



Left: Susan Norrie, *Undertow [Element 3]* [video still], 2002
 Photo courtesy the artist and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art
 Right: Simon Cooper, Isabelle Gerard and Pat Liam, *Bathroom*, 2002
 Photo Brenton McGeaghie



Susan Norrie

Undertow

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
www.artnow.org.au
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The major work of this year's Melbourne Festival visual arts program, Susan Norrie's *Undertow* also inaugurates the new 'ACCA experience' in its huge Wood Marsh-designed building in Southbank. *Undertow* was commissioned especially for its cavernous hall space, a privilege Norrie has risen to by turning it into a cinematic apparatus. And, given the building's rusty bunker exterior, it seems appropriate that she has also transformed the interior into something of a war zone.

As we enter the cone shaped hall, our first encounter is with a tiny screen, the size of a snapshot photo, embedded in the wall. It shows a short black and white loop of a well dressed man entering a large typing pool carrying a white box, and a peasant woman slowly dragging a wooden chest across a wasteland of architectural modernism. A remix of Orson Welles' version of *The Trial*, this sets the tone for all six DVD 'elements' in *Undertow*. The images are mysterious [we never find out what's inside the box], sombre and evocative, and their austere, historically foreboding critique of 'modernity' is pure Norrie – whose work aspires to be nothing less than society's moral conscience.

Emerging into the hall, we are engulfed and dwarfed by a projection of an overwhelming cinematic scale [matched only, on the local art circuit, by Bill Viola's *The Messenger* in the 1998 Melbourne Festival]. This sequence opens with images of a tempestuous ocean, moves to the blackened trees of lakeside forest fires, and then cuts to images of a city under siege [using pre-digital archival footage from the dust storm that rolled over Melbourne in 1983, sourced from the Bureau of Meteorology. Deeply infused by media memory, enhanced by Norrie's treatment of the material, these images of nature's violent force are extremely beautiful. Their slowed down, purple toned black and white images evoke the tradition of Romantic painting and the painterly depth of only the most poetic cinema [think Tarkovsky or Resnais].

Perhaps the most striking images in this sublime vision of apocalypse are those of Melbourne: the central thoroughfare of Flinders Street Station, with slow moving cars whose headlights cut beams through the dense plumes of smoke; aerial views of the city; and a traffic jam on what looks like the Westgate Bridge, imagined as an unlikely escape route from the city. In the latter, emergency staff appear like ghosts out of the darkness, waving torches. An extraordinary scene from the front seat of a truck lends poignancy to objects dangling off the windscreen. The work was lent an unexpected gravity in its first weeks, with the October Bali bombings only days before the opening of the exhibition and Australia's media awash with signs of devastation. In any event, the sheer size of the images gives them an unmistakable affective power, enhanced by an ambient Eno-esque soundtrack by Robert Hindley.

Three more projections line the side walls of the hall, increasing in scale as one moves towards the front. Their black wooden projection boxes, with spiky metal legs, are sculptural works in their own right. These 'elements' focus our attention on the fragility and energy in the natural environment, and the paradox of human progress: lab workers clean the oil off a bird's feathers; in a perplexing sequence, gasmasked figures tie up balloon strings before releasing the apparently toxic objects into the air outside; and a third projection shows more abstract images of volcanic mud bubbling and spurting in a fecund way.

The overall effect of *Undertow* is dramatic and singular. Juliana Engberg, Curator of Melbourne Festival's visual arts program and also ACCA's new Artistic Director, is quite justified in describing it as an 'epic essay', a 'visual symphony' and in terms of 'the hidden terrors and delights of a world in environmental flux'. Indeed, all the Engberg effects are here: sublime terror, the unconscious, modernity's repressed histories, and so on. As a premonition of environmental catastrophe, Norrie's *Undertow* also has to be seen in the context of Australia's current drought and the outlook for the bushfire season ahead. It's not all grim, however. On turning to leave we encounter another embedded screen, above head height, on the back of an internal wall at the entranceway. This one shows a child being piggybacked through a cherry blossom park. While also black and white, in contrast to the range of green and purple tones of the other screens, this one is slightly pink toned, and acts as a provisional, inconclusively redemptive refrain.

Daniel Palmer

Imperial Slacks

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www.imperialslacks.com
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It is difficult to summarise the activities of an artist run gallery like Imperial Slacks. This is because such galleries are, in some sense, always in transition, redefining their position and activities. Nevertheless what made Imperial Slacks noteworthy, like all successful artist-run spaces, was its capacity to encapsulate a particular stance, a particular attitude at a particular time. Describing exactly what that attitude is or was, is likewise practically impossible. Normally it arises organically out of the complementary ideals of gallery directors. In this case, the directors were numerous, comprising core artists, Simon Cooper, Sean Cordeiro, Marc Dempsey, Lea Donnan, Chris Fox, Shaun Gladwell, Claire Healy, Wade Marynowsky, Angelica Mesiti, Técha Noble, Emma Price, Michael Schiavello, Monica Tichacek and Melody Willis. Given the potential for disputes arising from the sheer size of its directorship, the success of Imperial Slacks is perhaps even surprising. On the other hand the directorship's numerical weight predisposed Imperial Slacks to a multi-disciplinary inclusiveness. This inclusiveness could further be explained by the diverse interests and practices of its artist directors. These encompassed the fields of painting, sculpture, installation, performance, video and computer generated art, sound and electronic improvisation. The scope of such interests fostered a variety of exchanges and opened the gallery to activities beyond its primary role as a venue for the exhibition of contemporary visual arts.

No matter how 'serious' or impressive this multi-skilling sounds, what characterised many of the events staged by Imperial Slacks was their seemingly casual irreverence for such notions. In this instance the on-site living and/or studio circumstances of several of the directors enabled the gallery to operate, at least partially, along the blurred boundary traditionally separating art from life. Beyond 'celebrating' the gallery directors, such conditions enhanced the 'ambience' of the gallery and located it as an essentially active and propositional site. Unfortunately the seemingly ever encroaching real estate market in Sydney recently curtailed the life of Imperial Slacks the gallery. Once housed in an ex-industrial warehouse, whose original function gave the gallery its title, the building is currently being reshaped to provide yet more 'New York Style Loft Apartments'. Potential buyers may rest assured that by the time they move in, the creativity insinuated in the previous epithet will well and truly have departed for alternative terrains.

During its life Imperial Slacks provided an arena for a range of related events. Foremost among these was the *Impermanent Audio* series hosted by Caleb K. Experimental electronic musicians were invited to perform weekly before a crowd gathered in the main gallery. Such performances consisted of longer or shorter sets that were often accompanied by video projections. Here the gallery provided an arena for types of music generally still regarded as marginal. With the closure and rethinking of many long surviving music venues, Imperial Slacks provided a haven for performances which would otherwise be deemed interminable by the mainstream. In this instance the gallery enabled a particularly open form of contemporary experimentation that may not have been possible anywhere else. Another singular venture of the

'Slackers' as they became affectionately known, was their release of two video publications entitled *Serial Sevens*. These productions, replete with seductive packaging, contained varieties of video works from a range of diverse artists, including Brent Grayburn, TV Moore, Shay Launder and the gallery's own fabulously disrespectful 'King Pins'. The 'King Pins', consisting of women dressed as men, took it as their duty to consistently lampoon the stereotyped and phallogocentric pretensions of the commercial music industry. The results of these incursions were frequently hilarious because of their innate accuracy.

The final exhibition, *Slacking Off* [24–31 August 2002] was characterised by its juxtaposition of works of formal and conceptual rigour with those evincing a more casual attitude. The result reconfigured the soon-to-disappear gallery as an enveloping environment. Every room and every living space became an opportunity to exhibit work created there, criticise the enforced circumstances of the gallery's closure and reflect on Imperial Slacks' achievements. Such preoccupations were brilliantly counterposed in a variety of works that addressed the gallery as a site inhabited on multiple levels. These included Claire Healy's faux bus shelter made of rough hewn timber, wood veneer and exposed fluorescent lights; Pat Liem, Isabelle Gerrard and Simon Cooper's reworking of the gallery bathroom as a neo-primitive site; Michael Schiavello's illuminated square of recently and immaculately 'refurbished' floorboards critiquing the fetishistic nature of inner city real estate speculation; and an installation by Mark Brown and Chris Fox. This incorporated a surveyor's tripod, laser and smoke machine, and subtly compared science fiction narratives with the 'rationalisations' of property developers.

What made such works so successful in the context of this exhibition was the concreteness and specificity of their inherent duality. Their overall mingling of pathos and humour, nostalgia and potential was ideally suited as an iconic representation of the ideals of Imperial Slacks. Like all venues of this nature, inclusiveness meant the overall variety of shows could be uneven. However, this fact should be regarded positively, as democratic rather than as symptomatic of disorganisation. *Slacking Off*, although by its very nature unable to fully represent the gallery's previous activities, nevertheless encapsulated some of its best attributes – its openness, enthusiasm, commitment and energy. These qualities were additionally celebrated in the party that coincided with the exhibition's opening. Ultimately the manifold activities of Imperial Slacks can only testify to the continuing importance and centrality of artist-run spaces in consistently transforming contemporary Australian culture.

Alex Gawronski