



Sub-terrain

Paddy Bedford, Julie Dowling, Derek Kreckler,
Matthew Ngui and Juha Tolonen

Curated by Hannah Mathews

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Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

Subterranean

"Yesterday I found a hidden passage" *Sun Kil Moon*.

Joan Didion spent 2004 in mourning. Her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, died at the dinner table. Heart problem. Outwardly she dealt with it well. The nurse at the hospital called her a "cool customer". Yet there were moments when she came undone. She'd find herself walking along a road, travelling up an escalator and, unexpectedly, see a place, a fragment of a place even... and from this encounter would cascade a train of memories. This, she called "the vortex".

In a way the vortex was her grief, initiating the flood of memory, memory uncalled for. Memory - erasing the present. Memory - a malicious high tide. In this state, the world she inhabited was alive, maybe more alive than her. Who knows, perhaps the landscape she moved through so coolly was grieving on her behalf. Either way, in her grief the physical world was more than the pragmatic arena for social activity she had spent her life constructing in the guise of first-person New World reportage¹.

See, in the vortex there is no division between subject and object, inside and outside. The world is imbued with a subterranean element that wraps around us surface dwellers. Truth is, though, we are always in the vortex. It's our acknowledgment of this that flags. Sometimes it takes a shock to make us aware of the currents running through us.

But this is not just a personal matter. It's political. The ideologies that shape us shape the world and vice-versa. Like I said, acknowledgement flags - or rather it's repressed. It's the same the world over but it does feel that here, in Western Australia, it's doubly the case. The subterranean elements - basically anything the dominant culture does not want to see or admit to seeing - are firmly and regularly retreated from, glossed over. Our mainstream culture has been historically given over to the appreciation of bright sunny pastures of plenty, impressionist harmonics, modernist modulations, beer on the terrace; all is a blissful surface that pleasantly denies the violence (physical, psychic and imaginative) of colonisation. We have, accordingly, forged a sense of this place as being without the usual troubles of an occupied, class-divided territory. No-one was fucked over. It was totally all peachy picnics and flowers in white girls' hair smiling on the front of *The Western Mail*, and then macho muscles at the beach as we conquered all liminal zones with the toothy rictus face of eugenic bourgeois content.

This splendid vision has been dubbed the "Myth of consensus", and much criticism has been levelled at historian Geoffrey Bolton for perpetuating it². Yet, as he has argued in the introduction to the revised edition of *A fine country to starve in*, this process is hegemonic³. The majority of the population here may have internalised the culture's political divides, not speaking of it, flattening it, normalising it. I agree with Bolton and similarly think that our little world in the West may not be formed on blatant ideological falsifications of the past and present but upon something far more complex, something inside all colonial stock: something complicit, callow, hollow, pissy and weak. God knows

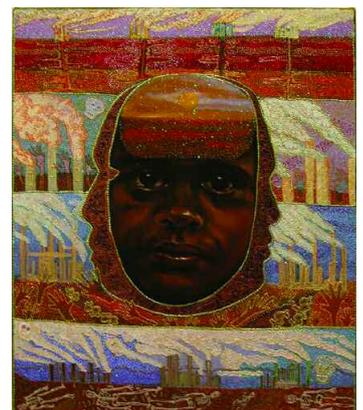
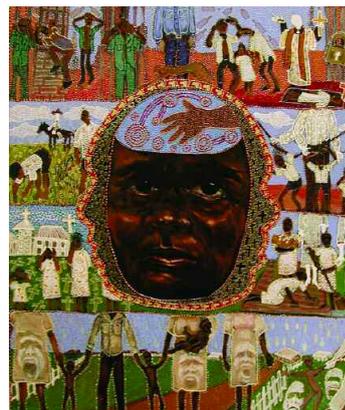
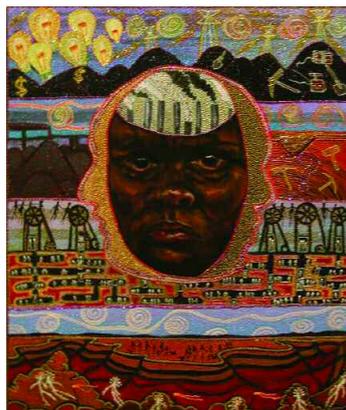
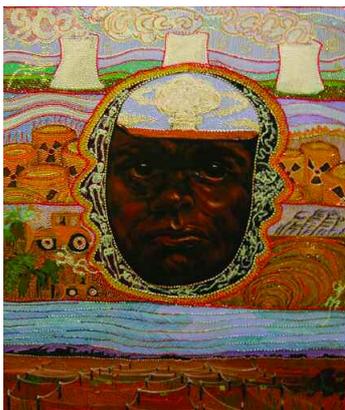
it's shaped me that way. That's the reason why each time we encounter the subterranean vortex - that which refuses to play ball with the notion of bounteous plenty - it's a shock, because it's internal, it's a part of us.

It is this tension that the exhibition *Sub-terrain* opens up. In keeping with the complexity of the matter, however, the participating artists don't simply and brashly reveal "the way things really are". Instead, each reflexively circles the shifting dialectical relationship between surface and depth, darkness and light, good and evil, pleasure and pain, in this our most blighted, happy-go-lucky place under an ever-more mild sun.

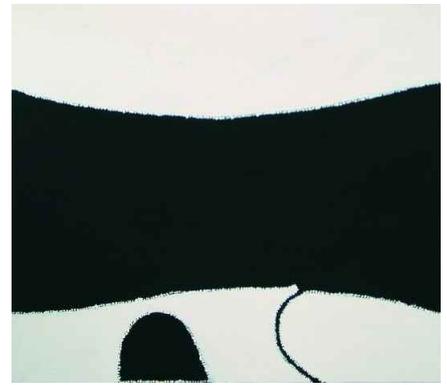
Paddy Bedford's works lunge at this head on. The artist was born in the wake of the Bedford Downs Massacre in the East Kimberly that saw a group of his relations murdered with strychnine. This was "in retaliation for the killing of one milking cow... After the murders, the people moved out to the government station at Violet Valley but by the time of the artist's birth they had been persuaded to return to work at Bedford Downs"⁴. So Bedford, it is clear, works in the shadow of death and dispossession. It's thereby easy to see in his paintings the dark black masses carving their way through, under and around pale milky spaces as a metaphorical darkness pulsing through the landscape; the surface is a thin wrap and latent anguish and pain pulses below it. As a whole the landscape (when seen as landscape) holds together opposing forces, but barely. It swells and moves, groaning with the weight of history, dreaming, humanity, and what passes for humanity.

Juha Tolonen examines similar terrain from a different perspective: one of remove. His photographs chart the arena of the ruin, empty spaces left over from failed industries, settlement hiccups, changes in the economy. Bright, light, his images hint at depths, tunnelling, containment. Yet the door is closed or if it is open, it reveals nothing. In front of these works we are left, simply, with mute existential facts. There is no sociological explanation, just the visual notification of a passing. In this, Tolonen deliberately envisions a non-relationship to history as an unknown, *unknowable*, entity. As such, these works pull us back into ourselves as agents of the temporal, making us ask what real relationship we can have with what is left from the past, from what remains of the trail of our modern world's passage over the landscape. Just where do our responsibilities lie in relation to the wrongs and pain of related, though irrevocably distant, time-zones? They may also chart the limit of the visual project in getting a grip on any of this. With answers difficult, out of reach, Tolonen's works manufacture *and* reflect the torpor that functions as a counter vortex, pulling us back into the sleepiness of hegemonic business-as-usual.

Rather differently, Derek Kreckler's works from the *White Goods* series hold past, present and future in a taut balance. Depicting people in Australian garb in a rural setting, they stand in groups overlooking hanging white goods. They are set against a darkness, a night sky, inky. They are set against daytime, scrub, beige-light bushland. The white goods they rubberneck at appear to be from another era - the future. These people who make their living from the land gaze at the hope of modernity, the much spruiked saviour of the urban housewife.



From left to right: Paddy Bedford, *White Goods* series, 1990s; Juha Tolonen, *White Goods* series, 1990s; Derek Kreckler, *White Goods* series, 1990s.



These objects stand for the promise of modular living with its concomitant hopes for endless, unfettered leisure time: a whole other time, a whole other space. Yet the issue of time is ambiguous. After all, girls emerge gleaming from the river, as if from today. Here, Kreckler's photographs offer an oblique portrait of a community in between time-zones, eyeing down coming change yet simultaneously beyond it. Likewise, there is an echo of violence in the way the white goods hang that speaks from another time and another place, hinting at the impossibility of ever building the perfect community. Somehow, this reaches out and darkens the inquisitiveness of these people. Amazement and openness, present and past, life and death, hope and its effacement, sit together in these complexly choreographed photographs.

The paintings that make up *The Seven Deadly Sins* series by Julie Dowling also map human dynamics in relation to the landscape. We have 'Lust' represented by the diamond mining industry, 'Envy' in suburbia, 'Greed' in the gold industry, 'Sloth' in pollution, 'Wrath' in uranium mining, 'Avarice' in the coal mining industry and 'Pride' in fertiliser and salt damage. In Dowling's vision, all the biblical human sins have environmental implications. And in each we are presented with a kind of open-cut geological vantage point to mirror this: the layers of landscape lie on top of each other, tied together by the pictorial ballast of the head of an indigenous woman. Here, land practice and social practices are inextricably bound - our relationship to people is not different from that of the land. Everything we do has repercussions. This was a point the environmental feminists were making in the 1990s (Kate Soper, Val Plumwood et al) and it stands today. Interestingly, Dowling re-presents this thesis in the form of a simplified diagram; it's playful, redolent of school boy and girl maps of how the world works. The naivety is intentional, however, as it provides the intellectual platform to allow the work to cut through the rhetoric that would otherwise surround such land uses. Its simplicity wipes away the stories that have been the ideological engine room legitimating Western Australian "growth" - all hail the gold boom, lord praise the mineral boom. There is a clearer way of seeing the consequences of what's at stake. Dowling knows, or hopes, the bullshit won't continue to wash, and that the bullshit is a sin.

Dowling, Kreckler, Bedford and Tolonen each use two-dimensional representation to catch the ideological foundations of aspects of our shared culture. Matthew Ngui's installation is a three-dimensional fault-line in this context. Composed of a "forest" of PVC poles, each of which has fragments of text on them, the installation layout is recorded by two cameras positioned at opposing sides of the setting. As the real time footage plays back in an adjacent room, we can read the words in full, the phrase: "seeing may be believing but not always understanding". The

work accordingly performs the Heisenbergian game - where we are affects the experiment, affects what we see and understand. This reflects the radical, atomic subjectivism of twentieth century literature, from Joyce to Woolf and beyond, as it merges into the way our world is mediated by the "realistic" monocular perspective of the video camera. *Big Brother*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Ulysses* are now conceptual kissing cousins. Ngui's play with the perceptual apparatus is not hysterical or flamboyant however, it is simply there. Its tone is akin to the beginning of a migraine when we, for an instant, doubt the world's make-up, and then realise it's us that's screwed. In a way, Ngui suspends this moment indefinitely and in such a way as to cultivate a mild anxiety, a paradoxical blank anxiety, taking on the form and experience of perception itself.

The subterranean is, again, positioned within. This time at the core of our optical apparatus and the experiential world it fashions and guides us through. The breakage Ngui's work performs is apparent in each of the other works in the exhibition too. This is as it should be. Doubt and cracks in our understanding are necessary to get at what lies below. Just as it was for Freud, the subterranean symptom speaks on behalf of the social unconscious. Its unravelling will continue in relation to a culture that is itself shifting and changing according to the manifold sum of the perceptions of its citizens, as well as those denied citizenship. Gaining a complete awareness of its movements is impossible. We're surrounded by the vortex, but cannot touch its sides. It's enigmatic by nature, like the unseen creature in Kafka's *The Burrow*. We can sense something going on, and can only hope to channel our paranoia and fears, as well as what's left of our critical apparatus, in the right direction. Well maybe, after we get back from the beach.

Notes

- 1 These events are related in Didion, Joan (2005) *The year of magical thinking*, Fourth Estate: London.
- 2 See Gregory, Jenny (1990) "Western Australia between the wars: the consensus myth" in Gregory, Jenny (ed) *Studies in Western Australian history XI: Western Australia between the wars, 1919-1939*, University of Western Australia: Perth.
- 3 Bolton, Geoffrey (1994) *A fine country to starve in*, University of Western Australia Press in association with Edith Cowan University: Perth.
- 4 Kofod, Frances (2005) in *Heart of blackness: Paddy Bedford*, William Mora Galleries: Melbourne in association with Jirrawun Arts: Kununurra.

Robert Cook
Associate Curator, Art Gallery of Western Australia



Artist Biographies

Paddy Bedford (Gija)

Paddy Bedford was born at Bedford Downs Station in the East Kimberley circa 1922. As a senior lawman Bedford has been involved in painting as part of ceremony all his life. Bedford has held a number of solo exhibitions since 1998, including *Paddy Bedford – Heart of Blackness*, William Mora Galleries, Melbourne (2005); *Paddy Bedford – Walking the Line*, GrantPirrie, Sydney (2003); and *Paddy Bedford*, Raft Artspace, Darwin (2001). He has also participated in numerous group exhibitions, including *2004: Australian Art Now*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2004); *True Stories: Art of the East Kimberley*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2003); *Blood on the Spinifex*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne (2002); and *Mapping Our Countries*, Djamu Gallery, Australian Museum, Sydney (1999). Paddy Bedford paints for Jirrawun Arts.

Julie Dowling (Widi-Nyoongar)

Julie Dowling was born in Perth in 1969. She was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Literature from Murdoch University in 2006, and completed a Bachelor of Fine Art at Curtin University of Technology in 1992. Since then Dowling has held a number of solo exhibitions in Perth and Melbourne. She has also participated in numerous group exhibitions in Australia and abroad. These include *Terra Alterius – land of another*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney (2004); *Holy holy holy*, Adelaide Festival and tour (2004); *Places that name us: Kate Challis RAKA Award*, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne (2003); *It's a beautiful day: new painting in Australia 2*, Art Gallery of NSW and the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne (2002); *Beyond the pale: Adelaide Biennale*, Art Gallery of South Australia (2000); *Ceremony, identity and community*, South African National Gallery, Capetown (1999); *Daughters of the Dreaming*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth (1998); and *Out of Australia*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (1996). Dowling was the winner of the 2000 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Art Award and is represented by Artplace, Melbourne.

Derek Kreckler

Derek Kreckler was born in Sydney in 1952. He studied sculpture at the South Australian School of Visual Arts (1977 – 1980) and completed a Masters degree at Sydney College of the Arts (1990). From 1991 to 1992 Kreckler was artist in residence at PS1 Studio in New York City before finally arriving in Western Australia in 1995. Kreckler works across performance, video, sound and photography. Solo exhibitions include *Derek Kreckler: Downstairs*, Performance Space, Sydney (2005); *The looking and other outcomes*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne (2003); and *Blind Ned*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2001). Kreckler has also participated in numerous group exhibitions in Australia, including *mixed tape*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth (2005-06); *On reason and emotion: Biennale of Sydney*, Museum of Contemporary Art (2004); *Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art*, Art Gallery of South Australia (2004); and the *2003 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award*, National Gallery of Victoria; He has also exhibited internationally in Kwangju, Mumbai, New York and London. Kreckler was awarded the Australia Council Visual Arts and Craft Fellowship in 1995 and New Media Fellowship in 2000. He is represented by Margaret Moore Contemporary Art, Perth.

Matthew Ngui

Matthew Ngui was born in Singapore in 1962. He completed studies at the National University of Singapore (1988) and Curtin University of Technology (1992), and continues to share his time between Singapore and Perth. Ngui has exhibited extensively in Australia and abroad. Exhibitions include *36 ideas from Asia*, Rupertinum, Salzburg, Austria (2003); *HOME: global city*, Sculpture Square, Singapore (2003); *Untitled*, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide (2002); *Gwangju Biennale*, Korea (2002); *Venice Biennale*, Italy (2001); *HOME*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth (2000); *Cities on the move 5*, Hayward Gallery, London (1999); *Our landscape*, IAKSA, Kellerberin (1998); *Documenta X*, Kassel, Germany (1997); and *Rapport - 8 artists from Australia and Singapore*, Singapore Art Museum and Monash University Gallery (1996). Ngui has been the recipient of a number of residencies, awards and grants, and has undertaken significant public art projects and commissions, including *TIMBRE!: The International Massive Ball Rolling Experiment*, Leuk, Switzerland (current); *Memory*, Singapore History Museum (current); *Untitled/SNAP!*, agnes b, Raffles City Shopping Centre, Singapore (2005); and *Point of view*, Potong Pasir Train Station, Singapore (2004).

Juha Tolonen

Juha Tolonen was born in Western Australia in 1968, and is currently completing a Doctorate in Communications (Photomedia) at Edith Cowan University, Perth. Tolonen has participated in a number of group exhibitions, including *Out of site*, breadbox gallery, Perth (2005); *Uglie lands*, Fremantle Arts Centre (2001); and *Seeing through landscape*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney (2001). He has also held a number of solo exhibitions throughout Western Australia, including *Leisure industry*, Fremantle Arts Centre (2004); *King and country*, Mandurah Performing Arts Centre (2004); *Zone*, Fremantle Arts Centre (2004); and *Industrial evolution*, Katanning Art Gallery (2002). Tolonen will hold his first major solo exhibition interstate at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne in early 2006.



List of works

Paddy Bedford

Dingo Spring (2005)
ochres/pigments with acrylic binder on Belgian linen
122 x 135 cm

Jamelayagoon - Figtree Hole (2005)
ochres/pigments with acrylic binder on Belgian linen
122 x 135 cm

Saddler's Jump Up (2005)
ochres/pigments with acrylic binder on Belgian linen
122 x 135 cm

Turkey Dreaming - Lerdijwanema (2005)
ochres/pigments with acrylic binder on Belgian linen
122 x 135 cm

Courtesy the artist and Jirrawun Arts.

Julie Dowling

The Seven Deadly Sins (2000)
series of 8, acrylic, red ochre and oil on canvas,
60 x 50 cm each

Courtesy the artist and the Cruthers Collection.

Derek Kreckler

White Goods #2 (2003-04)
type C print, 130 x 230 cm (framed)

White Goods #3 (2003-04)
type C print, 130 x 244 cm (framed)

White Goods #4 (2003-04)
type C print, 131 x 230 cm (framed)

White Goods #6 (2003-04)
type C print, 130 x 233 cm (framed)

Courtesy the artist and Margaret Moore Contemporary Art.

White Goods #5 (2003-04)
type C print, 130 x 241 cm (framed)

White Goods #8 (2003-04)
type C print, 130 x 232 cm (framed)

Courtesy Private Collection.

Matthew Ngui

untitled (2006)
live video and mixed-media installation,
installation dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist.

Juha Tolonen

Fully Licensed (2005)
digital inkjet print, 100 x 100 cm

Heaven (2005)
digital inkjet print, 100 x 100 cm

Mainshaft (2005)
digital inkjet print, 100 x 120 cm

Moonyoonooka (2005)
digital inkjet print, 100 x 120 cm

Silo (2004)
digital inkjet print, 100 x 120 cm

Courtesy the artist.

Acknowledgements

The curator would like extend her thanks and appreciation to the artists for their support and contribution to the exhibition, Robert Cook for his inspired text, the private collectors who generously loaned works, and the artists' representatives who provided valuable assistance.

Paddy Bedford paints for Jirrawun Arts, Kununurra; Julie Dowling is represented by Artplace, Melbourne; and Derek Kreckler is represented by Margaret Moore Contemporary Art, Perth.



image credits

front
Derek Kreckler, *White Goods #6* (2003-04), type C print, 130 x 233 cm (framed)

above
Juha Tolonen, *Moonyoonooka* (2005), digital ink jet print, 100 x 120 cm

inside left (1 to 7)
Julie Dowling, 'Wrath', 'Avarice', 'Sorry' and 'Sloth' from the series *The Seven Deadly Sins* (2000) series of 8, acrylic, red ochre and oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm each

inside right - top (1 to 1)
Paddy Bedford
Saddler's Jump Up (2005)
ochres/pigments with acrylic binder on Belgian linen, 122 x 135 cm

Saddler's Jump Up (2005)
ochres/pigments with acrylic binder on Belgian linen, 122 x 135 cm
Turkey Dreaming - Lerdijwanema (2005)
ochres/pigments with acrylic binder on Belgian linen, 122 x 135 cm

inside right - bottom (1 to 1)
Matthew Ngui, untitled (2002) audio-visual installation (installation view
Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide).

Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

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