

EXHIBITIONS

Left: Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, *Memorial project Nha Trang, Vietnam – towards the complex – for the courageous, the curious and the cowards* [video still], 2001 Photo courtesy Biennale of Sydney
 Middle: Patrick Corrillon, *Les Trotteuses*, 2000 Photo courtesy Biennale of Sydney
 Right: Do-Ho Suh, *348 West 22nd St. Apt. A, New York, NY 10011 USA [Corridor]* [detail], 2001 Photo courtesy Biennale of Sydney



Grasshopper Worlds... or, Grasshopper lies heavy?¹

The Biennale of Sydney 2002, [The World May Be] Fantastic

Museum of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Customs House, Artspace, Sydney Opera House, 24a Orwell Street, Potts Point
 15 May – 28 July

I like this exhibition. It's a humanist show: funny, sad, surprising. It's engaging, somehow quite 'real' [despite the theme of 'fantastic' worlds], kind of grounded. A curator from the Museum of Contemporary Art told me they received record attendances [even more than the last blockbuster Biennale], and this is good, because I get the feeling that it's a show that a broad range of people could get something enriching from. Spread over six venues, the Museum of Contemporary Art component was the most focused, occupying the entire building. It felt 'carnavalesque'. The Artspace component is pretty spirited too. Compared with works at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Customs House, the MCA appeared crazy: weird stuff everywhere, a crafty, low-brow, do-it-yourself vibe. The other two museum venues appeared more staid. On repeated viewings this still held true. It was at the MCA where Richard Grayson's curatorial personality was most readable.

This is important because this Biennale has a definite theme: fictions and fantasies, imagined worlds and subjectivities. For this reason it makes it difficult to argue for the inclusion of omitted works. Grayson's theme tends to lend itself to works that are figurative and narrative based. There were quips early on that it was the 'mannequin' show [several mannequins or 'human models' each in Eleanor Antin's, Jeffrey Valance's and Suzanne Treister's works, one each for Gilles Barbier, Olaf Nicolai and Patricia Piccinini]. Lots of fake-real documentation, models and fabrications too.

Grayson's selection of artists was unexpected, not the hit-list of the 'coolest' from the art magazine circuit, which gives the show a refreshing edge. Grayson was Director of Adelaide's Experimental Art Foundation for seven years and it should not, perhaps, come as a surprise that there are at least eight participants that he had shown during his time at the EAF, most notably Susan Hiller, [who was also an advisor in the early stages of exhibition planning]. Hiller's installation *Witness* was one of the few monumental works – a chandelier-like array of sound-speakers suspended in a large darkened space, each recounting individual encounters with aliens. When I first experienced the work the effect was jolting, both for its beauty and the cumulative effect of the content. Do-Ho Suh's installation *348 West St., Apt. A, New York, NY 10011* was likewise monumental, but ghostly too – a replica of his New York apartment made from pink and blue gauze, surprisingly moving in its ethereal [interestingly, others have read the work more in the direction of Claes Oldenburg's big soft sculptures]. The monumentalism thing was interesting because 'big' is often conflated with

'important', you know, the wow factor of a seven-screen DVD projection. But the scale of the works here operated differently; they might be layered, convoluted and archive-laden, but also accessible and often compelling.

[The World May Be] Fantastic was quite museum bound, which meant that for all the 'imaginings' we knew that it was all art because it was inside the white walls of a smart gallery [and they were mostly all white]. A number of performances took place at the MCA and the Sydney Opera House, and there were two major external installation works – James Angus' *Shangri-La*, an inverted hot-air balloon in the central southern foyer of the Sydney Opera House, a beautiful and subtle work which pulls a range of successful conceptual calls on its location – the other, Mike Nelson's *24a Orwell Street*, a strange animal/human 'nocturnal house' installation in a disused shop in the backpacker district of Potts Point, near Kings Cross. This received lukewarm critical responses from some, but I found it one of the best examples of verisimilitude in the *Biennale*, precisely because it was out there in the world, and its intervention was subtle.

Given Grayson's playful theme, a few works had a political and social kick – Mike Stevenson's installation *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* with references to hostages and an aircraft door [spooky for obvious reasons], and Patricia Piccinini's pseudo-provocative *Still Life with Stem Cells*. Even Panamarenko's dopey Soviet submarine parked out front of the Art Gallery of New South Wales was given a slightly sinister edge in light of the Government's current xenophobia. Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba's video *Memorial Project Nha Trang Vietnam...*, a sub-marine memorial to those who had lost their lives attempting to flee Vietnam, was seriously affecting.

Personally I would like to have seen a stronger representation of Australian Aboriginal and Pacific Islander artists. Michael Parekowhai is an international artist these days, and Luke Roberts' *Pacific Island Odyssey* was a riff. Darren Siwes was represented by yet more variations on the same theme.

Note
 Refer Richard Grayson's catalogue essays, 'Grasshopper Worlds', *2002 Biennale of Sydney*, and 'The Grasshopper Lies Heavy', *Arcanum: Extracts From The Archive*, Union Gallery, University of Adelaide, 1992

Chris Chapman

Would you believe...?

The Biennale of Sydney 2002, [The World May Be] Fantastic

Try to get inside an alternate belief system. Try to get inside it without just appreciating it for its exoticism. Try to recognise that you yourself are inside a belief system. Try to identify its parameters, its predispositions, let alone its primary directives or ethics. A difficult, if not impossible task? Giving yourself over to art can set off the process, however. And many works in *[The World May be] Fantastic* invite us to do just that – not with hard sell or proselytising, didacticism or seduction for that matter, but by earnest proposal or playful humour, often a little nutty in flavour.

A woman in proper middle-class casual attire, shuffling on all fours along the pavement of a suburban street, wondering aloud to herself about what the children will think. A woman plotting how to outsmart her mental hospital attendants, engineering a hiding spot under her bed with astounding cool-headedness and technical sophistication. A woman making herself at home by systematically drawing all the curtains shut to banish the light. A plaintively countenanced pubescent girl deliberately lying down in a gravelly puddle, the dark stain on the back of her jeans and her dripping hair evocative of some kind of bodily trauma. Each woman is locked in her own idiosyncratic personal drama, the world of each very tightly circumscribed by her creator, Finnish video artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila. And yet the neurosis that is either latent or all-too-manifest is powerfully communicated, so that, for a moment at least, I can enter that mental state, I can hope against hope that the bastards won't find me, I can feel the compulsion to besmirch my innocence in filth, I can perfectly comprehend how it is that an apparently privileged woman is on her hands and knees and talking to herself in public. The representation of narrative fragments using high production values – the video is beautifully shot, well-scripted and acted – and a separate but inter-linked installation format – five monitors face in different directions and play at overlapping times – are key to Ahtila's project *The Present* [2002]. The narrative is direct in its address while fecundly vague in its meaning. Each world-view is individual, and yet each is also clearly part of a larger syndrome in which we too are implicated.

This idea is also beautifully captured in Emma Kay's map of the world *The World From Memory I* [1998], hand-drawn from memory. This is Kay's world in all its flawed poetry, but this is also my world, our world.

Through her direct mode of address – the low-tech rendering, body-sized scale, immediately recognisable subject matter – I can begin to enter her geo-political perspective, and while perhaps astounded by the bloated lands that betray her partisan knowledge, I can wonder at the comprehensiveness of her coverage, at the earnestness of her effort, and at the heart-rending vagaries of human memory. I can for a moment believe in her world.

Miwa Yanagi also used direct address to draw us into alternate belief structures in her *My Grandmothers* series [2000–2001]. The artist used make-up and digital effects to picture the fantasies of old age articulated by a group of young Japanese women. Already, the artist was attempting to capture an alternate belief system, that of an elderly woman living in the future, through the cipher of yet another's fantasy of what the future might hold. This doubled belief system was then represented to the viewer through a combination of first person monologue [in a substantial wall-text] and photograph. We were invited to share a private world, a fantasy grounded as it is in cultural specificity, an invitation that Yanagi's accessible form of address facilitated – the images were powerful and the texts absorbing, the themes evoked gender roles, ageing and cultural expectations well nigh universal.

The communication of an alternate world-view was also consummately achieved in Susan Hiller's *Witness* [2000]. The matter-of-fact accounts of fantastical phenomena in a range of languages could be heard both individually and collectively, as the mode of address shifted from a narration audible only by holding one of hundreds of suspended speakers to your ear, to a single broadcast voice that came to, momentarily, silence all the others. The pace and tone of these recountings gave them a certain coherence despite linguistic differences, so that I got the sensation after a time of being able to understand a voice in a language foreign to me. I knew what these witnesses to UFO activity were telling me, and I was convinced of the veracity of their claims by their insistent, measured earnestness.

That earnestness, even if sometimes cocky, as in the hilarious alternative reading of Western religious icons proposed by Jeffrey Vallance, pervaded many works, as did a direct mode of address that presented the plausibility of thinking otherwise. This Biennale fulfilled its promise to bring us in touch with other ways of conceiving the world, and thereby allowed us fertile ground to consider how we might re-fashion our own belief structures

Jacqueline Millner