

Naturalisation: Recent Australian art and the natural

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Nature is parts without a whole.

This is perhaps the mystery they speak of.

Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro¹

The bats have red circles for eyes and the cross-hatching of bark painting on the wings that are wrapped tightly around them. They are hanging upside-down, crowded, on a Hills Hoist. Beneath them, where their pungent droppings would be, there is a sprinkling of spotted rings the size of large washers and they are reminiscent of the dots on Central Desert paintings. This is, of course, a description of *Fruit bats*, one of Lin Onus' best-known sculptures. As is immediately apparent to most viewers of the work, *Fruit bats* is a statement that is both humorous and profound, a gentle but clear declaration of Aboriginality. Onus' use of the Hills Hoist, that icon of the backyard, in combination with the totemic image of the bats and the signs of Aboriginal fine art, the dots and the hatching, encapsulates a set of possibilities for representing Australian culture. It is as if Onus is echoing Surrealism's dictum, Comte de Lautremont's famous phrase, 'As beautiful as the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella' with his own: 'As Australian as the surreality of a mob of fruit bats roosting on a Hills Hoist'.

Onus' *Fruit bats* is more than the sort of iconic image of Australian culture that might be witnessed in the context of a national spectacle like the Opening Ceremony of the Sydney Olympics, because it powerfully and realistically reinstates the politics of a natural, 'aboriginal' presence. While the Aboriginal iconography of the work is obvious, its dynamic, that particular aspect that 'animates' the sculpture, is less conventional. It is the animals, the bats themselves, that allows the work – and I use the cliché with a renewed awareness of its meaning – 'to come alive'. It is the animals that convey the notion of a continuous spiritual presence, and it is they that naturalise the Hills Hoist, making that industrial product a local object. And this presence of the animals as intermediaries



Lin Onus, *Fruit bats*, 1991, polychromed fibreglass sculptures, polychromed wooden disks, Hills Hoist clothesline. Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales. © Lin Onus, 1999/Viscopy, Sydney. Photo: Jenni Carter for AGNSW.

between the pre-colonial and the present (post-colonial?) worlds allows the effortless incorporation of the icon *par excellence* of Australian suburban conformity into the life of the land and of the continent.

One consequence of seeing *Fruit bats* must be the realisation that the territories of humans and animals overlap or, to use a politically loaded term, 'coexist', and that likewise – and here Onus' intelligent use of Aboriginal iconography is so important – contemporary white culture and Aboriginal culture are already on shared ground. So

when a few months ago the Melbourne Botanical Gardens were re-inhabited by thousands of bats I, along with a number of activists, ferals and the eco-historian Bill Lines, saw this as an atavistic event, a reclamation of place by the natural, something akin to the political reclamation demanded by the movement for Land Rights. The visit of the bats to the trees on the south bank of the Yarra made it very clear that we urban humans are still part of the natural world despite our frequent feelings of alienation from it.

In the past year or two I have seen other works that have given me the sense that more contemporary artists are turning to, if not a contemplation of the natural itself, at least an acknowledgement of the presence of the natural in their experience. In the well-known series of works *Paradisius terrestris* by Fiona Hall and in the installation *Blind Ned* by Derek Kreckler I saw the natural as functioning as a limit or opposite with or against which human presence might be compared.

In Hall's series *Paradisius*, which consists of altered sardine cans, each of which contains a sculpted human genital and from the top of each there extends a miniature metallic indigenous plant, the consideration of the natural is a direct critique of human history. Each of the works in the series is labelled with the plant's Aboriginal name, the name of the Aboriginal language, the Latin botanical name, and the plant's common name in English. In so labelling the works the artist historicizes the plants themselves and instates the plants, their indigeneity, as almost pedagogical examples of the effect of the process of colonisation. In their having been named and categorised the plants become both instances of pre-colonial presence and objects that testify to the separate evolution of natural and human histories. Hall's introduction of images of human genitals is also instructive in that it allows her to convey the basic fact that we humans often conceive of our sexuality through metaphor, natural metaphors of fecundity and floral abundance.

What is most intriguing to me about Hall's work is that it is not only post-colonial, by that I mean concerned with the analysis of the colonial, but that it is in an important sense a phenomenological analysis of metaphor, a study of the way in which things that physically resemble one another, either in appearance or in terms of function, are placed in the same category: hence male and female parts of plants, male and female animals and, under the regime of the colonial mentality, masculine and feminine races. (Anomalies, like those animals that can change sex, inevitably interrupt the deceptively smooth operation of metaphorical categorisations of this kind.)

Beyond that, Hall's *Paradisius* is feminist in its concern to attend to description, to the nexus of classification and exploitation, yet the work's ideology appears secondary to its focus on the perceptual and the sensual. Its representation of sexuality – some of the genitals are aroused – inverts the conventions for thinking about humans and nature and places that most intimate and elemental of human acts, the act of procreation, within the context of the procreative impulse of the seemingly alien world of plants. Thus the human interest in seeing the world in terms of the division of

male and female – an extension of the necessity to differentiate ourselves from our sexual opposites – is presented as something we have in common with plants, apparently simple organisms.

While Kreckler's work *Blind Ned*, like Hall's *Paradisius*, is evidence of an interest in the perceptual and the phenomenal – the armoured Ned Kelly figure in Kreckler's video wanders through bushland tapping the track he is walking along with a stick like a blind man – it is clearly a more ideological work, a piece about national identity and alienation. In the installation of

audience and the absurd performance of the national hero as a reminder of the peculiarity of this country and the persistence of indigenous non-human life here. Kreckler's use of the animals is an effective foil for the enactment of the pretentious national psyche that is figured in the blind, nearly stumbling Kelly. To me it was as if the theatre of the nation and its exploitations, signified by the fence, were slight events in comparison to the 'larger-than-life' presence of the animals. Their glass eyes glinting in the gallery's dimness were alive with suspicion.

Simryn Gill's photographic works, *A small town at the turn of the century*, also uses the



Simryn Gill, *A small town at the turn of the century*, 1999-2000, type C photograph, series of 39 images, edition of 5. Photo courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

the video work use was made of a white picket fence and several stuffed animals from the Melbourne Museum. The animals were placed facing the audience from behind the fence and behind them the image of Ned was projected on a large screen. The emu and kangaroo, two animals emblematic of this continent and nation, appeared as if witnesses to the presence of us, the viewers, the strangers behind the suburban fence. I imagine that this was intended to make the audience feel voyeuristic, as if intruding on the sombre idiosyncrasies of a domestic drama.

The animals in this piece are a distancing device; they stand between the excluded

natural to make the audience aware of alienation. What that alienation, that strangeness might mean is difficult to specify. The subjects of Gill's photographs are people from her birthplace in Malaysia. They are photographed either in their homes, places of work or in the street, all places familiar to them. Yet the subjects are disguised, masked by headdresses made of tropical fruit.

In studying the photographs I was immediately forced to confront the reality that as I couldn't see the people's faces it was impossible to establish an imaginary person-to-person engagement with them, the engagement that is usually invoked by



John Wolsley, *A history of ferns with hoopoe and hooded pitohui (detail)*, 2000 (trace no. 12), watercolour on paper. Courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

portraiture. The viewer thus sees them as durian- or rambutan-heads, 'self-less' figures. Gill's fruit masks encourage the viewer to see the people as types, perhaps in a manner that parallels the way in which colonisers saw native peoples as types, and she does so, just as Kreckler does with the animals, by allowing the natural to interrupt the social continuum: the 'exotic' fruit, like the 'exotic' animals, remind the alienated viewer that it is the historical circumstance in which we and they exist that is odd, not the fruit, animals or the people themselves.

Onus' *Fruit bats* suggests that the natural can reclaim the industrial, while Gill's *A small town* may be regarded as warning us of its opposite, warning us that by viewing people as types, as functionaries in the world of the natural, the industrial economy and its mentality actually claims and uses us. That appropriation was, after all, the primary aim of the colonial venture.

The works of Onus, Hall and Kreckler are very different from the painting installations of John Wolsley, a more conventional artist of the natural, whose use of notebooks and watercolour aligns his practice with that of early scientific illustration and the images produced by amateur naturalists. In his

exhibition *Tracing the Wallace Line* Wolsley brought together a selection of pictures, notebooks and reliquaries that he created in Northern Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia. *Tracing* is at once an exhibition of images of the natural world and a personal mapping of the zone surrounding the Wallace Line, the bio-regional division which Wolsley evokes in the catalogue of the show:

'The Australo/Papuan plates (once Gondwana) and the plates which make up Laurasia were far apart when many of the animal and bird species evolved. In the north – pheasants, tigers, monkeys, hoopoes and magnolias. In the south – honeyeaters, echidnas, tree kangaroos and myrtle beech trees. These rafts of species slowly moved together and in recent geological time they collided to the north of Australia. All along a line – known as the Wallace Line – between Bali and Lombok, and up between Borneo and Sulawesi there is a juxtaposition of differently evolved life forms – different yet often strangely similar owing to parallel evolution.'

Thus, although *Tracing* appears to be a body of work concerned with depicting the fleeting phenomena of the natural, it is at base a study of the effects of deep time and the relationships between bio-regions. It is a powerful contribution to the political understanding of Australia's position in the Australasian region. In looking at the works I couldn't help but wonder at the absence of the human. To me it seems that Australia's sharing of certain of 'her' species with Papua New Guinea, Sulawesi and Timor, among other islands, parallels the sharing of trade practices and culture that is evident in the pre-colonial trepang trade between Sulawesi and north eastern Australia and in the current incursions of Indonesian fishermen and so-called people smugglers.

Tracing is characteristic of Wolsley's interests, drawing both on the strangeness of science and on his fascination with the experience of the natural. His practice of travelling to paint *en plein air* is clearly born of his enjoyment of the natural and the pictures and sketches successfully convey this. In his images layering is often as crucial as shifts of scale – leaves and birds and trees and islands being piled layer upon layer like mulch in a forest, and a leaf can be as large

as a tree or a bird larger than an island. Through this work the viewer can share something of the innocent wonder of looking carefully at a natural object. The wonder is perhaps naïve because it is at odds with the eco-grief that the viewer might experience were she to consider the fact that many of the places Wolseley has depicted are in the process of being destroyed by forestry or land-clearing and because that wonder at the natural 'itself' elides the limitations cultures impose on their people's appreciation of the natural. Wolseley work is strikingly pleasurable for the reason that it enables the viewer to look at the wild as if the act of seeing was self-less and not at all utilitarian.

Other less established Australian artists, too, are considering the issue of the natural in their practice: Louise Weaver decorates stuffed animals, birds and trees with 'feminine' materials like crocheted cotton perlé, sequins and silk; Lisa Roet makes large charcoal drawings of the digits – the most basic of tools – of orangutans as well as of the fists of gorillas and the feet of chimpanzees; Beata Batorowicz has created the persona of Joseph Beuys' daughter and presents photographs of herself wearing a fox mask that looks like something between a muzzle and fetish-wear under the Oedipal title *Take off your felt hat daddy, your daughter is here*; and Stephen Birch makes sculptures of trees some of which have small video monitors 'grafted' onto them like boxes for nesting birds. The work of all of these artists has a contemporary awareness of the natural, what seems to be a recent sensibility, one which is simultaneously fascinated by the semiotic power of animals and plants and careful to avoid idealising their wildness.

As with the work of the more senior artists, the project of these artists entails the rediscovery of the commonalities of human and non-human experience. But what is apparent in the objects of Weaver and others is that while the distinction between the natural and non-natural

world is often the subject of interest it is increasingly ambiguous. It is this realm of ambiguity that gives their work its dynamic, its facility for representing naturalisation. Intriguingly, none of these artists draw on Aboriginal or other indigenous cultures nor are they political in a post-colonial sense. They are artists of a new era in which the politics of identity is seemingly secondary to the growing awareness of the natural and concern about its future. These artists are making work in a time when it is clear that 'global resources', in particular wild nature, are under threat as they have never been before, and, moreover, their work is evidence that even the most basic distinction between the human and the natural is now felt by many to be problematic. In a sense, the impending crises may be seen as a curtailment, a neutralisation of humanity, a re-naturalisation of civilisation. It is this prospect of naturalisation, whether enforced or chosen, that I see powerfully figured in the work of all of the artists discussed here.

In the process of surveying recent Australian exhibitions featuring animals or plants it has become clear to me that the current interest in the natural is able to reinvigorate certain debates about the

economy, human experience and politics. Much of the work has a conceptual openness that allows a range of issues to be addressed while always retaining an awareness of the provisionality of human experience and its relationship to eco-systems. It appears as if artists as different as Onus and Weaver are manifesting a therapeutic practice of the kind that the American philosopher Paul Shepard articulates when he writes, 'The metaphor of the animal rescues the person from fragmentation.'² The recent return to the presence of the natural in the world of contemporary art is, I believe, an indication that the questioning and, perhaps, the reconstitution of the category of the human in our so-called post-modern, post-industrial society is already under way.

1 *Fernando Pessoa @ Co: Selected Poems*, (translated and edited by Richard Zenith), Grove Press, New York, 1998, 65.

2 *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1998, 123.

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Louise Weaver, Fox, 2000, hand crocheted lambswool over high density foam, cotton fabric, felt, sequins, synthetic fibre, cotton perlé thread. Installation view from the group exhibition RENT at ACCA. Photo courtesy Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.