

Left: Yoko Kajio, *Invisible Waves* [installation detail] 2002 Photo Alan Cruickshank
 Middle: Emil Goh, *Styrofoam* [video stills], 2001 Photos courtesy the artist
 Right: Simryn Gill, *A small town at the turn of the century* 1999–2000
 Photo courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney



Emil Goh+Yoko Kajio

Contemporary Art Centre of SA, Adelaide
 www.cacsa.org.au
 23 August – 22 September

The titles in this exhibition, the 'New Worlds' of Emil Goh's catalogue essay and Yoko Kajio's *Forest of Invisible Waves*, are pre-emptive of the artists' redefinitions of our contemporaneity.¹ At the same time, the use of video projections and two and three-dimensional objects spectacularly placed throughout the gallery spaces seems to confirm our cultural over-reliance on the sense of sight. Would this exhibition be seen as another feast for our sight, with its ever increasing appetite for more to see, or is it more than that? A question for which possible answers neither can be nor should be expected to be definitive, for that would mean depriving of vigour the discursive practices which are held in high esteem as one of the important learning and communication tools in our 'civilised' world. But in the context of art, and engagements in it, the absence of such probing questioning in the process of making and/or viewing would engender and amass a burden of mediocrity that would be more overwhelming than attempting to address questions which would further potentiate our critical thinking and awareness.

I start from the premise that the artist is always engaged in the making towards achieving something with and through the work that may bear some resonant truth with its subject which would remain with us after the exhibition is over, when the sighting of the *object* itself is no longer occurring. A wager perhaps. What remains with the viewer after experiencing the artwork may be a confirmation of, a challenge to, or a sense of indifference towards the artist's visual articulations regarding the subject and his/her attitude to it. Will it be included or not in our personal or collective bank of images? And if it is included, does it become another of the useful navigational tools in our social, cultural and political interactions within our immediate and broader environments? In this sense then the art work, its resolution having been decided on and presented by its maker, becomes a potential generator of meaning/s once it is encountered by the viewer, once the counter signing takes place.

Upon entering the first space we are greeted by Goh's photographs of high-rise buildings without people, and other photographs bearing witness to objects [*futon* (2002)] and people in some form of transition. These photographs appear to be either documents from the artist's cross-cultural, cross-continental visits or simply found pictures, which have resonated with the artist's experiences as traveller. Some of the individual photographs possess a degree of strength to become images for further contemplation, such as *Schoolboy* [2002], *The Couple* and *The Airport* [both 1996]. As a group they seem to recede into the realm of snapshots and, particularly viewed alongside the video projections, seem to convey a sense of ambiguousness of intent, without the artist quite being aware of, or not having found it necessary to acknowledge, the nature of their ambiguity in the purported context of 'a humanist project' as articulated in the catalogue essay. There seems to be a lack of rigour in the process of editing. That is, the process of editing is not one for the sake of sleek coherence that is anxious to develop a style, or for the sake of forcing a sense of clarity. Rather, editing, in this sense, is a process of working through which

of the *pictures* potentially become *images*, thereby instigating optimal imagination, an active process of mediation between the real and the imagined.

In the middle space Goh has projected a video onto the gallery wall. There are short segments of images of people interacting within the busy settings of the metropolis. The location of action/lack of action seems to alternate between home and market place, with slowing down and speeding up of some of the frames. Public and private spaces seem to collide and their boundaries blur. Here there is the camera's significant contribution to the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private. And what we see is not necessarily a true reflection of actual happenings. Rather it might be another item on the wish list, in which, with the aid of the camera, we might make ourselves believe. In addition to the projection on the wall there are on the floor a few round, moveable, inflated black seats for the choice of the viewers. Overall, this installation appears to be a polite external agreement between the dictates of the space and those of the artist. There seems to be no internal agreement through which the viewer can sense rigour through tension engendered by difference in agreement.

Entering the back gallery where Kajio's work is housed, at first glance the space appears to be filled with the personal belongings of a guest, placed all around the room with somewhat anxious care by their owner. The main point of focus is a video projection, in effect a series of abstracted architectural sequences, which appears to be purposefully obstructed by vertical rectangular mirrors, some suspended between the ceiling and the floor, others leaning against the walls at various angles. Multiple sources of reflection at play. On the floor in front of the video projection is an inflated paddle pool full of water. In constant circulation, the water is being pumped up through a chrome pipe to shower back into the pool through a single head. On the floor, seemingly addressing the projection, is a row of widely spaced coloured light globes. The lights are on. Large dry leaves scattered along the line of lights sit incongruously with the naked bulbs. Nearby, perhaps to enhance the notions of 'invisible waves' that affect us without necessarily being seen, Kajio has placed a bundle of clear perspex rods in a corner. They are free-standing, and of average human height, silent transmitters of a kind.

Both artists have been generous in providing feasts for the eye. There seems less investment however in articulating any tensions they may have encountered along the way. It is the kind of investment needed in order to avert over-reliance on humanist sentiment or the resort to nostalgic expedience. Among this visual spectacle one seems lost among objects and projections rather than being able to achieve some kind of participatory yet objective observation.

Note
¹ Andrew Frost, 'New Worlds', *Emil Goh*, exhibition catalogue, Adelaide: CACSA, 2002

Mehmet Adil

Simryn Gill

A small town at the turn of the century

Contemporary Art Centre of SA, Adelaide
 www.cacsa.org.au
 4 October – 3 November

I had many second thoughts about *A small town...* prior to this show's arrival – well prior in fact. In its travels it has been preceded by a limited edition book and piecemeal reproduction for upwards of a year. Gill is known to Adelaide through a number of exhibitions that have been impressive – hard-headed, poetic, intelligent and witty, and often affecting. They have tended to deal with postcolonialism through examination of cultural trace elements, chains of cultural association, objects – the meanings and associations of often insignificant objects – presented almost as etymology and epistemology. The current show, in expectation, looked to be a lot balder.

A small town at the turn of the century is a suite of forty photographs [C-type, just moderately large, made over 1999 and 2000]. They detail life and leisure – via portraits in situ for the most part – in Malaysia. It is Gill's own family and friends and relations, her once home town Port Dickson on the west coast of Malaysia. Blunt, or bald, is the obscuring of the subjects' faces in each photograph by a masking head-gear of exotic fruit. The pictures are [as if] made only for Westerners – as Brechtian intervention to prevent orientalising Western identifications that are too easy or sentimental, to prevent Western focus on *difference* – and to offer in their stead masks that refuse these readings, or offer sarcastic verdict on them. Of course they don't allow for – perhaps [their point?] they don't believe in *the possibility of* – an acceptable occidental reading.

There is in this an unpleasant sense in which the artist is offering a verdict on the audience. Which can raise some viewer resistance. But *so what?* I think deals with that objection fairly adequately.

In a sense all of this is preliminary – or not so much preliminary as that it is an early achievement of the work [“the works of but a moment” to quote Gill's beloved Jeeves] in our response to it. It may be the important part of the pictures' task – but it is achieved fairly instantly. It is the overtly ideological part of *A small town...*'s job description. The pictures continue to work in other non-confrontational ways as well.

This second, less swift effect is to do with the gaze being deflected from faces and direct confrontation with race [skin being perhaps both essence and metaphor here] to a searching, less hierarchically organised gaze across landscape but, more particularly, over clothes, furnishings, dwellings, details of brand-names, foods and appliances [decorations, clothes] – the mechanics, tools and appurtenances of every day life. Much of this detail was very interesting and informative: the *opposite* of seeing only what you believe or project [as is the case with an orientalising vision]. Much of it – thanks to globalisation – said we are all the same or becoming the same. Much of it said we were different, but mysteriously so and not alienatingly so. [The colours were beautiful, the pictures as compositions made little effort to subvert or counter the conventional – and details of texture, pattern, the visual reportage, were full of charm].

The exotic fruit and seed-pod heads were mostly ugly I thought – and hard to look at. Maybe I'm squeamish. Some of course were funny – as simple sight gag or, more pointedly, in resembling, say, *Star Trek's* idea of a pretty intimidating alien.

The people pictured were, from memory, doing endearingly unremarkable things – a bunch of guys sitting around having a beer, someone fishing. The décors varied from fairly comfortably worldly to the more austere: one noted CD players, 'pop' materials in one home, puritanical Christian imagery in another, signs of travel, interesting quasi workstation desks in the home. Etc.

A small town... was more memorable than I'd been expecting but less compelling and formally intriguing than Simryn Gill's work to date – largely the result of the photographic medium and format, the conventions at play. Previously Gill has worked with installation and quasi museum-style displays and arrays of objects. On the other hand, *Small town...* felt much less like the [usual] 'art experience' – a product of the artist's savvy and directness.

Ken Bolton