

SOUTH

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Modern western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees.

– Edward Said¹

The conceptual seed for this exhibition was germinated more than a decade ago, when I wandered, somewhat awestruck, through the multiple venues of *Documenta11* (2002) in Kassel, Germany. The exhibition was curated by Nigerian-born Okwui Enwezor, the first non-European to direct the revered quinquennial (and curator of the upcoming 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, only the second person to curate both major exhibitions). Enwezor's *Documenta* doubled the number of non-western artists from previous exhibitions and its model featured a series of 'platforms' where discourse took place in far locales – New Delhi in India, the Caribbean island of St Lucia, and the African city of Lagos in Nigeria before culminating in the Kassel exhibition. It's easy to forget that, prior to then, it was rare to see contemporary art from third world and developing countries presented 'equitably' so to speak, alongside the great names of the developed North. In a bombed and indifferently-rebuilt north German city, I encountered an exhilarating variety of new work installed in surviving baroque palaces and late modern spaces. Art from Benin, Cuba, Iran, Cameroon, Argentina, Mexico, Senegal, India, South Africa, Lebanon, Nunavut, and more. Questioning, restless and sometimes disturbing, the exhibition spoke of worlds unknown, yet somehow familiar. Destiny Deacon was the sole representative from the antipodes and she showed quietly poignant black-and-white photographs [*Postcards from Mummy* (1998)] taken on a road trip through her mother's country in Far North Queensland. It seemed I had come to the heart of Europe to be reminded that some of the most significant work was being made in its one-time colonies and vassals. Alongside parallel

developments in literature, dance and music, it was a case of 'The Empire Strikes Back'.

Twelve years on, amidst the worldwide explosion of contemporary art biennials and art fairs, artists from diverse cultures exhibit worldwide. At home the Biennale of Sydney has been a significant force in this regard, as has the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, which has presented the work of contemporary artists in Australia's geographic region since 1993. In terms of contemporary Latin American and African art, Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art has presented major exhibitions such as *The Hours: Visual Arts of Contemporary Latin America* (2007) and solo exhibitions of artists Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (2011–12), Yinka Shonibare (2008–9) and Wangechi Mutu (2013). As the cultural landscape has developed the establishment of private museums like Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art, Sydney's White Rabbit and Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, and the independent 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, has enabled Australian audiences to see more of the dynamic art emerging from China, Indonesia, South Asia, Melanesia and Polynesia. Australia's regional galleries are playing their part, expanding their programs to include international artists, and not just the usual suspects.

The 'Global Contemporary'² phenomenon has given rise to huge volumes of critical discourse, not all of it in favour. The unease focuses on the levelling effect of international biennials and art fairs, where work emerging from unique cultural contexts is generalised under broad internationalist categories (for instance 'Identity Art'), arguably thwarting deeper readings of the work itself. On balance, however, the verdict is positive. The noted Mexican curator and critic Cuauhtémoc Medina, whose essay *Contemp(t)orary: Eleven theses* (2010) is reproduced in full in this catalogue, discusses the art-historical tags 'modernism' and 'contemporary':

NEWELL HARRY
Untitled (DAD/MUM/MAD/DUM), 2013 (detail)
Tongan Ngatu (bark cloth),
ink, 279 × 118 × 6cm

The global art circus of biennales, fairs, and global art museums has forced an end to the use of a metaphor that understood geography in terms of historical succession – it is no longer possible to rely upon the belatedness of the South in presuming that artistic culture goes from the centre to the periphery.

...

And while the critical consequences of the policies of inclusion are less central to the agenda of the South than the critique of stereotypes, the activation of social memory, and the pursuit of different kinds of cultural agency, it remains the case that ‘contemporary art’ marks the stage at which different geographies and localities are finally considered within the same network of questions and strategies. Art becomes ‘contemporary’ in the strong sense when it refers to the progressive obsolescence of narratives that concentrated cultural innovation so completely in colonial and imperial metropolises as to finally identify modernism with what we ought to properly describe as ‘NATO art’.³

Despite this, it is apparent that Australia’s cultural gaze, and the aspirations of many young artists, remain fixed on the Northern citadels of New York, London, Berlin, Seoul, Shanghai, Tokyo... a ‘post-NATO’, G8 cultural hegemony if you like. Beyond the contemporary scene, exhibitions of Italian old masters remain a sure-fire winner for our art institutions, and people will pay to see anything involving the words ‘Impressionism’ and ‘Paris’. When exhibitions have an Asian focus, they tend towards antiquities, sacred art and cultural treasures. And that’s all well and good – a large majority of Australians have a European or North Asian heritage, and experiencing our historical inheritance first-hand is certainly worthwhile. But, what of contemporary conversations with the other great Southern zones? In recent decades there has been an explosion of extraordinary work in Africa and Latin America, as well as our own Oceanic region. We have arguably more in common with these zones – as former European colonies, as young and vigorous new worlds, and as tributaries of the cultural North – than we do with Europe, yet we hear and see little of their contemporary art.

And what of Australia, an ‘upside down’ country where the cool, cerebral North is in the South, where the cultural landscape is an uneasy amalgam

of old Europe and much older Indigenous cultures? An overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic-European population of cultural Northerners inhabits a geographical and psychic South, the *Terra Incognita* of the old maps, the abyssal no-man’s-lands of the Northern imagination. As Australians strive for an easy internationalism within a fully wired global village, we know we are somehow different, whatever our parentage. There are many iterations of ‘otherness’ in our society. Personally, I feel this alterity most strongly when I look down at the interior desert from an aeroplane, and understand afresh that this land has been inhabited for over 50,000 years. I see where I live, in the narrow green fringe around the vastness. I see a thinly populated ‘Western’ nation-state, recreated on a great Southern island that is a country that is a continent. I see our multicultural success, how it is studied by other countries, and I wonder why, unlike gastronomy, this contemporary diversity is not always reflected in our cultural institutions.

In selecting the artists for *SOUTH*, I have set out to show work that could only have emerged from a particular locale and time – work with a strong sense of place and personal narrative. I have also striven to show the work of Australian artists of many cultural backgrounds, and most crucially to place their work in context with their Southern peers, in this case from Mexico and South Africa. Like Australia these countries were, not so long ago, polyglot amalgams of many (Indigenous) nations, upon which a dominant colonial tongue, national borders and an overarching nationhood were imposed. Mexico lies in the Northern Hemisphere, but relationally it is a South – economic, transactional, emotional – a cultural fracture-zone, which fought fiercely for its independence. South Africa is another kind of South, one where until a mere twenty years ago diverse Indigenous peoples endured a sustained oppression by a settler minority. The cultural memory and trauma of these histories is inseparable from the experience of Mexican and South African artists today. As in Australia, the North’s art academies were also imported, with their strict codifications of iconography, genre and historicity, and their influence has been sustained through the eras of Duchamp, Beuys, Warhol and Bourgeois.

In this sense, the thirteen artists in *SOUTH* inhabit multiple artworlds – they participate in the ‘Global Contemporary’, but simultaneously they tap into other narratives and older histories – tribal,

ERIC BRIDGEMAN

Wilma, 2010

Fibreglass, acrylics, linen, lightbulbs, spoon and fork, bilum cap, feathers, trophies, birdseed, variable dimensions



spiritual, ecological, mythical, phenomenological, metaphysical. It is their roaming of these cultural borderlands and liminal zones that makes their work so vital, and in a very real sense 'worldly'. From the singularity of their vision emerges a surprising universality. However the aim of this exhibition is not to promote some sort of false equivalence in the practice of very different artists, but rather to facilitate a rowdy and unpredictable conversation, with many voices talking at once, each in its own argot and local accent. I hope this undermines the levelling effect discussed above, and perhaps, encourages us to see their work as a '... nomadic kind of practice that forbids any attempt at specification beyond the micro-narratives that each artist or cultural movement produces along the way'.⁴

Among these 'micro-narratives' certain common threads can be traced. Masquerade and metaphorical personae feature in the work of several artists, notably Eric Bridgeman and Diego Ramirez. Brisbane-based Bridgeman's imagery and practice draws equally on a suburban upbringing

and his Papua New Guinea highland heritage, and he is often a subject in his own work, inhabiting a series of metaphorical characters. His photomedia and video projects interrogate Australian sporting culture, ethnographic representations and tropes such as 'blackface', gender politics, pop culture memes and indeed the very process of functioning as an artist. As a young, urban, black man he is the 'other' in Australian society, yet is not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, imposing on him a further layer of alterity.

Melbourne-based Diego Ramirez is from Guadalajara in Mexico's mountainous Pacific West, and like most Mexicans his heritage is a combination of Hispanic and Indigenous influences. For *SOUTH* he playfully re-imagines himself as a semi-mythical 'axolotl-man', playing out on his fascination with these larval salamanders. His installation *axolotl's Smile* (2014) explores how 'the trope of axolotl anthropomorphism has been translated across different cultures in the fields of arts, literature and pop culture', and how 'the axolotl as a cultural symbol has generated a large genealogy of cultural objects that have called upon the axolotl as a metaphor for the Latin American condition'.⁵

Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser, an enduring Indigenous/non-Indigenous artistic partnership, create distinctive personal worlds wherein certain character and object memes recur. Their photomedia works often depict everyday objects, mysteriously charged with sinister meanings, and their large extended family are frequently subjects in a series of 'dress-ups' and tableaux which explore quirky cultural tropes – from black vampires to fairground stalls. Deacon is of G'ua- G'ua (Far North Queensland) and Erub/Mer (Torres Strait) descent, and the installations occupy an uncomfortable terrain between family fun and a savagely funny 'blak'⁶ humour, laced with unbearable pathos. In *Home Security* (2007-14), a group of black dolls inhabit a kind of postmodern rumpus-room, where they watch on TV old documentary footage from mission schools, where many young Aboriginal children were taken for their 'betterment' after being forcibly removed from their families – a practice which aimed to remove all traces of Aboriginal culture and language that continued with official sanction until the 1960s.

The collaboration of identical twin brothers Hasan and Husain Essop, from Cape Town, South Africa, also enact and photograph elaborate

tableaux in which they themselves are subjects. Their works exhibit a sophisticated theatricality and technical mastery, expressing their ‘Cape Malay’ (in fact largely Indonesian) and Muslim heritage. They state: ‘creating a moment in time, a dream or something seen, we tell a story of growing up. Being competitive with each other is a constant battle for the best. We use our own iconography to provide a political context for the wars being fought on a local and global scale.’⁷

Also working in photomedia, Zanele Muholi, of South African Zulu descent, has for many years documented the ‘invisible sisterhood’ of South Africa’s lesbian community in an ongoing series of black-and-white portraits, titled *Faces and Phases* (2006–), of which 80 feature in *SOUTH*. These strong young women regard us with a defiant non-smiling gaze, leaving viewers to confront their own stereotypical ideas about race, sexuality and gender. The unadorned quality of these images is their strength. The message: ‘We exist. We are here. Deal with it’.

Sydney-born Newell Harry presents a dual-screen video work, *Untitled (Words and Pictures)* (2013), in which 147 black-and-white photographs taken in Vanuatu are combined with anagrammatic *Bislama*⁸ words and fragments of recorded audio. The video ‘converses’ with six large-scale *tapa* banners, (a traditional Pacific Islander material made from bark cloth) which are inscribed with anagrammatic English words. Harry is of South African ‘Cape Coloured’⁹ and French Mauritian heritage, and has spent his working life wandering between Australia, the Vanuatu archipelago, India, Africa and northeast Asia. His practice embodies his experience of exile and restlessness, ranging across anthropology, colonial trade and cargo cults, language, religion, cultural diaspora and exchange. The artist’s explorations of words and images fuse with a distinctive materiality, subtle metaphors for his nomadic existence.

Contested histories and travellers’ tales also feature prominently in the work of Joan Ross and Michael Goldberg. Ross, a Sydney-based artist, whose background is Anglo-Celtic, is fascinated by Australian colonial narratives and depictions of flora and fauna. Recent video works have ‘intervened’ in the picture-space of the works of early settler-painters such as the 19th-century convict-turned-artist Joseph Lycett. The works often show genteel ladies and gentlemen strolling about the landscape, while contented Aborigines



MICHAEL GOLDBERG
justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude 2014, maquette (detail) for site-specific installation, variable dimensions

are depicted in their ‘natural’ state, often having a traditional ceremony among the eucalyptus trees. Ross re-frames these soothing historical narratives, creating compelling video works that question the veracity of painting as a cultural transmitter.

Michael Goldberg, born in South Africa, but of European ancestry, has lived in Sydney since 1988. His diverse curatorial and art practice includes sculpture and site-specific installation investigating wide-ranging themes including colonial histories, museology, financial and commodity markets, the ‘War on Terror’ and video game simulations. These projects often present alternative views of political and historical narratives. Goldberg has created a site-specific ‘Southern Cross’ installation, titled *justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude*¹⁰, in the Hazelhurst gardens, inspired in part by the stick charts once used by Marshall Islanders to navigate the Pacific Ocean by canoe.

Brisbane-based Archie Moore is of Aboriginal (Kamilaroi¹¹) descent, and his work references this heritage, often concealing an ironic fist of political comment within the velvet glove of his facture. His objects, paintings and installations meld a deeply personal iconography with a sophisticated materiality, usually emanating a subversive humour. Moore is also a musician and performer, and a serious reader with an encyclopedic knowledge of Western philosophical positions. For *SOUTH* he presents a new project titled *Depaint*, in which his childhood memories of place are embodied in a site-specific ‘paint’ installation.

Also exploring notions of place and displacement is Columbian-born, Sydney-based Maria Fernanda Cardoso, who has long worked with materials from the natural world – ranging from cattle bones to



preserved insects, frogs, starfish, emu feathers and live fleas. She is fascinated by classification systems and the taxonomical methods of natural history museums, and the tension between these hierarchies and the natural world. For *SOUTH* Cardoso revisits her extensive work with emus, a creature inextricably bound up with Australian national identity. As a migrant who has lived across three different continents, the emu becomes for Cardoso a metaphor for a connection with place and ‘an interrogation of locational identity informed by Cardoso’s personal experiences’.¹²

A powerful sense of her Mexican identity and ancient cultural inheritance imbues the work of Betsabeé Romero, who lives and works in the heart of Mexico City, one of the world’s largest and oldest urban conurbations. Her work references contemporary tropes of consumption, transportation and popular culture, critiquing her country’s rampant ‘petro-culture’ through recurrent use of cars and the regalia of motoring. Her use of motifs drawn from Aztec, Zapotec and many other Mesoamerican cultures permeate her installations with multi-layered, historical resonances. In this exhibition Romero realises a site-specific work that incorporates Indigenous motifs from many cultures and periods of history.

Among these works I hope you will discover resonances and similarities, divergences and dialectics. Artists are in a sense society’s ‘seers’, and through their eyes I hope you will discover new ways of seeing the world. Welcome to the Global South. Enjoy the path less travelled.

David Corbet is an independent curator, writer and designer.

REFERENCES

- 1 Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 2002
- 2 The term ‘Global Contemporary’ is used here to indicate a perspective where contemporary works previously ascribed the status of (often anonymous) ‘ethnographic artefacts’ are now viewed by the developed North as equal to its own contemporary art.
- 3 Medina, Cuauhtémoc ‘Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses’, *e-flux journal*, New York, 2010
- 4 Medina, Cuauhtémoc ‘Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses’, *e-flux journal*, New York, 2010
- 5 Ramirez, Diego, ‘aXolotl’s Smile’, artist statement, 2014
- 6 The terms ‘blak’ and ‘blakness’ were coined by Destiny Deacon in 1991 and began to be used by artists as a way of repositioning the derogatory use of the word ‘black’ to describe Aboriginal people.
- 7 Essop, Hasan and Husain Essop, artist statement, 2014
- 8 *Bislama* is a pidgin language of Vanuatu.
- 9 This term has historically often been used to differentiate people of mixed race in South Africa’s Western Cape from those of ‘Cape Malay’ descent. Both phrases persist as non-perjorative descriptors, however many people of these heritages prefer to be described simply as people of colour.
- 10 Ivor Evans, the fourteen-year-old designer of the Australian flag (1901), used the stars of the Southern Cross to represent Dante’s four moral virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude.
- 11 Kamilaroi is the language of one of the four largest Aboriginal nations, extending from upper New South Wales to southeast Queensland.
- 12 Jaspers, Anneke, *Maria Fernanda Cardoso: Emu Next Skm*, exhibition catalogue, Grantpirrie, Sydney, 2006

Left:
MARIA FERNANDA CARDOSO

Emu works, 2006-08 (detail), installation, variable dimensions

Right:
JOAN ROSS

Who is gonna clean up this mess?, 2012 (detail), from the series *Touching Other People’s Shopping*, hand painted pigment print on cotton rag paper, 32 x 50 cm