

frieze

Biennale of Sydney

Various locations

To find a signature work that summed up the theme of this year's Biennale of Sydney, 'On Reason and Emotion', was a hard task. Loosely based on an analysis of a 1995 book called *Descartes' Error*, in which Portuguese neurologist António Damásio discusses how human emotional response is linked to cognitive thought, 'On Reason and Emotion' was curator Isabel Carlos' attempt to recast the rigid Cartesian cogito ergo sum as 'I think and feel, therefore I am'. A succession of nice images masking not so nice subjects hinted at the gut feeling of emotion that seemingly straightforward or rational-looking work can sometimes conceal. For instance, Australian Derek Kreckler's slick photos of lynched refrigerators entitled *White Goods* and Aboriginal satirist Gordon Hookey's iconoclastic installation of politicians caricatured as bowling skittles reflected deep-seated racist mentalities both past and present, while Finnish artist Jari Silomäki's beautiful photographs of weather and landscapes were footnoted in pen with hidden narratives such as 'Helsinki, on the day Saddam Hussein was captured' or 'Latvia, on the day Sydney was surrounded by forest fire'.

However, as is so often the case, the theme was as destructive as it was constructive. Carlos also cited 'reason' as representing the staid sensibilities of the north and 'emotion' as the hot-headed south. This definition split the hemispheres like a Jens Haaning exchange piece; in this exhibition he swapped the contemporary art museum's chairs with those from a café in Hanoi, as well as the lobes of the brain, like Catherine Richards' sci-art installation recreating human feelings of joy and fear with electromagnetic pulses, but did nothing to elucidate works as varied as Michael Sailstorfer's drum kit made from a recycled German police bus or Nathan Coley's architectural equivalent of shorthand – a forlorn outdoor structure that stood in for a defunct style of Modernism as plainly as the Sydney Opera House represents Australia in logo form. Luckily, the north/south divide was really flagged only in the catalogue and not over-egged in the choice of work.

Although geographically southern, Australia has a predominantly anglicized or northern culture, but this exhibition has always veered towards antecedents in central Europe. Sydney has hosted a major biennial (scusa, biennale) longer than most cities (since 1973), but the event has never been one for jingoistic, cultural chest-beating. Instead of extolling Australian art, it has celebrated the progress of

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Published on 10/10/04

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contemporary art elsewhere in the world, treating Antipodean audiences over the years to group exhibitions much like a Berlin Biennale, a Manifesta or Venetian aperto.

If there was an opening statement that reflected this, it was Beijing-based Yin Xiuzhen's less than life-size patchwork 747 aeroplanes stitched together from Sydneysiders' clothes which, like her Portable Cities (suitcases of homely cityscapes embroidered with garments taken from inhabitants of each place), neatly evoked the peripatetic nature of today's artists, travelling from one biennial to another with work under both arms. Australian artist Susan Norrie, perhaps unexpectedly, lampooned the incongruity of international art groupings in her slow camera pan around the 'World Square' of a miniature theme park in Japan, complete with replicas of the Vatican, the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben. Titled Enola (after the Hiroshima B-29 bomber 'Enola Gay') and set to a karaoke version of 'Walk On By', the piece was only slightly let down when the cheery muzak gave way to a sombre rumble as the shrunken Twin Towers of New York came into view, presumably not just a mark of post-9/11 respect but also a signal of Norrie's serious intentions.

Despite a gratuitously grand space for an unmoving Bruce Nauman video of his empty studio at night, the works that deserved the big rooms included a 2004 work by Javier Tellez juxtaposing female patients from a Sydney mental hospital with Carl Dreyer's film *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* of 1927, a masterful de Rijke/de Rooij film that tracks a slowly moving Persian carpet like the monolith in 2001: *A Space Odyssey* (1968), and a beguiling James Coleman slide projection from 1978, made up of layers of imperceptibly shifting stills from James Whale's 1933 film *The Invisible Man*, akin to the moment of a shuddering video pause. All of these screen-based works required persistent viewing but cumulatively highlighted the startling capacity that art on film has for collapsing cinematic traditions.

To combat Sydney's creeping conservative attitude to contemporary art fostered by the traditionally dominant grumpy art critics such as John Macdonald and, before him, Robert Hughes (currently persona non grata in his homeland), the biennale's 2000 edition was a hit-list of tried-and-tested biennial favourites such as Louise Bourgeois, Martin Kippenberger, Gerhard Richter and Yoko Ono, put together by a heady curatorium of six bigwigs including Nicholas Serota, Harald Szeemann, Fumio Nanjo and Louise Neri. Thankfully any sense of curatorial showboating or crowd-pleasing art-for-all was strongly countered this year by Carlos and her interesting list of lesser-known artists, yet rarely did she take too many risks, either politically or aesthetically.

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