

# Making it New

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Curating often courts the vexed issue of agency, namely the extent to which the curatorial imprint carries sympathetically to the artists involved. Without this imprint, an exhibition can appear bland or callow, yet it can just as much distort an artist's work as enrich its context. When a curator's charge is to name a particular contemporary condition and choose artists representative of it, the matter becomes particularly fraught, as we have already witnessed many times in the heated debate surrounding biennales. This presents the curator with a sort of identity crisis. What, then, are survey exhibitions supposed to do if their ability to survey has been discredited? One answer is to impose the curatorial will as a temporary antidote to the artistic gangrene of imposed excellence caused by art fairs, prominent commercial galleries and commercially-indexed magazines. If you did not let yourself be deterred by the blandness of the title, *Making it New* offered a very new perspective on what is occurring in Australian art. One sensed a directness, wit and willingness to experiment that brought back memories of the sadly defunct Australian Perspectives. It was a show unencumbered by glib slickness yet safe from laxity; and its freedom from cerebral heaviness gave no quarter to ingratiating accessibility.

This was the first major exhibition for the new MCA curator Glenn Barkley, a close devotee of Outsider Art, a term meant to describe the art of the untrained or the insane. To suggest that art has an outside is somewhat tenuous, since art is neither homologous nor is there any perceptible 'inside' (besides the 'mainstream' which is really just another way of saying what is fashionable at the time). Perhaps other, less loaded artistic terms such as *Art informel* and *Art brut* allow for better leverage on the desire to foreground spontaneity and irrationality. Cavil about terminology aside, what joins all such titles together is a fiendish distrust of art that is well made, that bespeaks rational control, and which seeks to seduce with its love of technical discipline. Depending on what side of the fence you are standing, these are not necessarily the noblest of aims, but the overall untidiness of this aesthetic suited this exhibition's interests well, giving the sense of wishing to speak frankly, without jargon.

One of Barkley's intentions was to dredge up certain artists with commendable practices who had had limited exposure for unaccountable reasons. Among the most outstanding of these was Tasmanian Bob Jenyns, who over forty years has waged a campaign against sculpture with the kind of meticulous elegance that lulls viewers into a false state of aesthetic certainty (think big formalist public sculpture, et cetera). On the surface his work seems heavily improvised and jokey, beneath which is a thoughtful



Bob Jenyns, *Suit... dedicated to my dad who waited for forty years for me to buy a suit and then he died so that I might have somewhere to wear it*, 1995, polychromed wood, 60 x 240 x 23cm. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Collection the artist. Image courtesy and © the artist.

vulnerability about the experiences of memory and loss. In a work like *Suit... dedicated to my dad who waited forty years for me to buy a suit and then he died so that I might have somewhere to wear it* (1995), the vacant, cartoon-like suit stands grim, angular and mute on its crudely hewn, small, red plinth, the ensemble an *ersatz* coffin, the visual and verbal deadpan masking some unspoken sadness. If not sad about the defunct father, then the work is about the ways in which relationships and intentions regularly misfire, leading to communicative voids, never to be remedied.

In Jenyns's *A monument to friends* (1982), an angular black unit, vaguely house-shaped with several indented windows, sits on a thick, custom-made table in front of a neon sign announcing 'Home'. The transformer for the light is easily visible under the table, with its own readymade warning ('DANGER'). As here, there is an odd combination of burlesque and foreboding to Jenyns's works. One is unsure whether they prophesy, condemn or celebrate, seeming to disclose some unstable truth that is either too dangerous or too equivocal to express verbally. It calls to mind Adorno's statement that 'art is the sedimented history of human misery', except Jenyns's humorous and humble self-deprecation lends this formulation a deceptive levity.

A similar quizzicality at the world's contradictions permeated the collages from the early 1980s of Ruth Waller. For instance, the mock sci-fi heroism of *Boy in a Manscape* (1981), a crude 1950s-style collage of a youth against a doctored background of a factory, revives the arch social commentaries of early Pop artists like Hamilton, Paolozzi and Blake, but with a dryly dystopian air. More recent work



(2003) of sculptures and paintings is also historical, this time reprising the late Cubisms of Ozenfant and Leger, only these machine bodies are ungainly, clapped-up and uncomfortably restricted. They are not so much robots gone wrong as wild mechanical compounds. Other less figural cardboard assemblages (*Powder Blue Lamentation*, 2003-4) resembled lively sculptural models for emotional states. The impulsive handling of the material was an eloquent metaphor for the hopelessness with which we seek to approximate the nebulous zones of sensibility.

There was a commonality of such interests in the objects that made up the sprawling installation by Toni Warburton. Working with ceramics for several decades, Warburton is unusual for the way she pushes the elements of crafted utility germane to the medium back to its more mystical origins of ritual, fable and place. Many of her objects such as *lookout: bell climb chora (Pigeon House Mountain)* (2004) look as though they have arisen from an archaeological dig, innocently denatured, chipped and deformed historical residue.

More surreal perhaps, but no less saturated with the sense of some discarded mythology, were the sumptuous dioramas of Tom Moore. An intricate cut-out cityscape flanked a simulated road which served as the resting place for a green glass bird perched on a proportionately dwarf-sized car sprouting leaves and something like asparagus heads. In another part of the installation (*Pondlurking, Skylarking Freaks of the City*, 2009) barrel-like, artificial ponds were home to glass rushes and normal-enough looking birds that mixed gregariously with amphibious, glutinous mutants. Moore's world is a menagerie of impossibles, a glory world of childhood fancy driven to obsession. Artwork like this succeeds by dint of the energy, thoroughness and devotion with which the artist follows through on the most unaccountable and dauntingly crazy of intuitions. We are convinced, forced even, to take seriously a set of ideas that are mightily absurd when put down in words.

Text-based works were a noticeable component to the exhibition, from Linda Marrinon's celebration of false starts in painting (a grey scribble with 'sorry' scrawled beneath it); to Jon Campbell's 'Yeah' banners of hollow affirmation; to Raquel Ormella's large banners



1/ Jon Campbell, *yeah flag*, 2005, polycotton, thread, bunting, brass fittings 90 x 180cm. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Image courtesy and © the artist, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney and Uplands Gallery, Melbourne.

2/ Ruth Waller, *Boy in Manscape*, from the *Remote Control* series, 1981, mixed media collage, 21 x 26cm. Image courtesy and © the artist the artist, Helen Maxwell Gallery, Canberra, and Watters Gallery, Sydney.

3/ Tom Moore, *Full pond*, 2009, blown glass, water, mixed media, 240 x 120 cm. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Image courtesy and © the artist, and Ray Hughes Gallery. Photograph by Grant Hancock.

## JOHN FORD PATERSON: A FAMILY TRADITION 21 FEBRUARY - 18 APRIL 2010



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John Ford Paterson  
*Full pond* (detail)  
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declaiming vaguely left-wing indignation, propped up at regular points throughout the spaces. Deprived of their context and displaced from their opprobrium, it will be interesting to see how effective Ormella's works will be in a few years' time. With less moral gravitas were the Ed Ruscha-inspired text paintings of Matthew Hunt, slogans, as it were, of internal narrative and the subconscious: 'Look around everything is dirty', and 'Shit. Did I really say that out loud'.

Hunt's other work, a video, together with that of Khaled Sabsabi, were two works to savour from the exhibition. The question of how much video to put in an exhibition is, I expect, another dilemma for critic and curator alike. The current dominance of video as a medium can sometimes lead to overkill or the reflex of reactive exclusion. Hard to say here – but the two works were superb. Hunt's *End of the Earth* (2006) was a simple but striking sequence of a man in a purple shirt playing drums at the top of a small waterfall. As the video rose to a crescendo, one suspected that there was a lot more to this than a radical juxtaposition. The drummer, an aged rocker, was no less than James Baker (ex-Hoodoo Gurus). Armed with this information the work becomes a warmly humorous testimonial to the dissipated aspirations of youth and to faded stardom. Hunt's orchestration of Baker assumes mock-heroic proportions, the proverbial rocker past his prime cast into limbo, the Pop-travesty of Prometheus chained to the rock.

Sabsabi's *You* was how political art should be: rooted to the moment but speaking outward to human struggles that make politics necessary, and tragic. One entered the space through a specially constructed door to a box-like enclosure, whereupon one was immediately met with the beam of the projector. This beam, like the one that an interrogator shines at his victim to avoid being identified, had the effect of jolting the viewer from a habitual place of safety. The installation space was thick with chanting and cheering. Closing the door and turning, one was met with a grid of images of the Hassan Nasrallah speech given to celebrate the defeat of the 2006 Israeli invasion. Some faces of the Hezbollah leaders were effaced by a white radiating spot, akin to the light that shocked you on entry. Clearly about demagoguery and fanaticism, the work was a visual lamentation to the failure on both sides of a conflict to see their overinvestment in personalities and causes whose only substance and maintenance is through opposition itself. The cheers were eerily inspiring.

The strong emphasis on culture and identity was carried through in the exquisite sculptural headdresses of Torres Strait Islander Ken Thaiday Snr. It was rewarding to see these outside of an exclusively ethnographic or ethnically themed exhibition. Less effective were the decorated poles and bark paintings of Marrnyula Mununggurr from Yirrkala. Extraordinary pieces in themselves, it seems that non-indigenous people still have more thinking to do about how to make Aboriginal art in mixed exhibitions appear more than compensatory and politically expedient. This was not the curator's intention, of course, but is endemic of a wider problem.

What is certain is that this exhibition took risks. Its underlying thread of marginalised identity went well beyond nationality or creed, uniting eccentrics and self-proclaimed misfits together with cultural minorities. This show was characterised by the folksy, the odd and the brazen. But it had an unusual honesty and grace. By and large the works in the show were not underscored by redressing any balance or by making some reproach. Rather it reminded the non-artists that most if not all artists are unapologetic and indeed comfortable being an ill fit, living on some outside, geographical or psychological, or both. Artists, like many of the groups they represent, do not necessarily wish to assimilate. *Making it new* said something that wasn't new: that the peculiar in this world, if not always understood, seeks to be heard and accepted. ■

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*Making it New: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art* was curated by Glenn Barkley and shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 10 September to 11 November 2009. The exhibition featured Alison Alder, Micky Allan, Jon Campbell, Lou Hubbard, Matthew Hunt, Bob Jenyns, Linda Marrinon, Archie Moore, Tom Moore, Marrnyula Mununggurr, Raquel Ormella, Alwin Reamillo, Khaled Sabsabi, Neil Taylor, Ken Thaiday Snr, Ruth Waller, Toni Warburton and Ken Whisson.  
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**Adam Geczy** is a writer and artist based in Sydney. He lectures in sculpture, performance and installation at Sydney College of the Arts. His next exhibition is *Remember to forget the Congo*, a live (webcast) performance at Croxhapox, Ghent, Belgium in May.  
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Nadine Christensen, *Untitled (Tiled floor)*, 2008, acrylic on board.  
 Collection: Geelong Gallery.  
 Winner, 2008 Fletcher Jones art prize

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