



LIVING TOGETHER IS EASY

Fiona Hall, Rosemary Laing, Susan Norrie, David Rosetzky, Ricky Swallow, Samuel Namunjdja [Australia]; Kaoru Motomiya, Tetsuya Nakamura, Taro Shinoda, Tabaimo, Tadasu Takamine, Akira Yamaguchi [Japan]

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ANTHONY GARDNER

One of 2003's great contemporary art moments took place within that most earnest and often dour of genres: cross-cultural visual art. *Kill Bill*'s O-Ren Ishii, fresh from asserting her authority over Tokyo's yakuza council with a samurai sleight of hand, calmly shuffles through the back corridors of a traditional restaurant cum cheesy *Happy Days*-style nightclub. Her posse of mask-clad yobs, the ubiquitous *Sailor Moon*-esque Japanese schoolgirl and a Star Trek villain wannabe, pouts behind her; together, they cruise the corridors to the RZA's funk soundtrack, a kimonoed remake of über-macho scenes from Quentin Tarantino's earlier *Reservoir Dogs* or Philip Kaufman's *The Right Stuff*. O-Ren sports a white kimono, white zori sandals and a sheathed knife from which kandy baubles dangle as innocently as from a new mobile phone. It's an exquisite moment, incorporating numerous

tongue-in-cheek homages to 'national' clichés, cultures and cinemas, while articulating the unsettling tensions and creative constructions inherent within cross-cultural translation and exchange.

It's precisely this conjuncture of sensual love for, and nuanced irreverence towards contemporary cross-cultural paradigms that the NGVA's *Living Together Is Easy* lacked. The show was one of those earnest collaborations between two international institutions; in this case, Japan's Contemporary Art Center at Art Tower Mito and Melbourne's NGVA. Six artists each from Japan and Australia shared equal billing and floor-space, all equally sharing 'a sense of their identity amid the chaos of contemporary society'.¹ For the esteemed Japanese curator, Eriko Osaka, the exhibition highlighted the paradox that the [English] saying 'living together is easy' pays lip service to the tensions – verbal, physical, racial, political – actually extant within contemporary globalism, migration, communications and social relations. For the NGVA's curator, Jason Smith, today's globalised closeness, cultural anxieties post-9/11 and the reality of cultural diversity form the backdrop for artworks that "question... our ability to transcend the limiting notions of country and race in an attempt to live together in the world, and in harmony".²

The exhibition however, did not present nor reflect this complex backdrop. The NGVA's third-floor space was neatly pared down the centre, with works by five Japanese artists and Ricky Swallow on one side and by five Australian artists and Kaoru Matomiya on the other. Such an 'us-and-them' starting point was not exactly subtle. Nor were some of the works. Once again we saw Fiona Hall's *Dead in the Water* [1999], her vitrine of pipes that below the glass plate from which they poke like periscopes, organically sprout small barnacle-like forms and tentacles. More unobtrusive still was Matomiya's installation *Metabolism* [2002], in which viewers stepped on shredded paper made from Tasmanian timber, so as to see a video of Tasmanians discussing daily life, logging, Salamanca Place and more logging. These Tassie tales were intercut with shots of trucks trundling through Hobart's city centre, their load of logged old-growth timber carted behind them. Eisenstein it ain't.

Slickness prevailed on the 'Japanese' side of the show. Tetsuya Nakamura's *Premium Unit* series [2003], with its aerodynamic baths and basins in metallic multi-colourism, turned minimalist design into a technicolour yawn. Nakamura's visually striking, [if again, conceptually obvious] questioning of the relevance of high-tech design fashions for bathtubs, at least provided a necessary counterpoint to the fashionably jaded

yuppie angst advertised, if not explored, in David Rosetzky's oft-seen *Weekender* [2001]. They also made a neat formal correlation with Swallow's oeuvre and Patricia Piccinini's *Car Nuggets* [though perhaps only for the arerati, given the surprising absence of Piccinini from the show]. Ultimately, the exhibition could be seen as divided between a super-slickness and a vague activism, rather than predominantly by nation, one simplistic antinomy replacing another. The highlight of the show however, was Akira Yamaguchi's *Postmodern Silly Battle* [1999], which like the *Kill Bill* sequence, irreverently mocked both a connoisseurship of 'traditional' cultural practice [narrative scroll painting] and a banal political correctness of sharing, equality and harmony. In a stunning detail of Yamaguchi's painterly satire, the cult figures of Japanese schoolgirls flee from death, photographed by a paparazzo tourist, oblivious to the arrows flying around him.

Nonetheless, while some of the works succeeded individually, together they made for an uninspired and uninspiring show. Despite collaboration between curators being foregrounded as an innovation in cross-cultural exhibitions [as Osaka states, such shows generally showcase artists from one country to another, rather than exhibit artists together], there was little, if any, attempt to question the influence of touristic influx, artistic influences or political involvement between the two countries. The Australian selection was especially cautious, reading more like an internationally oriented showbag of artists, or, perhaps more cynically, works within the NGVA's own collection by artists who developed a reputation in the mid to late 1990s. Citing cultural anxieties after 9/11 does not excuse such safe curatorial choices. Nor is it particularly credible to define the exhibition's parameters by that event, given that a number of the artworks were created before 2001. What *Living Together Is Easy* required was a cat or two amongst the familiar pigeons. While Susan Norrie's *Enola* [2004] didn't succeed in the 2004 *Biennale of Sydney*, its tinny critique of Japanese miniature-world amusement parks and cutesy imperialism would at least have provided a direct, if problematic challenge to the cuddly 'harmony' of relations between Australian and Japanese funding bodies and art institutions. Smaller scale projects, questioning the very premises of liberal humanist values amid globalisation – the quasi-protests of DAMP or Pedagogical Vehicle Project for example, both of which Stuart Koop included in his similarly rhetorical but more critically minded 2004 exhibition, *Concern* – might have responded to the NGVA's brief with greater insight and debate. For while the exhibition wore its humanist heart on its sleeve, questioning that bill, rather than fitting it so snugly, would have made for a more enticing and less easy show.

Notes

¹ *Living Together Is Easy* [catalogue], Ibaraki: Contemporary Art Center, Art Tower Mito, 2004: 5

² *ibid*: 46