

ART AND LIVING HERE NOW POLITICS

AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTA 99

Museum of Contemporary Art 20 August-8 November 1999

■ MCA ■



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This exhibition offers five artists' perspectives on 'living here now'. All their works emerge from a specifically Australian context. They engage in personal ways with issues central to today's politics: nationalism, globalism, racism, multiculturalism, republicanism. Their work has currency but is not didactic. They open up closed spaces, getting underneath the skin of what it means to be in Australia now, with an honesty that often reveals itself through humour and contradiction.

The works distinguish themselves from the pap of much journalese and political speak, marking the limits of certain nationalisms. Prime Minister Howard's draft constitutional preamble was the most recent statement of national identity at the time of writing. In it issues of reconciliation remained unresolved and exclusions were implied by an appeal to ideals of questionable relevance today. These artists recognise that new social and political models are needed to sustain them —models that do not claim a present devoid of history, but instead reveal the complex histories of the present. Their works explore these ideas through recasting mythic figures of identification, or questioning the structures of identification within Australian culture.

These artists eyes are open. Curiously though, an image of blindness is fundamental to many works — a kangaroo with glass eyes, a blind Ned Kelly, a headless kangaroo, a man without a head, a man looking but not seeing in the mirror, blinding floodlights. And so is the use of a kind of humorous, inane repetition. This often induces a desperate, inflated laughter, expressive of a fear that there is nothing beyond the mundane veil of clichés drawn over a disavowed history. In Adam Cullen's words: "Get it while it's not —invade Australia".

The works of these five artists are accompanied by a selection of works from the MCA Collection. Their works look at the relationship between violence, myth and the Australian landscape in the context of indigenous dispossession. Included are photographs from Tracey Moffatt's *Up in the Sky* series, Ian Burn's *Value-added Landscapes*, Nikolaus Lang's *Terra Nullius* and Sally Morgan's *Citizenship*.

Adam Cullen

Adam Cullen's group of works presents a double image of Australian masculinity: as impotent and lazy, deadened by beer and TV; or as intolerant, sexist, aggressive. His works confront us with poisonous slogans born of alcoholic stupor and media overload, and cite media events of extreme violence. Cullen subtly manipulates snatches of image and text—graffiti-like scrawls or small bytes of information we could do without but which have become embedded in our consciousness, and recombines them with deadly self-awareness. His regurgitation of the banal reveals a profound emptiness. This emptiness centres on a traumatised, inauthentic, white Australian male identity—grimy, weak, soft, flaccid, like the Y-fronts in *Underpants Dreaming*. Its flip-side is the bravado and nihilism of *GO MANLY/ END EVERYTHING*, which we laugh at despite ourselves, despite its placement across a work depicting the protagonists in the drama of Jaidyn Leskie's murder. If you didn't laugh, you'd cry.

Adam Cullen was born in Sydney in 1965, and received an M.F.A at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales in 1998. Recent solo exhibitions include a Level 2 project at the Art Gallery of NSW, an exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand, both in 1998, and a touring exhibition organised by the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, in 1999. Cullen's work has been included in *Perspecta* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (1993), the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia (1996), and the Moët et Chandon Touring Exhibition (1998). Cullen lives in Sydney, and is represented by Yuill/Crowley, Sydney.

Derek Kreckler

Derek Kreckler's installation *Blind Ned* includes two stuffed kangaroos, a photographic portrait head of one kangaroo, and a video. The video loop depicts Australian folk hero Ned Kelly feeling his way through the Australian bush with a white cane, disappearing into the bush before going off-screen. A single shot in black-and-white, the video appears scratched and gate-jumps like an old newsreel. The kangaroos look at us looking at the video. They seem wary, accusing, defensive—looking away from the 'past' towards us with uncertain expectation. Initially the sight of Ned Kelly with a white cane is comic, almost farcical. But this deceptively simple conjunction is full of possibilities for interpretation, suggesting a traumatised relationship to land and nation. Together with the kangaroos specimens, it conveys a strong sense of pathos; the figures within the installation seem to exist in a neglected—even brutalised—place where no-one belongs. They prompt us with questions: how do we identify with this hero of the bush? who identifies? does Ned's blindness and repeated disappearance signify a loss of understanding of the environment, the loss of a believable national role model? Kreckler's installation gently alerts us to the implications of our national blindnesses, clearing a path to increased self-awareness.

Derek Kreckler was born in Sydney in 1952 and currently lives in Perth. He graduated from the University of Sydney with a Master of Arts in 1991, and works across the visual, performing and electronic arts. He has exhibited in Australia, the U.K. and the U.S.A., and participated in residency programs at the PS1 Institute for Contemporary Art, New York (1992), and at Gallery Chemould, Bombay, India (1996). Kreckler's work has been exhibited in the

Biennale of Sydney (1982 and 1991), the Edge International Festival, London (1988), Artist's Space, New York (1992), and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (1993). Kreckler was recently co-recipient of the Australian Multimedia Industry Award and ATOM award for his work on the sound design and audio engineering for the CD-ROM Moorditj-Australian Indigenous Cultural Expressions.

Tony Schwensen

Sport, especially cricket, is the primary motif in Tony Schwensen's work. The protagonist of his videoed performances wears official Australian Cricket Board training gear. Schwensen's coupling of a minimal performance style reminiscent of 1970s video art with images of Australian sport is full of droll, self-deprecatory humour. The Aussie armchair sportsman in *Having a good, long, hard look in the mirror*, or *Holding up an end* presents an unlikely candidate for either self-examination or responsibility. Such double-edged performances internalise the dislocations – real or assumed – between the 'average' sporty Australian and the intellectual 'arty' elite. Art is turned into sport in Schwensen's *Australia A: Moët & Chandon Finalists/Australian Art Under 35s Bestand Fairest Award 1999*, a series of drawn portraits of the finalists on Lismore Workers Club place mats. Through this and other works entitled *Australia A*, Schwensen muses on our gambling obsession, where excellence is measured in terms of winning and losing.

Tony Schwensen was born in Sydney in 1970. He graduated from the University of Western Sydney-Nepean with a B.A. in 1990, and with a Graduate Diploma of Visual Arts at the Sydney College of the Arts at Sydney University in 1991. Selected venues for solo exhibitions include the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (1996), and Artspace, Sydney (1999). Schwensen has received several awards including the Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship in 1998. He is currently living and working in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Elizabeth Gertsakis

Elizabeth Gertsakis has been a persistent critic of institutions, and draws from her experience as a migrant to reveal the limits of nationalism. In this exhibition, Gertsakis re-presents an installation originally created for the Line-Up Room in Melbourne's former City Watch House. This room was an apt theatre for exploring her concerns, a space dividing criminals from their gaolers, a space of judicial observation and control. From an elevated viewing room, viewers look through a wrought-iron map of Australia into the adjacent Line-Up Room, within which Gertsakis has inserted two wall-texts. Australia itself becomes the divided ground through which one interprets the texts. In one text, Australia is posed as "a place of criminals, immigrants, racists and critics". Through this provocative equation of terms, Gertsakis exposes the punishment of those who criticise monocultural authority, an authority here invested in the observer. Another text imputes blindness to the observer: "I know you/Do you recognise me/You don't know me/I am invisible to you/I see you". It becomes hard to judge who is looking at whom, and one has to question the way subjectivity is formed through institutionalised divisions.

Elizabeth Gertsakis was born in Florina, Greece, in 1954 and arrived in Australia later that year. She graduated with a B.A.(Hons) from the University of Melbourne in 1976, and an M.A. in Comparative Literature from Monash University, Melbourne in 1993. Gertsakis has had solo exhibitions at the Australian Centre for Photography (1989) and at the Ian Potter Gallery at the University of Melbourne (1994). Gertsakis's work is included in *New Worlds: Contemporary Art from Australia, Canada & South Africa*, which travels this year to London and Johannesburg. Her work has been shown in the 1998 Adelaide Biennial, and in group exhibitions at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, and the Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne. Gertsakis has received numerous awards and grants, and her work is represented at the National Gallery of Australia, and in major state collections. She lives in Melbourne, and is represented by Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

Gordon Bennett

Gordon Bennett's work is selected from a series made for an exhibition in New York in which he paid homage to the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Appropriating Basquiat's characteristic use of text and layered images of the human figure, Bennett explores the impact of racism in relation to structures of identification, both individual and social. He focuses on how racial identity is secured within Australian and American culture – how the logic of racism is inscribed in brand names and trademarks, fixing identity rather than recognising its inherent fluidity. The idea of 'branding' is given an alarming inflection in a quote transcribed by Bennett in *True Blue* where a Queensland stock owner (in 1998) justifies branding cows because 'we used to brand our slaves on the cheek in the U.S. 'Aboriginality' is depicted as another 'trademark' which collapses difference. In response to the persistence of racist stereotyping, Bennett's paintings present us with a multiplicity of words and images, often overlapping or crossed out, that represent the complexity of identity and the need for its continual reinvention.

Gordon Bennett was born in Monto, Queensland in 1955 and currently lives in Brisbane. Bennett has received numerous fellowships and awards, including the Moët et Chandon Australian Art Fellowship in 1991, and the John McCaughey Memorial Art Prize, National Gallery of Victoria in 1998. This year, a solo exhibition of Bennett's work is travelling to the Brisbane City Gallery, the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, and the Henie Onstad Art Centre, Oslo. His work has also been included in *New Worlds: Contemporary Art from Australia, Canada & South Africa*, which travels to London and Johannesburg this year. Bennett's work is represented in numerous state and corporate collections, and has featured in solo exhibitions at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (1990 and 1996), and at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (1991). Documentaries about his art practice have been produced by Juniper Films and Excalibur Nominees, and screened on the ABC and SBS. Bennett is represented by Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane, and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

List of Works

GORDON BENNETT

Notes to Basquiat: True Blue March 1998
acrylic on paper
120 x 80 cm

*Notes to Basquiat: Australia Day
Re-enactment #2* April 1998
acrylic on paper
120 x 80 cm

Notes to Basquiat: Be Polite April 1998
acrylic on paper
120 x 80 cm

Notes to Basquiat: Monkey March 1998
acrylic on paper
120 x 80 cm

Notes to Basquiat: Aboriginality April 1998
acrylic on paper
120 x 80 cm

above works courtesy of the artist,
Bellas Gallery, Brisbane and Sutton Gallery,
Melbourne

Notes to Basquiat: Aboriginal Generative
1999
acrylic on linen
100 x 100 cm

Notes to Basquiat: Boss Cocky 1999
acrylic on linen
100 x 100 cm

Notes to Basquiat: Kangaroo 1999
acrylic on cotton duck
100 x 100 cm

above works private collection, Brisbane

ADAM CULLEN

Lizard Dreaming 1997
acrylic, ink and enamel on board
91 x 91 cm
private collection

Everyday I Get Half an Hour Older 1998
acrylic, ink and enamel on foam-core
120 x 240 cm
private collection

Underpants Dreaming 1998
ink and acrylic on board
112 x 78 cm
private collection

The Man in White 1998
acrylic, ink and enamel on foam-core
triptych: each panel 122 x 81 cm

Playstation 1998
acrylic, ink and enamel on foam-core
120 x 240 cm

End Everything 1998
enamel and acrylic on board
2 panels: 120 x 120 cm each

Conspiracy Dreaming 1997
enamel on board
60 x 120 cm

Inappropriate Elation 1996
video, 9 minutes

Need to Feel to Turn My Mind Off 1997
ink and enamel on board
diptych: each 60 x 42 cm

Everything is low impact 1999
ink and enamel on canvass
152 x 214 cm

above works courtesy of the artist and
Yuill/Crowley, Sydney

ELIZABETH GERTSAKIS

Critical Punishment is Capital 1998
installation: sound, wrought iron, vinyl-cut let-
tering, custom board dimensions variable
originally commissioned by Maudie Palmer for
Remanence, Melbourne Festival, 1998

courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery,
Melbourne

DEREK KRECKLER

BlindNed 1999
installation with video projection, kangaroo
specimens, colour photograph
dimensions variable

courtesy of the artist
kangaroo specimens courtesy of the Australian
Museum, Sydney

TONY SCHWENSEN

*Australia A: Having a Good Long Hard Look
in the Mirror* 1999
video, 45 minutes

Australia A: Prime Beef Export Quality 1999
video, 45 minutes

Australia A: Holding up an End 1999
video, 45 minutes

*Australia A: The Ten Most Powerful Men in
Australian Cricket* 1999
Laundry marker on paper place-mats
10 units, each 41.0 x 51.0cm

*Australia A: Moet & Chandon
Finalists/Australian Art Under 35s Best and
Fairest Award* 1999 1999
Laundry marker on paper place-mats
21 units, each 41.0 x 51.0cm

all works courtesy of the artist

Curator: Linda Michael
Brochure text: Linda Michael
Design: Michael Donohue

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Sydney, Australia www.mca.com.au



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