understand, and in terms that we can determine and control.

AM: Are ProppaNOW being involved in promoting this idea?

VAK: I think ProppaNOW is a part of that. I think you're a part of that. I think any Aboriginal person making art in an urban context is a part of that.

RB: I see myself as the coloniser. I am fucking recolonising these fuckers. I'm using their language to do it. Taking the work of their artists and that sort of thing and changing it, you know, it's a great way to communicate with people.

It's something familiar yet unfamiliar, you can't miss it, you go directly to their subconscious.

VAK: In a city like Brisbane there are so many avenues for different media. A part of being an artist in an urban context is taking on different media.

RB: I swore I would never do dots.

AM: Your latest work is an interesting take on dot painting.

RB: It is. It's referencing central desert painting and also Lichtenstein. I am colonising their space. I've changed the iconography and put an Aboriginal flag on top.

VAK: We are defining Urban Art. Urban art is still a new idea.

RB: Yes. Well, let's capture it at this moment and describe it.

VAK: The distinction is: Aboriginal and traditional Aboriginal. We're Aboriginal and they're traditional Aboriginal and are a white construct.

RB: In Urban Art the artists, we are, ourselves the experts. There's no white experts, just black ones. Ok? You can write that down!

VAK: [At] Fire-Works and Woolloongabba the artist is only there as visual evidence [authenticating] Ooga Booga art. They can have a group show but they just need one blackfella standing up in the corner. So that one black person will vindicate all of that art just by their presence, they don't have to say anything.

RB: They have to have their noble savage.

VAK: The artist has been sterilised and cleaned. It's like laundering money. How does that fit in with Urban Art? That's the problem with [that] art. It disgusts me. They've been tricked into going, that's the difference with Urban Artists, we're not going to fall for that type of thing.

RB: That's why it is important for us to fucking sit down and fucking talk these things through and put something down and say, ok, this is how we see ourselves, now, at this moment in time, so they can't pin something on us at another time when we have grown and evolved into something else, which we definitely will. If we do that, we set the agenda, we keep these fuckers out, right. I came into art through politics and before that I was doing tourist art like the Ooga Boogas were. Then I discovered, as far as activism goes, there's no better forum than art. How can you be more influential on your audience than that?

AM: And you've said it is propaganda not art?

RB: I was saying that I am a propagandist not an artist. But, it's not propaganda, it's the truth. It's about communicating a point of view. Our point of view is not out there. Look at that fucking article there (Sally Gabori article, 'In A League Of Her Own', *The Courier Mail*, 20 December 2005), that influences people. They lap all that sort of shit up. It's like, it's so patronising. All over the world, they're interested in what we think [as artists], they're not interested at all in what those people think. They want to hear from the horse's mouth so to speak. Like Vernon said, we are the experts on our own work.

VAK: That's another big advantage, as artists in an urban context, we make art with the knowledge that we are the experts on our art. It's a ridiculous notion that you can be wrong about your own work. Do we let people mix up our own palettes?

RB: NO WAY!

VAK: That is a ridiculous notion, it's so disempowering that it's embarrassing. Even if you had no sense of colour, it's still yours. You should never feel bad about talking about your work because you are the expert.

RB: We are in the process of defining Aboriginal Art as we see it, and Urban Art as we see it, rather than the existing paradigms, we don't accept those, we believe they have been presented to us as a fait accompli, and all they do is disempower us and empower them as the great experts on Aboriginal Art, well fuck them! And you can put that in.

Archie Moore is a Brisbane-based artist. |

Street art has always been creative in the ways it engages with the public. While *Anthropophyteia*, the first book of scrawled messages on toilet walls, was published in 1904,¹ the inception of ‘tagging’ (which occupied a more public space) did not occur until the 1960s in large cities, when teenagers began writing their nicknames on neighbourhood walls to give themselves a public identity. The process of tagging was distinctly territorial in nature, marking out local turf, and warning rival groups to steer clear.² Others began following the lead of Taki 183 (a tagging pioneer from Washington Heights, NYC), competing for space on public transport and buildings. With thousands of kids writing their names in the same locations, individual tags ceased to stand out, and graffiti subsequently developed into an art form involving coloured aerosols, and bold, large-scale works which were less likely to be ignored by passers by.

John Frow explains that while the act of writing one’s name on the wall isn’t a political act in itself, the practice ‘... situates itself within a politics of re-appropriation of space; in another sense, however, it is practised in accordance with quite specifically aesthetic codes.’³ In other words, in addition to the political act of appropriating public space, writers are participating in a kind of ritual, contributing to a larger community of like-minded people (even if they consider their acts of so-called vandalism to be independent in nature). The intention, ultimately, of public art is to push at the boundaries of experience, thereby changing the way we perceive the world around us.

Artists, while reclaiming public space through their own ‘brand’ names, are borrowing from the tactics used for advertising and publicity: ‘...a tautological process of self-promotion miming the reflexive signifiers of advertising and “packaging”.’⁴ Although this may at first appear to be a contradiction, artists are in their own ways creating a resistance to the very type of publicity they are adopting. ‘For this aesthetics of the signature works both within and against commodity culture, figuring the writer at once as brand name and as the repetition of resistance to the repetitions of commodity culture.’⁵

Contemporary stencil art flourished in Paris in the early 1980s, where artists increasingly began to use this traditional art form to convey messages of protest and defiance. Stencil graffiti shifted the emphasis from defacing surfaces and ‘getting as much coverage as possible’⁶ towards more considered, strategic pieces using both images and words

to respond to political issues. Rather than stencilling in as many locations as possible, the placement became ‘crucial for the artist to be able to communicate symbolically, politically and artistically to an audience.’⁷

Stencil art adopts the adage that images speak louder than words, and initiated a movement from typographic to iconographic street art. Images and their strategic placement ensure that the attention of passers by is captured—as people have a tendency to become immune to tagging. A lot of the images used in this form of street art are derived from the Pop Art movement of the late

The Politics of

1950s and early 1960s—art which ‘rejected the supremacy of “high art” and the pretensions of the avant-garde. Their iconography was aimed at narrowing the distance between art and life by celebrating the mass-produced objects of the time.’⁸ It is through the current resurgence of graffiti via the images of stencil art that culture jamming comes into play.



Like tagging and writing, stencil art is often used as a vehicle for simply marking one's territory and becoming known to like-minded artists. However, it is fair to say that it has become a common and effective tool through which activists can convey very powerful messages. Most of the messages conveyed tend to be protest-based—addressing everything from globalisation and corporations to war and human rights.

The use of stencils to carry a political agenda is not new. What is new is the way in which it has burgeoned globally, rather than only being concentrated in certain areas in

of Street Art

Kylie Timmins

the midst of a cultural or political struggle. Stencils were used during World War Two for political propaganda. The same technique was used in Germany after the war, this time attempting to reunite refugee families. Since the 1970s anti-war activists have adopted graffiti in various conflict zones, including Mexico, Northern Ireland and South Africa. Subsequently, the icon of the 'visionary' became commonplace, with figureheads such as Lenin,

Stalin, Chairman Mao and Che Guevara being depicted. (Ironically, the mass-production of Che's image counteracts the protest intentions of many street artists, as well as the original political motivation of the image intended by photographer Alberto Korda, who allows the image to be reproduced for any purpose provided it propagates Che's memory and serves social justice).

In Brisbane and across the world, government and community groups are developing 'authorised' graffiti sites, sparking much debate between artists about whether graffiti is about the art or the act of re-claiming a public or private space. Some would argue that a simple tag scrawled in pen on the back of a bus seat is more admirable than a large, planned, legal piece of colourful spray-can art that, while beautiful, involved minimal risk to the artist.

Like any popular art form, graffiti will end up being increasingly presented in a gallery context as time goes on. This raises the question of whether graffiti will lose its ability to have a political impact, and whether it really is more about the art or the politics. Sebastian Moody is a Brisbane artist whose work is presented both on the street (unauthorised and commissioned) and in galleries. Sebastian says, 'I think that it [street art] will inevitably end up archived in a museum; in fact, I did a piece about this in the Museum of Brisbane in 2004 called *Contemporary ruins*.' Sebastian also believes that the political impact of street art isn't necessarily determined by where it is presented or whether or not it is authorised, but by how commercialised it is:

If stencil art had any political power, it has been eroded not by its legality, but by its commercialisation...Stencil designs on T-shirts and jeans borrow not just the form but also the inherent association with edginess and youthful rebellion...I think that this youth marketing debate is more interesting for me at the moment than the public/private property debate.

Brisbane artist Shaun O'Connor believes there is a risk for graffiti appearing in a gallery context to become 'boring and decorative', but he also points out that the audiences of street versus gallery are very different. 'The audience in a gallery might be a more specialised "art audience" who are generally there to see or buy art. Showing work illegally in a public space can allow a non art-specific audience to access the work or perhaps encounter the art in an incidental kind of way.' He believes that artists should have the ability to respond to each specific environment on



Sebastian Moody *We understand the desire for immediate and potent communication* (construction phase) 2005 The old iceworks building in Paddington Synthetic polymer paint Courtesy the artist



Shaun O'Connor *Untitled (freedom or death)* 2003 London Colour photograph Courtesy the artist

their own terms, stating that, 'Investigating shifts between legal/illegal, public/private, commercial/non-commercial modes of practice is often the starting point for much of my work.'

Ideology is employed in various ways, particularly by politicians and other authoritarian figures, to create a fear and hatred of street art amongst members of the community. As a direct result, graffiti has long been perceived by the wider community as something to be removed at all costs, as it impacts on the people's rights to live in a 'clean' society. This is evidenced in the many anti-graffiti campaigns being implemented across the world, including right here in Brisbane with the multi-million dollar introduction of graffiti-resistant panels in Queensland Rail metropolitan stations.⁹ It can also be seen in Melbourne's massive one million dollar pre-Commonwealth Games clean-up to rid the city of its graffiti 'eyesores'. The campaign involves the development of 'specialist anti-graffiti police taskforces' to prosecute Melbourne's 'graffiti menaces', several of whom now face up to ten years jail.¹⁰ The disgust and frustration supposedly expressed by citizens is, as James Ferrell notes, '...an ideological construct, based not on sound social research but on the values of the business and political forces behind the campaign.'¹¹

While it is not always politically charged in its subject matter, the way in which a public or private space is appropriated ensures that a political element always underlies the art (even if this had not been the conscious intention of the artist). In much the same way, an artist exhibiting street art in a gallery context must make the politically charged decision to expose their work to a different audience (and, in certain circumstances, risk leaving it vulnerable to commercial exploitation). In any

case, decisions about graffiti placement are what makes this art political in nature. It has the ability to communicate to people en masse, including those who may never step foot inside a gallery or take an interest in art otherwise. Graffiti is as much about the message as it is the medium and, as long as there are people—both young and old—who want to be heard, it will persist.

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Thanks to Brisbane artists Sebastian Moody and Shaun O'Connor for participating in interviews, September 2005.

¹ Ganz, Nicholas. *Graffiti World*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2004. p8.

² Cooper, Martha and Henry Chalfant. *Subway Art*. New York: Henry Holt, 1984. p14.

³ Frow, John. *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. p147.

⁴ Stewart, Susan. 'Ceci tuera cela: Graffiti as crime art'. *Life After Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*. John Fekete, ed. New York: St Martin's Press, 1987. p166.

⁵ Frow, p148.

⁶ Manco, Tristan. *Stencil Graffiti*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2002. p.8.

⁷ Manco, p11.

⁸ Manco, p19.

⁹ 'Anti-Graffiti Coating Protects QLD Rail Refurbishment' (<<http://www.spec-net.com.au/press/0204/parchem.htm>>, accessed 17 January 2006).

¹⁰ 'Attack on Graffiti' (<http://www.heraldsun.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5478,17885619%25E661,00.html> accessed 1 February 2006).

¹¹ Ferrell, James. *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993. p135.

AN ARTWORK IS A DOT ON A LINE

Two contemporary ephemeral artists **Emma Mühlberger**

Time passes. In art history this seemingly simple concept has led to various visual meditations on life and death. From the presence of a *memento mori* skull in a still life, to the transience of a Tibetan Buddhist sand mandala, the viewer is invited to reflect on the passing of time.

Contemporary artists such as Ricky Swallow are revisiting the *vanitas* tradition, which depicted skulls and other objects symbolic of human mortality. However, time as an object of contemplation is often conveyed most effectively by ephemeral art, in works that draw attention to their own transformations, growth, and demise.

The liminal nature of ephemeral art overcomes attempts to present the work as a discrete object. This creates an issue—when the work is documented in static form a vital element of the experience is lost. Yet, in some way, documentation does contribute to our understanding of the work as a whole. How then are we to place this kind of work, and how can we account for the richness of the experiences it elicits?

The *Soundish* collaborations of Brisbane artists Lubi Thomas and Adrian Davis are an interesting case study. *Soundish* is an installation that comprises a large inverted dome of ice suspended above a metal dish. The ice is frozen in the dish with its own armature and then lifted out. The dish is thinly extruded so that when water droplets from the melting ice hit, it acts like a microphone membrane, amplifying the sound, which then changes as the water

level increases. Ball bearings have been incorporated into later *Soundish* versions to increase the acoustic effect.

The ice is an apt metaphor for the issues surrounding ephemeral art, primarily that of documentation. Frozen, the ice is solid and static. However as it melts, a process exacerbated by the body heat of any adjacent viewers, it becomes fluid.

With the emergence of land art and other forms of ephemeral art in the 1960s, subverting the commercialisation of the art object was a primary goal. Artists made work that existed outside the gallery, and most interestingly, in indeterminate spaces, which thus could not readily be commodified. Yet in order to communicate their vision, artists needed to ‘document’ their art, primarily through photographs or video. There has always been a strong tension between the nominal ‘artwork’ and its documentation. The blurring of this boundary resulted in some of the most engaging work of the period, such as that of the American artist, Robert Smithson.

Land art was one of a number of art forms that heralded a focus upon the viewing *experience* as well as the object presented. The boundaries between viewer and object have been successively renegotiated by art that actively *involves* the viewer—installation, video and new media art being the prime examples. In certain instances, the definitive boundaries of what constitutes the ‘artwork’ blur between object and experience, event and documentation. Often the ‘event’ and its documentation can be encountered as

There has always been a strong tension between the nominal ‘artwork’ and its documentation.

equally valid aesthetic experiences. What once might have been thought of as a form of documentation now becomes part of an *arc* of work.

In the case of *Soundish*, the work is filmed as it melts, with the looped image then projected on the back wall of the gallery space, behind the empty armature and dish filled with water, for the remainder of the exhibition. The melting ice and looped projection is the first incarnation of the work. This recurrent reflexivity is a theme that the artists further develop—they use documentary elements from their past works as the medium of future works. Images and sounds from *Soundish v.3* were the basis for *Drift*, a subsequent DVD work.

Luke Jaaniste is another Brisbane artist who produces ephemeral work. Jaaniste works in the in-between spaces of the world, the ordinary spaces we encounter so frequently that we barely notice them. A forgotten corner, a garden, and everyday objects are gently rearranged or minimally changed. His interventions perceptually alter the space they occupy.

A recent project, *ASI: QAM (Art Scene Investigation: QUT Art Museum 2005)*, focussed on the areas of a gallery that did not relate to the gallery proper—the back office, the storage spaces, the garden. By hole-punching the leaves of all the plants in an adjacent garden, or folding red paper around various office objects and structures, Jaaniste's interventions draw attention to formal qualities of the manipulated objects: the grid pattern of the garden's layout or the structural qualities of picture frames, guillotines and shelves.

However they also draw attention to themselves and the whole definition of 'art'. Is the artwork the hole-punching? The photographing of the leaves? The subsequent exhibition of photographs and accumulated 'evidence' such as the hole punch used and the resulting confetti-like disks? Or is it the leaves in their current state? Still in situ, eventually they will drop off, become obscured by other leaves or, more likely, go unnoticed.

The whole project has an air of vulnerability about it. Like *Soundish* it destabilises categories, blurs the edges of a demarcated world. Yet why is it that this particular work

feels 'ephemeral' whereas others, that will not leave traces in the gallery's environment for as long as *ASI*, do not? Perhaps Jaaniste's practice loosens the hold on notions of permanence—not so much in the sense of time passing but in a more ontological sense of our belief in the rigidity of our conceptual structures. The gallery-based exhibition seems to exert the strongest hold on understanding, but perhaps this is because there is a general semiotic agreement that any thing in a gallery is by definition 'art', whereas work encountered outside this space slides uncomfortably through other potential descriptions—gardening, vandalism, experiment, or embellishment.

Nicholas Bourriaud suggests that the form of art has changed, that its form is no longer a discrete object, or objects, but rather the thing that *links* moments of subjectivity, or as he puts it, 'a principle of dynamic agglutination.' Thus, 'an artwork is a dot on a line.'¹ Working from Bourriaud's framework, Darren Tofts points out that to understand this notion of the arc we need to presuppose a 'co-ordinating agency', a kind of hypothetical meta-work that encompasses all the elements of an arc as an entirety.²

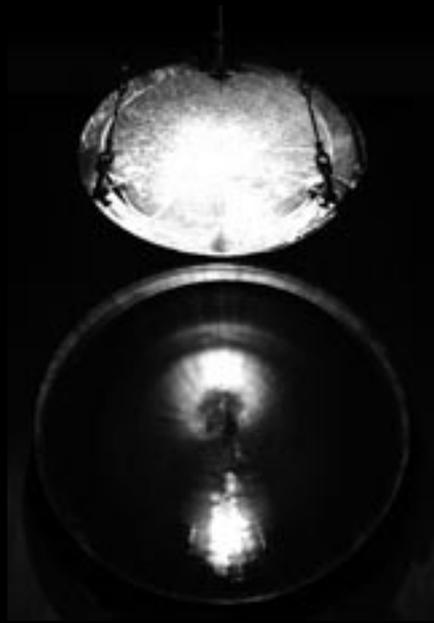
These theoretical observations can be applied to Thomas, Davis and Jaaniste whose works might be considered 'dots on the line', each a link that connects to and allows for a liquid series of experiential encounters. Their works do point to a totality of experience, one that is never consummated; yet the discrete elements of each accrue, informing each other and leading the viewer through increasingly complex negotiations of permanence and transience.

Subtly these ephemeral works use all the elements of their artistic predecessors, from the obvious initial aspects of melting ice or plant growth, moving through the play between documentation and artwork to then arrive at a complex accumulation of nested experiences of time and impermanence.

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¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland, trans. Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002. p21.

² Tofts, Darren. 'Tsk-tsk-tsk and Beyond: Anticipating Relational Aesthetics.' Paper presented at Biennial of Electronic Arts Perth 2004. <http://www.beap.org/2004/index.php?z=conferences/dis_papr&ch=dist#tofts>



Lubi Thomas and Adrian Davis *Soundish v.4* (installation view) 2005
Ice/water, spun metal dish and stand, 500 ball bearings, steel girders and cables Courtesy the artists

DIALOGUE IN THE TOURIST CITADEL

SIMON TAIT

Look at any brochure about Cairns and you will see white beaches and clear water. On arrival be prepared for mudflats and a dirty, un-swimmable ocean. The underbelly of Cairns is harsh and inhospitable. There is an almost schizophrenic split between the perfect weather of winter and the repressive summer wet. Tourism reinforces the distance between this propagated image, which uses the winter idyll and ignores the tangled reality of the balance of the year.

Within this environment lives an incongruent blend of both country Queensland and international jet-stop. People move through Cairns to covet the treasures that surround, and tourism reaps the benefits. Perversely it is Cairns' *lack* of beautiful beaches and beautiful people which could provide conceptual space for meaningful dialogue uncluttered by the trappings of modern glitz. These alternative layers invite conceptual exploration from creative individuals—of which Cairns has many. And yet, that kind of inquiry never seems to delve too deeply.

How much does tourism—which both competes with and 'promotes' regional and local assertions—affect and inform such cultural inquiry? For starters, tourism looks outwards whilst art is an inward process of observation, questioning and self-reflection. Speaking to three prominent Cairns artists, this tension is further illuminated through their personal experiences.

There's a strong sense from speaking with Cairns artists that the financial and intellectual pressures of tourism curb the free development of inquisitive cultural work.

Dominic Johns is an artist who arrived here from Melbourne in 1989. Originally a high school teacher, he moved into tiling as a business and is now emerging as a prolific mosaicist. His is a double struggle, both with the old art/craft dichotomy and with seeking validation as an internationally focused artist in a regional centre.

So does the local environment sustain him conceptually? When asked directly, he replies that he finds the Cairns art scene lacking true collaboration, leading to a deficit in dialogue. Johns believes that 'tourism becomes a screen which stops the development of a healthy society because it panders to a false, bubble view of the local environment.'¹ Additionally it seems tourism can promote protectiveness and intellectual jealousy. The constant jostle for advantage in this cutthroat industry means new ideas are currency and people guard them with zeal. It's

a culture of deals and dollars: the Swiss tourist painting a didgeridoo, the pub owners who continually get people to work three nights 'on trial' then never pay them.

Everything is 'on show' in Cairns and the external image is the most important element. Live here and realise that to a tourist you are often as significant as a palm tree. To question the vision is to invite possible contrary expression. And the question may disrupt the lie and shatter tourism's delicate position that rests on a vision of beauty, mass popularity and most importantly, a good time.



Arone Meeks *Paris Dreaming* 1990 Linocut Courtesy the artist

When asking Arone Meeks, an established and successful artist from the Laura tribal area north of Cairns, how tourism affects his practice, he offers a similar response to Dominic Johns. Meek replies that artists have to compete with tourism for both the financial and physical space. This, he believes, leads to art becoming a commodity rather than an opportunity for risk taking and a process by which to grow and make mistakes. Yet Meeks and partner, Geoff Dixon, agree that because they 'have a momentum and established structure separate from the local they can put in and pull out' as needs be.²

In the catalogue to Dixon's 2005 exhibition *Sentinel* in the KickArts gallery, Russell Milledge states:

*...through anthropocentric vignettes of deep blue-green we are empathetically transported to verdant wetlands and tropical coastlines. Nevertheless the flourishing surface is a sinister cortex.*³

The subtext here is that although Dixon is informed and inspired by the natural environment, he successfully subverts this through juxtaposition: elegant bird life rendered so heavily it becomes dinosaurian together with subtle sci-fi images only noticed upon the second or third glance. A disturbing resonance between the deep past to the far future. The beautiful present is pushed into the past just as it is paradoxically in the presence of the future. A collapsing of the circle of time that brings all things into the now along with the implicit forgotten deeds and misdemeanors. These ancient creatures seem to be judging our visions of the future. An historical reminder of the cracks in the rose-coloured lens of the tourist eye.

Arone Meeks has traveled and lived in cities from Sydney to Paris. As he says, although Cairns is conducive for him to create because of the quality and pace of life, it is his wider community here, not the artistic community, that informs his work. He creates and exhibits here yet ultimately admits the majority of his work will end up in capital cities and southern states, pushing much of the artistic dialogue outside of the region.

All three artists share their work, talents and processes extensively throughout the local community. Significantly, they all also travel regularly both to promote and inform their work. They agree that they find people here both outgoing and generous. So why do they also all agree that collaboration, and, by extension, true dialogue, is lacking in Cairns? There's a strong sense from speaking with Cairns artists that the financial and intellectual pressures of tourism curb the free development of inquisitive cultural work. Perhaps in time, Cairns will take the next step, intellectualise its obvious adolescent mantra and grow big enough to house truly conceptual development. The images are there, the intent is there and the infrastructure is slowly growing. There is the new



Dominic Johns *Cocky Clock* 2005 Stencil on acrylic Courtesy the artist

Contemporary Art Centre (COCA), rising collectives such as The Upholstery and the established Cairns Regional Gallery. But the conceptual hole remains.

As the housing estates claw their way up rainforested hill slopes, as yet another high-set Queenslander topples to make way for concrete citadels, tourism and development become more and more the central tenet of our being. The metaphor jars our sense of self. Ironically, perhaps the touristic escape provides opportunity to dodge our own complicity in the outward expression of the region in which we reside. An ugly reflection best kept at arms length. Alternately, it is indeed a concept well worth artistic pursuit.

Simon Tait is a Cairns-based multimedia artist, reviewer and filmmaker.

¹ Conversation with the artist, 20/12/2005.

² Conversation with the artist, 8/1/2006.

³ Milledge, Russell. *Sentinel* [Exh Cat] Cairns: KickArts Contemporary Arts, 2005. p2.

An Interview with Orange / Brown:

This interview was conducted via email between January and February 2006.

Kris Carlon: The key members of Orange/Brown are spread across the globe, and the artists affiliated with O/B are even further far-flung. How does this dynamic of distance affect the cohesion of O/B, and is this why O/B is so diverse?

Anthony Burnham: O/B is diverse because of the way we use a situation to its full potential making it work to our advantage. We have been doing shows and projects with no funding, using alternative ways to function. It's not about trying to be diverse, it just happens. Having the core members spread out is exciting and opens up new possibilities.

Lance Blomgren: This distance communication thing, while at times frustrating, seems to fit O/B's tendency towards dyslexia and poetic misunderstanding.

Joey Dubuc: We're just getting used to it. Fortunately, we have a history of friendship binding us together, something that goes beyond any kind of professional relationship. And before splitting off to our respective destinations, we were kicking around enough ideas and projects to last a few years.

KC: Is yours a widespread collective model, or is O/B fairly unique?

Justin Stephens: I don't think our group idea is revolutionary, but from time to time, like in *The End*, we do invite artists from abroad to partake, to stimulate new relationships between the work and artists.

LB: I think O/B's collective model is shared with a number of artist groups out there. What made O/B unique from the beginning was the focus on getting people and energy from different communities to collaborate with. These days we are looking to mix things up—work together more on projects, just the four of us, as well as the occasional massive endeavour like *The End*.

JD: A few groups in Montreal could be said to have shared qualities with O/B, but these likenesses, I think, are superficial. We encourage artists of different disciplines to try things out knowing very well of the uncertainty of the outcome. Someone who's comfortable writing or taking pictures is going to have a hellride sitting in front of a blank piece of paper with a pen in their hands. And these works sit side-by-side with artists more comfortable with the project at hand. The work made is never juried. Our approach is experimental.

KC: Do you think there is a universal language that all artists share that allows them to work meaningfully beyond differences of language, culture and location?

JD: Yes and no. The mass media certainly evens things out, whether we like it or not. Well-publicised events and images will become "universal". And love, happiness, misery, and death are seemingly cross-cultural constants. The flipside is that the differences between us might be more important than our commonalities.

JS: In terms of an international group show, I think it is really about throwing the chips in the air and seeing where they land. Things may possibly collide culturally, and the outcome be a hit or miss, but I suppose the chance of things clashing demonstrates that stuff like the internet hasn't yet flattened out cultures entirely.

LB: One common language shared by many of the artists in *The End* is a return to fairly uncomplicated ideas of beauty and wonder. The work of O/B, while although usually born out of an interest in the idea, tends to never allow that to be all. The work, on some level, seems to transcend the concept that gave it life.

KC: What are some of the benefits (and problems) of working in a collective situation like O/B?

LB: The benefits are inspiration, closeness and intimacy—non-physical usually. The problems generally come out of giving up individual ownership, putting the ego in check, for the collective endeavour. Feelings can often be hurt. Civil war is always a step away.

AB: The collective energy is definitely an important benefit, but good energy spreads, so much so that it can sometimes get out of control when a large group is involved. This can get problematic at times. Being part of O/B is about not having control while still being able to make decisions.

JD: Administrative and political snags are certainly a drawback, but these are usually ironed out pretty quickly, or at least, eventually. What's so great about O/B is never knowing what's going to happen. We share ideas and give space to things that might never have happened given the restrictive and prescribed conventions of your typical group show. I think this puts a little bit of life in the work, in all of its awkward, unrefined beauty.

Orange / Brown: *The End*, H Block Gallery, QUT Kelvin Grove
16 February—11 March 2006

Kris Carlon is a freelance writer, curator and artist based in Brisbane.

Animals as Allegory

QUT Art Museum, Brisbane | 3 February—9 April 2006

Victoria Bladen



Michael Zavros *Love Me* 2005 Oil on board Private collection

This exhibition, curated by Simone Jones, collates a significant range of artistic responses to animals in various media. It illuminates humanity's paradoxical relationship with animals, which is at once dependent and exploitative; scientific and symbolic. The works explore several related themes. While some works celebrate animal life in its beauty and complexity, others confront us with the consequences of exercising power over animals, ultimately based on a construction of humanity as outside the machinery of nature.

Some artists explore the 'humanity' of animals through portraiture. Maria Fernanda Cardoso and Ross Harley's innovative *Chicken face, Fish face and Bat face* (2001-2003) startles the viewer with elements strange and recognisable from the operatic grandeur of a fish to the masked Venetian mystery of a chicken. Ben Quilty creates carnivalesque portraits of budgies in slabs of impasto paint. Such approaches invite consideration of animals as unique individuals, rather than generic species.

Lucy Griggs draws on elements of natural magic and animal metamorphosis common to folklore traditions. *A Ladybeetle whispers the story of the Rabbit in the Moon to a dead bee* (2003) conveys a gentle harmony between insect and plant life in muted tones. Above, the rabbit stirs its

magic in the moon. The significant role of animals in indigenous narratives and cosmology appears with lyric grace in works such as George Milpururru's *Magpie geese* (1994) and Dennis Nona's *Awai tithuyil (Pelican constellation)* (2004).

Several artists explore issues of consumption and human impact on animal environments. Marian Drew's work presents disturbing juxtapositions of food with animals killed on the roads. The consequences of human actions via introduced species also confront us in Pamela Mei-Leng See's *Inside every toad* (2005) which succinctly conveys a quiet horror in the cut lines of the cane toad having devoured a native frog.

The potential for animal imagery to be read allegorically is present in many of the works. Sharon Green's moving *Devout sadness* (2005) draws parallels between the deer hunt and the male pursuit and capture of the 'trophy wife'. In Michael Zavros' *Love Me* (2005) the spectacle of the peacock's fan seems a subtle allegory of the vanity of glitzy celebrity performers.

Other works explore themes of nature's complex orders. The short-lived beauty of the butterfly made it a symbol of the brevity of life in medieval iconography and seventeenth century Dutch still life painting. Its ephemeral nature belies its pivotal role in the health of eco-systems. Both these aspects are conveyed in Fernanda Cardoso's *Butterfly drawing* (2004) in which the detached wings of the exquisite Ulysses butterfly are arranged to form a perfect circle. In Tiffany Shafran's *Intricate soul* (2003) a bird (an ancient symbol of the soul in many cultures) is set against a patterned background, suggesting a cosmic order that surrounds individual spiritual entities.

The innovative images and objects presented in this exhibition remind us of our enduring fascination with animals while questioning our actions and assumptions of control over their lives. Given our impressive and accelerating record of species destruction, the exhibition also functions as a celebration of what is passing. In the future such contemporary responses may become traces of absence in the nature matrix. The exhibition will also enable the artists to view their own work in new perspectives, as it shares space with related works.

Victoria Bladen is a PhD student in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland.

Regarding Retro: Reanimations of the Preloved

Museum of Brisbane | 8 December 2005—19 March 2006

Nadine Cameron



Elaine Campaner *Pounce* 2004 Digital photographic print Courtesy Museum of Brisbane

The human habit of collecting, compiling, coveting and arranging objects has a lengthy history. Many people have an overwhelming fascination with owning and touching something from another time or place not their own. The exhibition *Regarding Retro: Reanimations of the Preloved*, is a reflection on the fetishising of objects by eighteen Australian artists. The exhibition explores the concept of reuse, with the artists recontextualising and drawing out the multiplicity of meaning in discarded objects.

Not only is there an overlaying of past histories within each work on display, but also within the commentary of the show itself. Included along with assemblages, sculpture and film, are a series of photographs by Sydney photographer, Martin Mischkulnig, of portraits of collectors set amidst their collections, including some of the artists in the show.

Superficially, it appears that the collecting methodology of artists and collectors—the former to make and the latter to have—are dissimilar. But given further consideration, the distinction seems much more subtle—even the collector's accumulation is a recontextualisation of objects. Utilitarian objects that once provided a singular function are transformed into objects of comparison, to be laid out and compared to the next addition to the fold.

But it is the strength of works such as Luke Roberts' poignant film, *Living Arthur Street On* (1983/2005), which defines this as an exhibition of artworks beyond

their collections. Here the notion of past histories re-emerges in a present tense. In 1983, Roberts filmed his house in New Farm brimming with his collection of 'good' kitsch items; the film was then postproduced and overlaid with music in 2005. The stratification of time ebbs through the film, poised with a melancholy of looking back to see forward, perhaps alluding to the fluidity of both past and future when considered from the locus of an ever-changing present. By utilising objects and techniques from then and now Roberts highlights through time a cyclical totality and an overlaying of generations. The cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth is embedded in the essence of the retro object.

Mother (1994), by Christine Turner, is an assemblage comprising a myriad of biscuit tins crammed into a 1950s side cabinet, adorned by a female bust with a starburst surrounding its head. It is imbued with religious overtones, a sense of sacredness and simple strength reflected in the mother figure. The work could also be viewed as homage to the mother as giver and preserver of life (and often the central figure in a domestic context). In a later work, *Boardgame for Van Gogh* (2004), Turner again uses biscuit tins and serving trays, but the tins are mounted uneasily, gridlike, on a board. In contrast to *Mother*, *Boardgame for Van Gogh* is suggestive of the laying out of a dead person, orderly and without the animation of the lively *Mother* work.

In Elaine Campaner's work, the use of things from the past broadens to the incorporation in her work of the once living. The dead mice included in her photographs extend the notion of reuse toward reanimation. Campaner gives new life to these creatures that, congruent with many of the objects in the exhibition, have become in a sense reincarnated—as a vehicle of expression for the artist.

By illuminating the collecting experience, *Regarding Retro: Reanimations of the Preloved* successfully demonstrates the pursuit and transformation of the secondhand, oft-discarded object, the foraging and claiming of the neglected and its elevation as a newly created wonderment.

Nadine Cameron is a recent graduate in Art History from the University of Queensland.

Fresh Cut 2006

Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane | 4 February — 11 March 2006

Michele Helmrich

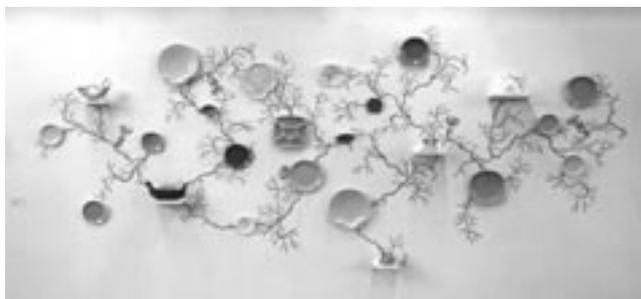


Daniel McKewen ...*Make the World go Round* (3 parts) (detail) 2004 Acrylic on plywood

An art critic told me not so long ago, with regard to a piece of affirmative criticism he'd written, that it's nice to be nice. In writing about an exhibition of artists fresh out of art college, such a view is worth noting. One does not wish to shoot down birds still testing the strength of their feathers, as it were, especially when the hesitant may well develop the more interesting flight patterns.

The curator's rationale is briefly stated:

All the artists have drawn on familiar and personal experiences. Domestic situations and objects play an overwhelming role. While there is nothing unusual about this, what makes this group interesting is the intensity with which they have explored their physical, psychological and social surrounds.¹



Kirra Jamison *Untitled* 2005 Ceramic and acrylic

For ten years the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) has been selecting and exhibiting the work of students who've just graduated from local art schools. This year IMA Deputy Director David Broker and Exhibitions Coordinator Vanessa McRae have determined 'the cut' from Queensland College of Art at Griffith University, QUT's Creative Industries, and the University of Southern Queensland.

If the art schools are point scoring, then QCA will be preening itself with ten students selected, and QUT's high-profile Creative Industries will be less than flattered with only two students' work appearing on the IMA's white walls, neither of whom (Kirsty Bruce and Daniel McKewen) appear enraptured with 21st century high-tech practice. Being even-handed isn't on the curators' agenda and neither is promotion, since the catalogue fails to tell us who attended which college.

If this is a survey of the best in show—and that's neither confirmed nor denied—then one could assume the above similarities are happenstance. And anyway, the brief spans a wide arc.

So, should I be nice? If 'intensity' is the defining factor, then is being 'nice' an honest response? Does Emma McLean with her 'performance-for-video' work *Looking at You Makes Me Want to Purge* (2005) expect the viewer to voice platitudes while watching saliva and sausage fat fall in gross globules from her painted mouth? Yes, we're confronted. Artists have been confronting

their small and ever-enduring audiences for decades, even if they weren't making a point about the beauty business, let alone the so-called 'abject qualities of being an Australian female.'

There's no argument that McLean's video is the most confronting work in Fresh Cut, perhaps necessitating its separate room. More intriguing for this viewer is Paul Mumme's video work in which a man in a suit stands waist-deep in water as if nonchalantly waiting for a bus. Rain falls on his umbrella, and then the rivulets ascend back up to the taut plastic as time rewinds. The absurdity of this piece is quietly compelling, a quality which also resonates, though without the degree of wit, in Peter Booth's elongated 'mutant' washing machine and in Kirra Jamison's *Untitled* (2005) wall piece, in which plain-coloured China plates and vases sit like strange flowers on a wall-painted vine that, on close inspection, looks more



Emma McLean *Looking at You Makes Me Want to Purge* 2005 DVD 7 mins

like a tracery of veins or underwater creatures. Restraint reins in the kitsch quality, the work instead hovering on Chinoiserie curiosity. Andrew Rewald also exercises restraint on the kitchen items in his 'home sweet home' wall plaques, though to more alienating and surreal effect.



Christian Flynn *Untitled* (installation view) 2005 Laser cut plywood

Text figures in the work of several artists. Christian Flynn's is the most cryptic, 'GRIEF', 'FEAR' and 'HURT' holding a wall as if a crossword without boxes, the dark letters crafted with typeset neatness. They intrigue insofar as we don't know whether the words allude to the domestic/global or the abovementioned 'physical, psychological and social' possibilities. Davina Kelly's embossed lino prints,

Paper Roses (2005), raise the text like accusations of failed promises, a subtext to linear portraits. Any links she makes between relationships, songs of 'imitation love', and recent Indigenous social history are made with a light touch, and the work is more moving because of it. Ritchie Ares Doña rigorously folds and sculpts the pages of books, appearing to relish simple text on paper. The resulting abstract forms, reminiscent of Christmas decorations that fan out to become bells and balls, are linked to fall like a carved column, casting a shadow across the gallery floor.

That two printmakers have been included would give heart to those who persevere with this somewhat threatened artform. Florence Tetuira's etchings of dilly bags beautifully link two traditional media in which line is essential—Tetuira's adopted media and that of her mother's country, Kuku and Yalanji, in lower Cape York.

Jennifer Lowrey's gestural paintings of storybook bunnies are at odds with Daniel McKewen's cold fragments of cigarette ads that apparently 'nudge our desires'—better to see the film *Good Night and Good Luck* for that play. A more engaging take on popular culture comes with Kirsty Bruce's *Untitled* (2005) in which a range of images, a number of them displaying an eye for tone, sit on the wall as might images in a girl's bedroom. A conceptual intricacy steers the work from the banal, with the expressions of those depicted worth noting, as if each were an excerpt from an individual drama. Not for a moment banal, however, are Gail Cowley's *Numbered Portraits* (2005). Seemingly naïve portraits of prison and hospital inmates are painted without embellishment in the bottom of enamel bowls, cups and plates, each with a number and often without eyes. While massed between floor and wall they appear cluttered, individually they are haunting and compelling.

Tetuira and Cowley's work offers an apt reminder that a depth of personal experience, if keenly tapped, can provide an edge that the art school nest cannot.

Michele Helmrich is a writer, curator, and Co-ordinator of Public Programs at the University Art Museum at the University of Queensland.

¹ All quotes from David Broker and Vanessa McRae. *Fresh Cut 2006* [Exh Cat] Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2006.

All images courtesy the artist and IMA Fresh Cut 2006

Priscilla Bracks: Making the Empire Cross

Raw Space Galleries, South Brisbane | 14 February—10 March 2006

Nicholas Thompson



Priscilla Bracks *To Be Continued* 2005 Lenticular image Courtesy of the artist

Priscilla Bracks' *Making The Empire Cross*, while technically engaging, is also a successful critique of our reception, criticism and consumption of current world events.

The show consists of nine works created by a process of lenticular imaging. This method of photographic production creates the impression of two distinct images that are revealed as the viewer shifts perspective. Bracks' images draw on the visual language of comic book heroes and use posed children's action figures to play out the conflict between stereotypes of 'heroic Americans' and 'shifty looking Arabs'.

Bracks' choice of lenticular imaging is significant. The technique suggests a narrative in the individual works as the viewer moves, however, ultimately the opposite is true. The stunted movement alludes to the selectivity of what is presented. The thick plastic coating creates a sense of removal from the conflict—the viewer stares into an artificial realm where what is seen has been painstakingly selected and over-dramatised—successfully critiquing media techniques in biased war correspondence. The events themselves are simplified into good guys versus bad guys, the colourful action scenes leaving no room for grey areas. This potential of the medium to construct binary relationships is further enforced in other works, most notably in *Bearded Orientals Making the Empire Cross*

(2006), as the face of Jesus Christ changes to that of Osama bin Laden.

Bracks' works also suggest the commercial and consumable potential of our current world events. The process of lenticular imaging is often seen in Catholic and Hindu images of devotion, ultimately as consumable religion. The medium is also employed for collectable images found in cereal boxes. Bracks' work suggests a similar potential, as the images of US glory arrange themselves as a collectable series as well as religious symbols. The work adopts a further position of worship, or at least contemplation, by its positioning in a gallery.

An arguable precedent for Bracks' work would be Jeff Koons. Koons realised the link between aesthetic object and social icon. He similarly recognised the security afforded by objects. Bracks reiterates this link: her GI Joes and Commando Barbies are offered as reassurance through their connotations and are magnified to devotional status by their mock religious posturing. Koons would not have imbued his work with such overt political commentary, but both he and Bracks recognise the power afforded to the artist through appropriating popular imagery.

Ultimately, Bracks' work challenges our perception of acts of US neo-imperialism, though perhaps more in terms of complacency. The work is exhibited at an interesting moment in time, when Iraq and 9/11 are beginning to slip from the forefront of our public consciousness as new concerns emerge. As the public shifts its attention to other issues, Bracks' final work in the show forces the viewer to recognise the tendency to assume resolution once personal threat has diminished. Barbie takes a photograph of the peace process in *To Be Continued* (2006), all in a day's work.

Is the western world guilty of consuming the Middle Eastern conflict, adopting it as a cause or discussion point and then disposing of it once we are out of harm's way? While it seems that Australians do not approach this issue the same way as the American public, and critique the foolishness of foreign actions, we too are guilty of treating current affairs as passing fads.

Nicholas Thompson is a gallery assistant, freelance writer and honours student in Art History at the University of Queensland.

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