

Once Removed

Once Removed is an exhibition of three installations that refer to aspects of place and the predicament of displacement. Interpreting facets of Australia's environment and culture, as well as of the former convent in which the exhibition is situated, the works reveal differing approaches to place and displacement by young Australian artists of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

As a way of negotiating conflicting local and global influences, artists often make sense of the world by basing their ideas about it in the place in which it is made. In the case of a new generation of Australian artists, as represented in this exhibition, reference to place, whether the artists' native or adopted home of Australia or in the sense of site-specific art practice, informs and underpins the conceptual rationale of their art practice.

Over the last two decades there has been a widespread rejection of flag-waving in a world where nationalism is increasingly linked to xenophobic and inflammatory extremes of patriotism. In the absence of nationalist insinuation, however, exhibitions defined by geopolitical borders still have the opportunity to evoke aspects of the place from which they derive. Venice established the world's first visual arts biennale in 1895 and today, as the leader in a field of over 100 such events worldwide, it is the last in the world to retain the national pavilion model. Ironically, it is precisely this preservation by the Venice Biennale of spaces in which national difference can be voiced, that lends the event with a perspective not shared by the scores of other biennial and triennial group exhibitions organised by curators working from a singular, thematic premise.

Yet as the rest of the world's recurrent international exhibitions reveal, as the march of globalisation continues to infiltrate every aspect of our world it becomes increasingly difficult, some may argue superfluous, to articulate a notion of place in the context of international art events. The fact that globalisation has been paralleled by a sometimes destructive rise of nationalism in many parts of the world is a powerful disincentive to celebrate national difference in contemporary culture. From a curatorial viewpoint, much of the anxiety concerning issues of place in recurrent international exhibitions is brought about by having to address the opposing pressures of "the globalization of the domestic and the domestication of the global".¹ While not arguing for a regressively nationalist curatorial approach, it must be acknowledged that

¹ Iara Boubnova, quoted by Hedwig Fijen in Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic, "Foreword", *The Manifesta Decade*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2005, p. 11

against an escalating trend towards cultural conflation (which in its worst extreme results in visual muzak), the Venice Biennale has a unique capacity to expose both coincidences and discord arising from the contradictory forces of globalisation, making it the world's least predictable and potentially most culturally attuned of all the world's recurrent exhibitions.

Politically, the displacement of individuals, communities and entire racial groups is a global concern, while the feeling of being sometimes "out of place" or at a remove is one that all individuals can relate to. The work here describes both political and personal experiences of negotiating the space that we all occupy at some level between discordant realities. The concept of place – both geographic and socio-political – can have a profound impact on the production of art and its interpretation in the company of other artworks. Claire Doherty has asked: "If we subscribe to a notion of place as an intersection of social, economic and political relations, rather than a bounded geographic location, where and how does artistic engagement with the context of the exhibition start?"² While the artists in *Once Removed* do not presume in their work created for the exhibition any direct engagement with Venice itself, there are conceptual links to place that underpin global concerns around forms of racial, social, environmental displacement.

As an emigrant, immigrant or an Indigenous person, each of the artists here has experienced cultural displacement. Sean Cordeiro's family is from Singapore; he and Claire Healy lead a globally itinerant life, currently working between Sydney and Berlin and their work draws on this experience of constant transit between cultures. Ken Yonetani immigrated to Australia from Japan just six years ago and his reflections on environmental devastation present cultural parallels between Australia and his native Japan, and, in the current context, Venice; while Vernon Ah Kee has experienced the worst aspects of displacement – racism and ostracism – as an Aboriginal Australian with Chinese ancestry living in the conspicuously Anglo-Celtic city of Brisbane. The insight provided by the artists' experience of otherness underpins the pungent narratives of these diverse installations.

Historically, some of Australia's leading cultural commentators of the 20th century, including Germaine Greer and John Pilger, have been expatriates. Indeed, as many other leading world thinkers have revealed, displacement in the form of removal from one's home ground hones the antennae, allowing sharper insights both into the place from which one feels displaced as a newcomer, and

² Claire Doherty, "Curating Wrong Places... or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?", in Paul O'Neill (Ed.), *Curating Subjects*, Open Editions, London, 2007

the place from which one hails. All of the artists in *Once Removed* have experienced being the Other, yet here it is that very "otherness" that unites them at the Venice Biennale under the banner of "Australian".

Geeta Kapur argues that "Billed under a country banner, the aura of national affiliation still works... a selection of artists from a particular country/context, properly conceptualised under a theme and a problematic, can in the consequent exposition address 'universal' issues of global contemporaneity (which has always been assumed to have been the case with selections of Euro-american artists)... I do not want to isolate and valorize location within what is an irreversibly globalized world, but I do suggest that if contemporaneity is continually co-produced across cultures; if place, region, nation, state, and the politics of all these contextualizing categories of history (proper) are in a condition of flux everywhere in the world, we can presume past universals – regarding culture, for instance – to have been superseded, exposing the major, often lethal tensions between peoples and regions. It is the task of specific art loci in southern countries to focus on their peculiar forms of political society that are especially volatile, and that mark a set of cultural conjunctures conducive to another kind of meaning production – in art and in history, separately and alike."³

Australia is one of those "southern countries" that enjoys a geographic vantage point from which to address volatile socio-political conditions. It is an ancient continent with a racially oppressed Indigenous population, suspended across the world from its colonising kingdom between Indonesia's Muslim archipelago and the ecologically endangered Antarctica in the southern Pacific. Geographically and in terms of its cultural surrounds, Australia could not be further removed from the European heritage upon which it was founded. Ours is a culture displaced from its European forebears, its next-door neighbours and, most contentiously, from its original inhabitants. As Paul Carter describes, white civilisation was overlaid on Australian soil like a picnic rug that covers the unknown textures of the ground.⁴

Until recently, many Australians displayed a lamentable lack of interest in the Aboriginal, Asian and Pacific cultures that existed thousands of years before arrival and continue to thrive within and on the nation's doorstep. Over the last two decades, however, a politically-led re-articulation of Australia's place in the world has resulted in a surge of interest from local and international audiences

³ Geeta Kapur, "Curating: In the Public Sphere" in *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, apexart, New York, 2007, p. 65

⁴ Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, p. 2

in Aboriginal art, and a new Australian preparedness to engage with the cultures of neighbouring Asian and Pacific nations. Critical frameworks established during this period, such as the Asia Pacific Triennial, have explored Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art in the context of current visual art practices from the region, stimulating a dialogue that informs much contemporary Australian art practice. Similar reassessments have occurred worldwide over the last two decades, as the focus of curators and consumers has moved from the traditional mainstream to embrace the art of non-Western cultures. Australia's contemporary visual arts culture has emerged as central to this shift.

At the forefront of this awakening to Indigenous and non-Western art is the work of Vernon Ah Kee and Ken Yonetani. Though rising above the specifics of place in terms of its political narrative, their practice draws from and comments on their respective Aboriginal and Asian heritages. Ah Kee's installation for the Venice Biennale, *Cant Chant (Wegrewhere)* presents the beach as a contested site, reflecting the fact that beach culture alienates people of non-Anglo backgrounds (Asian, Middle Eastern and Indigenous populations, for example), something brought to the fore with the Cronulla riots on one of Sydney's most popular surf beaches a couple years ago. Visual imagery framed within the three-channel video and accompanying installation of suspended surfboards also suggests iconic racist events from history, such as lynchings in North America and Australia, where blacks were ritually murdered by public hanging. Locally, the work's title and theme refers to Thomas Keneally's 1972 Booker Prize-nominated novel, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, in which the white author, controversially, told the story through the eyes of the Aboriginal protagonist of him taking violent revenge against racial persecution in the Australian outback.

Evading the familiar visual traditions of Aboriginal art and adopting instead a conceptual lexicon invested with political imperative and wry humour, Ah Kee removes the possibility for the kind of cultural pigeon-holing that can separate Aboriginal from non-Indigenous art. Anger at the plight of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations is clearly spelled out here in black and white wall texts and in the film depicting Aboriginal surfers reclaiming the beach – a surreal, fairy-tale scenario in the context of a modern Australia world-renowned for its Caucasian-dominated beach culture. Criticality here is cloaked in humour, making the work more palatable to a society not conversant with the phenomenon of 'auto-critique', a key strategy in contemporary exhibitions for maintaining identity in the midst of global modernisation.⁵

⁵ For the role of 'auto-critique' in contemporary art practice, see Hou Hanru, "Towards a New Locality: PICAF and 'Global Art'", *On the Mid-Ground*, Timezone 8 Ltd, Hong Kong, 2002, p. 140

The formal ordering of elements in the face of entropy is a device employed by each of the artists in *Once Removed* as they attempt to make sense of disassociation and displacement. Yonetani's carefully staged white sugar sculptures are rendered in a language that seeks to codify the damage caused by human disengagement from the natural world. The aesthetic framework for his practice is drawn from Asian culture, particularly cultural traditions that make a spectacle of ordering nature, such as the Japanese Zen garden. The particular type of garden cited in *Sweet Barrier Reef* is called *Kare san sui*, which dates back to the 15th century. These gardens were made in accordance with Zen visual and spiritual principles. Yonetani is interested in the *Kare* because it is a dry garden, made entirely from stones rather than living plants. Like the *Kare* garden, the orderly design and lack of colour in Yonetani's installation suggests a kind of living death, overseen by human cultural beliefs. Its sparse, serene arrangement evokes a post-apocalyptic landscape in which everything is bleached white, perished. Here, the excesses of life are inextricably tied to self-destruction and death.

Yonetani's interest in underwater environments stems from his diving activities, which offer him first-hand experience of humankind's devastating impact on usually unseen ocean beds. *Sweet Barrier Reef* invokes the fragility of an ocean life exploited by industry, specifically the tragedy of coral bleaching. Referencing greed and consumerism, the coral sculpture forms made from sugar that sit on the raked sugar garden are sexed up, similarities to human genitalia deliberately exaggerated so as to lure and shock observers. It's a visually seductive work, the sugar promising sweetness while the sculptures' overt sexual imagery titillates. Yonetani explains that "Sugar represents human desire. I use it as a metaphor for consumerism. The sugar industry continues to increase production in accordance with growing demand globally for sugar-based products, which have, disturbingly, over the last century evolved from 'special treat' foods to staples of everyday modern diets. This reflects society's more widespread desire for instant gratification, so the sexual nature of my sculptures is also closely related to this idea of consumerism as a manifestation of desire. But coral is a living animal and its appearance can be very sexual, so as well as having metaphorical value, the sculptures are also based on coral forms I've observed when diving."⁶

Yonetani abandoned a career in Tokyo's foreign exchange market to study ceramics as an apprentice to a master potter in the sub-tropical coastal city of Okinawa, where he witnessed the ecological

⁶ Interview with the author, 2008

crisis facing coral reefs. Okinawa, like north Queensland in Australia, is home to the country's major sugar industries, where sediment run-off from sugar cane plantations is bleaching and killing large sections of the coral reefs. Yonetani noted with a sense of foreboding that "Every time monsoon rains or a typhoon swept across the island, which was often during Okinawa's long summer, the emerald water would turn the colour of red, as soil, pesticides and fertiliser from nearby sugarcane fields were swept out to sea".⁷ Upon moving to Australia, the artist undertook research at the Institute of Marine Science, discovering that coral bleaching was having an equally profound effect on the iconic Great Barrier Reef. Five years on, the tragic predicament of the Reef is the focus of heated political debate around Australia's commitment (and lack thereof) to tackling climate change. Yonetani's work, conceived some years ago and presented in elsewhere in earlier versions, is suddenly one of the most politically timely and place specific contemporary art projects to emerge from Australia today.

Sweet Barrier Reef describes the fatal consequences of using the natural environment as a dumping ground for consumer-driven industry. In the context of this exhibition, the notion of self-destruction as a result of human greed is paralleled in the threat posed by the tourist industry to the beauty and indeed very existence of Venice. Extending the consumerism metaphor, the presentation at the Venice Biennale of *Sweet Barrier Reef* is accompanied with a performance involving the consumption of coral-decorated cakes by visitors.

The site-responsive installation by Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro in the Ludoteca's church embraces the dreams, fears and desires of its ecclesial setting. Collectively, the content of their VHS monolith ruminates on the human condition, the meaning of life and mortality. However, unlike site-specific works that aim to reveal aspects of the place in which they're located – often hailed in the biennale context as a form of cultural tourism – Healy & Cordeiro's work offers a contemporary reflection on timeless human concerns rather than on the significance of place, referring to film as a vehicle for self-reflection and the stack of obsolete media as a metaphor for society's contrived packaging of emotions and the ultimate transience of life. There are 195,774 videos in this stack, their combined viewing time equal to the average (global) human life span of 61.1 years. All of life's moments of happiness and misery are contained here, displaced from the video store categories of "action", "drama", "comedy", "thriller" and "family". Ironically a large proportion of tapes forming the stack's inner core

⁷ Julia Yonetani, "Sweet Barrier Reef" in Felicity Fenner, *Handle with Care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2008, p. 68

come under the euphemistically titled "adult" section, a fact the artists see as appropriate given that the sexual act is the catalyst of creation, yet in these conservative times is hidden from public view except in the luscious depictions of nudity that abound in historic the art of churches such as this one.

In a series of major installations in recent years, Healy and Cordeiro's have created precise visual statements that appear to make order out of chaos – the assorted possessions of a deceased estate, the building fabric of a demolished house or an old caravan, for example. They see the recontextualisations and reconfigurations of the found materials they use as loose metaphors for today's world, symbols of a wasteful consumerism that finds parallels in Yonetani's reflections on our treatment of the natural world. The artists' explorations into formality, materiality, accumulation and transition often manifest in works that relate closely either to the site in which they're presented or from whence they derive.

Life Span, the neatly ordered stack of VHS tapes created for *Once Removed*, is positioned in response to the distinctive art and architecture of its setting. Disproportionately commandeering the small church of the Ludoteca, *Life Span* proposes the substitution of religious doctrines for movie-watching as a path to spiritual fulfilment. The juxtaposition between popular videos and their church setting serves to heighten the significance both of the work and the church, the stack of obsolete media an apt metaphor not only for society's contrived packaging of experience and emotion, but for the ephemeral nature of life itself.

Together these works critique society's voracious consumption and commodification of objects, places and people. The displacement inherent to each work's subject matter is echoed in the incongruous context of the exhibition site and sometimes by unexpected parallels with Venice itself. Water, for example, is a key theme in the work of Ah Kee and Yonetani. Ah Kee proposes the unlikely repossession of the beach and its culture by Australia's original inhabitants, while Yonetani's sugar reef conjures the destruction of underwater environments brought about by human activity. Both works resonate with the predicament of Venice, where the physical environment is endangered by tourists in their utopian search for a place that's fast disappearing.

2009 is the twentieth anniversary of Jean-Hubert Martin's pioneering exhibition in Paris *Magiciens de la terre*, which controversially presented under the single banner of contemporary art divergent visual cultures from all corners of the globe. The mainstream status of western culture was irrevocably dislodged, with art from Asia and the world's oldest Indigenous cultures thrust

onto the world stage as equally valid to current practices from Europe and North America. 1989 also marked new insights into eastern Europe with the opening of the Berlin Wall and of China in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Twenty years later, Beijing and Berlin are two of the world's most dynamic and influential art centres. It was also the year that the World Wide Web was invented, facilitating infinite sharing of knowledge across the globe. Coincidentally given its thematic relevance to *Once Removed*, 1989 was also the year that Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* was published (translated 1991), examining the status of the foreigner as interior to the psyche in historical and political conceptions of social identities.⁸

Beyond the familial reference to one's relations of another generation, the phrase "once removed" suggests being remote, separated or in some way different from the norm. In Ah Kee's practice the phrase has obvious postcolonial reference at a political level to the displacement of Aboriginal people (and more specifically to the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children), though on a personal level it also refers to the artist's own feelings of displacement from a white society that has alienated Indigenous and other racial groups from iconic aspects of Australian culture such as the beach. In the context of Healy & Cordeiro's practice, "removal" refers to a nomadic lifestyle that necessitates the constant packing-up, disposal and shipping of possessions, and how the spirit of a particular place can be transformed by its changing context. Yonetani's work examines the disjuncture between ourselves and the natural world, warning of our dangerously complacent existence at a remove from nature.

The works in the exhibition invoke the uncanny and challenge mainstream perceptions of culture and place, presenting unexpected juxtapositions between concept and form. Visually, these three installations are linked by an otherworldly, almost surreal appearance. Inherent to all three works are allusions to that which lies beneath the surface, unseen and unfathomable.

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⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (translated by Leon S. Roudiez), University of Columbia, New York, 1991