

SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS



FUTURE
EMERGENCY

PROJECT SPONSOR: This project was organised by the Queensland College of Art Griffith University and the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University with generous support from the Australian Research Council's Asia Pacific Futures Research Network and assistance from the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, ANU.

The project forms part of an Australian Research Council funded research project on art and human rights entitled 'The Limits of Tolerance in the 21st Century'. The research for the exhibition has, in part, also been supported by the Australian Research Council's Asia Pacific Futures Research Network. This catalogue has been generously supported by Liveworm Studio.

With thanks to the artists; Louise Edwards, ANU; Mary Farquhar, Griffith; Michael Wesley, Director Griffith Asia Institute and Meegan Thorley, Manager Griffith Asia Institute; Ian Donaldson, Glen Barclay, Leena Messina, Melinda Sung and Rachel Eggleton HRC, ANU; Howard Morphy, Ursula Frederick and Katie Hayne CCR, ANU; Simeon Kronenberg and Jeremy Smith, Sherman Galleries, Sydney; Kirsty Divehall, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland; Daniel Chong and Beverly Yong, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur; Nozomi Takagi and the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; Griffith Artworks; and Ben Byrne, Postgraduate Secretary QCA.

Guan Wei acknowledges the assistance of Baokang Zhao and Sherman Galleries, Sydney. Wong Hoy Cheong acknowledges the assistance of Mohamad Arifwaran.

'FUTURE TENSE: Security and Human Rights' was exhibited at Queensland College of Art between 26 August - 11 September 2005.

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Designed by: Elliott Scott (cover), Elvira Wilkinson (internal layout), Liveworm Studio.

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ISBN 1920952446



- LIVEWORM

INTRODUCTION

In 2004 the Australian Research Council established 24 Research Networks, including the ARC Asia Pacific Futures Research Network (ARC-APFRN). Their goal is to enhance cooperation among researchers to create vibrant new research synergies. The ARC-APFRN builds upon Australia's internationally recognized research excellence in Asia Pacific studies and our goal is to ensure that the high quality of this output continues in a new generation of researchers. We also endeavour to strengthen the links between universities and the broader community.

Each year the ARC-APFRN focuses on a specific theme. In 2005 we explored governance and security within a series of events broadly titled 'Towards a Secure Future in the Asia Pacific'.

The artists featured in 'Future Tense' invite us to consider key questions about global security from important new perspectives. The impact of increasing fear, real or imagined, has significant ramifications for the nature and quality of connections between people and between governments. The quantum of human trust in the world diminishes as discussion about security threats increases. Differences between individuals or cultures are often presented as sources of tension rather than cause for

celebration. The diverse artistic works presented in this exhibition challenge us to consider the importance of valuing the innate human dignity and of striving for social justice. They encourage us to nurture trust rather than fear, and make us aware of the generative powers of cultural diversity. The artists showcased in 'Future Tense' point us to a future of less, not more, tension.

The Visual and Performing Arts sector can both reflect community concerns and promote change in unique and important ways. On this basis the ARC-APFRN is proud to sponsor 'Future Tense' and congratulates the artists and their curators, Associate Professors Caroline Turner (ANU), Pat HOFFIE (Griffith) and Simon Wright, on presenting a stimulating and provocative collection of works.

Louise Edwards

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'SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS'

CAROLINE TURNER

'Fear - otherwise styled security'. Salvador de Madariaga (1886–1978), 'Morning without Noon', 1974.

This exhibition takes as its two key points of reference contemporary global concerns about security and contemporary global concerns about human rights. Both are emerging as crucial to defining our lives and our future in the 21st Century.

Artists can give a special insight into these concerns and in the process highlight our common humanity. And Art, as French artist Christian Boltanski has reminded us, 'is always a witness, sometimes a witness to events before they actually occur...'¹

'Fear - otherwise styled security', in the words of Spanish historian, diplomat and head of disarmament at the League of Nations in the 1920s, Salvador de Madariaga,² has become the prevailing note of the opening years of the 21st Century. Our world in our present is obsessed with security and a 'war on terror'. If this period comes to be identified in history as the Age of Terror, it will be terror in a particular sense. This is terror which targets civilians and non-combatants, as most recently in London and in Bali and in Israel and in New York and in Egypt and ... where next?

It is also a time of extraordinary challenge to the principles of human rights which 57 years ago were enshrined in a 'Universal' Declaration adopted by the United Nations in 1948 in the hope of securing a better future for all the peoples of the world. The tragic fact is, however, that hopes for a culturally tolerant, humane and secure future remain unfulfilled in our time. As a leading scholar of international law, Professor Christine Chinkin, noted in 2003, poverty, war, imprisonment, torture, genocide and other abuses remain: 'The universality of human rights standards is challenged as abuses are committed in the name of religion, custom and tradition and increasingly in this post 11 September 2001 environment, national security ...'.³

Terror can, of course, come from the top down as well as from the bottom up, and on a far vaster and more destructive scale, because a State customarily has far greater capacity for destruction to hand than those seeking to oppose it. There is also the inherent problem that measures taken by a State to defend itself against terror can have the effect of eroding the values which the State itself claims to defend. War is frequently about terror and war is inevitably about absolute distinctions of right and wrong – our side and the enemy. But it is rarely in human relations as simple as absolute right and wrong. War cannot be an end in itself and at some point there needs to be a basis for peace. One person's terrorist can be another's freedom fighter; but the complexities do not stop there: it is a situation in which those under threat can come too easily to resemble those who are seen as constituting a threat. As Pat HOFFIE reminds us in her essay in this catalogue, the enemy can be within us. The atmosphere of fear and suspicion can also exacerbate differences and mistrust between peoples and escalate fear, violence and terror. Fear drives the quest for security, and it is the most basic psychological truth that one can come to resemble what one most fears. It is the dilemma which Graham Greene posed seventeen years ago in the epigraph to his novel 'The Captain and the Enemy'.

It is precisely the enigmatic aspect of 'security' that infuses the works of the artists in this exhibition. The eight artists included each take a very different approach to the complex historical and other factors encompassed in the concept of security. In doing so they help us to address the even more complex issue of human rights in the context of security in the present.

It would be difficult for an artist to be more adept than Gordon Bennett in conveying the enigmatic nature of this nightmare dilemma. Bennett's concept of Australia's identity as a nation clearly includes, in the words of Simon Wright, 'terror both as a historical component of

Australian colonisation and contemporary existence'. His 'Camouflage' painting of Saddam Hussein deliberately blurs 'the line between oppressor and oppressed – between colonisers and colonised, between the "here" and "there" ', leaving it 'open to negotiation and renegotiation, summarised as the postcolonial condition...'⁴

It immediately raises the question, Who is Saddam? Is he the friend of the West who invaded Iran and massacred his own people? Or the enemy who invaded Kuwait? Or the enemy whom the West invaded, ostensibly for not revealing weapons of mass destruction which it now appears he did not possess, and for theoretically supporting al-Qaeda, who would have been his own worst enemies until we came along? And some now claim that Iraq was invaded for humanitarian reasons to liberate and give freedom to its people – some of whom Australia rejected as refugees when they fled the regime. And is not 'camouflage' an appropriate symbol for this war?

In the 9/11 series Bennett recreates the terror of attack but the faces of fear have been echoed in his reconstructions of Australian Indigenous history of a decade earlier. Despite hysterical and inaccurate statements by some media that 9/11 is the first time US Americans have been attacked on their home soil, Bennett is not alone in perceiving the much greater complexity underlying such an assumption about history. In a speech in Canberra, Australia in 2002, Dr Richard West, Director of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington stated, in answer to a question from the audience, that Native Americans have much to teach their fellow Americans about being attacked in one's own country. Washington and New York have also been the sites of much historical bloodshed besides – Native American wars, wars by colonisers against the Native American first nations, colonial wars for a continent, the Seven Years War and other conflicts, including the British against French, the American Revolutionary war against the British, Loyalists against Revolutionaries, the war of 1812 when the British burned Washington, and the terribly bloody American Civil War, as well as potential and actual slave revolts, ethnic, race and other riots and civic violence. And of course within living memory the attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. And, as distinguished historian David Cannadine noted in a recent seminar at the HRC in Canberra, recognition of the existence of an historical

American empire and all that that entails in the present is something not readily faced by Americans.

Bennett's work reminds us of another critical theme of this exhibition: history and the ambiguities surrounding our often selective remembering of the past.

Eminent British historian of empire Linda Colley, currently an HRC Visiting Fellow, was recently quoted on Aljazeera Arab website from her earlier analysis of Tony Blair's statement in relation to the war in Iraq that 'History will forgive us'⁵ But as Colley pointed out, Blair, and all of us are 'constrained by, and entangled in, history'. British imperial occupiers last century in Iraq experienced the same sort of problems, she wrote, as US [and British and Australian] troops face today. For Blair '...the past is irrelevant, because this is a new world facing entirely new dangers' (Globalization and WMD). The artists in this exhibition remind us, however, that the past is not only with us with all its unanswered questions but is in reality shaping a future which looks frighteningly like the past. And a new century, the 21st, is coming more and more to look like a new version of the 20th, – the bloodiest in the experience of the human race.

Dadang Christanto, whose previous work has memorialised victims of violence in every time and place, in his 'Count Project', begun in 1999 set out to count those killed by violence in the 20th and 21st centuries. Dadang started the project in December 1999, when the world was 'celebrating the ...third millennium'. He felt with reason 'worried about what has happened in the 20th century. In the past century there have been massacres everywhere, bloodshed everywhere. Violence just to make people suffer'. And the fact was that 'we have always failed to stop violence, instead we have more violence. September 11, 2001, the War in Afghanistan, the Bali bombing and the War in Iraq' all were 'actual global evidence that violence is becoming the solution to problems. This is a strong sign that we are living in the barbarian age'. He had accordingly been 'counting the number of victims of violence'.⁶ As a small boy this artist experienced his own personal nightmare of violence: in 1965 when he was eight years old his father 'disappeared', taken away by soldiers. The five children were unaware their father had gone. He has never been heard of since, being presumably one of the estimated hundreds of thousands

of people (estimates vary up to 2 million) who were murdered between September 1965 and May 1966 for alleged or imagined Communist sympathies. The horror was compounded by the total element of the mysterious – the dead have never been numbered, the graves have never been found, the bodies have never been returned and nobody has ever been held responsible. Historian Robert Cribb has concluded that while the number killed may be closer to half a million, the event is 'the greatest tragedy in modern Indonesian history'.⁷ These arrests and mysterious killings were prompted by fear and undertaken in the name of security in that those who 'disappeared' were supposed to be threats to security. And a number of the victims, such as Dadang's father, Tan Ek Tjioe, were of Chinese descent and small business men. Chinese were natural targets, for exactly the same reasons as Jews were in Europe: for their different ethnicity, different religion and real or supposed prosperity. In his performance as part of this exhibition, 'Litsus', Dadang Christanto recalls (as he has only been able to recall since he moved to Australia) the stigma attached to the families of those who disappeared, their lack of security, the fact they could never publicly speak of the dead or disappeared and of the complicity of all in that silence as the audience is made complicit during the performance. Either by standing by or by actively participating in violence.

In 'Litsus' the audience must either stand by or participate in the violence by throwing missiles at Dadang (or in the first performance of this work also at his young son Gunung who was the same age, eight years old, as Dadang was when his father disappeared). In the second part of this performance, seen on video in this exhibition 'Searching displaces bones' we see a wrapped body removed and carried forward, slowly unwrapped and subjected to forensic investigation as in an archaeological excavation, inspired, the artist has said, by seeing the bodies of those massacred at Srebrenica (Bosnia-Herzegovina) in 1995 carried out from the excavations of mass graves. This event is considered to be one of the largest mass murders in Europe since World War II with estimates of up to 8,000 Muslim Bosnians murdered at that place. Surely in his imagination must also be the thought that one day his own father's body may be similarly found. And in the minds of the audience who watched this performance in Australia must have been the thought could Australia ever witness such scenes?

But Dadang Christanto's work is not concerned with the political nature of violence but with what makes us human. Inhumanity, injustice, insecurity, fear, oppression and the suffering of humankind are always there to be confronted; and these are the enemies he confronts in his art. His art is not to be confined to any specific ideology, religion or locality, as is demonstrated again and again by the fact that it resonates with viewers who have no notion of any political content or background, although one obviously can appreciate the significance of many of them more fully if one does have some knowledge of the background. But the fact is that audiences respond to his works as art but also in terms of their own experience of human tragedy.

Another war, and another child. Like Christanto who was a child in Indonesia in 1965, Tran Luong was a child in Vietnam in the early 1970s. He explores his personal memories of fleeing the US bombing of Hanoi in what is called in Vietnam 'the American war'. He drew on this life journey and his love of nature as well as his Buddhist beliefs in making the video 'Flowing' which he calls his 'self explanation for growing-up, observing, absorbing and accepting, based on the positive philosophy I learnt from Buddhism'. Tran Luong has stated that hate was not something he took with him from the experience of war into his adult life and 'my feeling always [was to separate]... Americans and [the] American regime.'⁸ Like Guan Wei who as a youth was sent to the countryside during the cultural revolution to be re-educated, Tran Luong learned much from nature and his life in rural areas and from the kindness of those who looked after the refugees fleeing bombing. Communism triumphed in Vietnam thirty years ago, after great sacrifices, including the deaths of two million of its people. The French and the Americans both were defeated. Yet the new free market economy in a time of peace also brought concerns of the potential loss of culture and history from globalisation, of the violent and even horrific mass-produced toys from the West that fill his son's world, replacing the gentle toys of wood and paper that delighted a previous generation, and of the street kids in Vietnam who have no toys and nowhere to go. Peace has certainly brought greater security from the horror of being killed or maimed by American bombs or strafed by napalm but not necessarily security of livelihood or home in a globalised world dominated by wealthy nations where the gulf between haves and have nots grows ever wider.

John Pule whose work is also about survival is the archetypal Pacific artist: As Simon Wright points out, Nicholas Thomas has referred to a 'Pacific signature', despite Pule's apparent rejection of some significant Polynesian practices including Christianity brought by missionaries and his claim only to represent himself and the history of his own family.⁹ He was born in the tiny village of Liku in the tiny island of Niue (pop. ca.2000). Pule emigrated to New Zealand at the age of two. He is a virtually self-taught, poet, novelist, printmaker and New Zealand Laureate Artist 2004, with an oeuvre deploying an extraordinary variety of media, fusing 'cosmology, cartography, biography and corporality'¹⁰ It is a remarkable record of personal achievement, mirroring the remarkable collective achievement of Pacific culture, of which Torres Strait Islander Tom Mosby said that its survival refuted the theory of evolution, in that it manifested the weak overcoming the strong, appropriating and adapting for their own purposes the technology, material and techniques of the world outside. But the fact is that the culture of the Pacific peoples is still engaged in a desperate struggle for survival. Colonisation and globalisation are the natural targets of Pacific artists, especially one like Pule, whose work is such a brilliant elucidation of the family stories of so many islanders. Pule is an artist of extraordinary strength, whose terrifying images in the works in this exhibition foreshadow and predict more such tragedies to come. This strength is displayed with what can only be described as combined rage and despair in the 'American Series' shown in this exhibition. The works exhibited here are etchings on paper, horrifying images of victimisation in its most appalling forms of mutilation and mutation. They passionately denounce the arrogance of power and the subjection of the human, echoing Dadang Christanto's words that 'Human beings are not objects'.¹¹

There could hardly be a greater contrast with the stark fury and violence of John Pule's etchings than the meticulously delicate and intricate miniatures of Pakistani artist Saira Wasim, painted with brushes made from the tail hairs of a kitten or a baby squirrel and derived from the rich tradition of miniature painting on the Sub continent and with inspiration from Mughal courts and the theatre. But the fact is that, in the words of Anna Sloan, these delicate miniatures presenting 'the devastating truths behind the celebratory veneers and fear mongering

of the post-9/11 world', with portraits of 'gluttonous power brokers, weak-willed political pawns', and 'hard-edged terrorists, bear a humanist mark, as if violence, hubris, and greed were signs of deep human frailty. In the artist's own soft-spoken words, her work sets forth a "humble plea" for social and political reform'.¹² As the artist herself says 'I believe from centuries ... weak remains weak and strong suppress weak and emperors play with the wishes of their people'.¹³ Nor has any artist placed their own security at greater risk in memorialising the insecurity of others, in her case particularly the truly desperate insecurity of Pakistani women, vulnerable to the arbitrary and unpunished terror of 'honour killings'. But it is clear that it is not fear but rather her strength that inspires her to paint.

Australian artist eX de Medici explores the complex psychology of security, of fear and of death in her drawings in this exhibition, which echo the themes of her artistic oeuvre: installation, performance, drawing, photography and tattooing. The extraordinary delicacy and scientific precision of the drawings imbue violence with a strange and surreal beauty as she explores the fascination of our society with guns and violence. They are also a 'memento mori' and thus a reminder that we all must die and can be seen to echo the fantastical, visionary quality of Medieval and Renaissance graphic art in an era of particular fear and anxiety about death, survival and the afterlife. They have an affinity in subject matter and execution with the graphic art of artists such as Albrecht Dürer who employed images from the popular culture of another turn of a century age – the last decades of the fifteenth and first decades of the sixteenth centuries. Dürer combined this popular imagery with what Vasari called his own 'extravagant imagination' and the exquisite precision of his execution in his graphic work which came to embody the iconography and ideas of a whole society and ultimately its deep insecurity in a time when humanism and religious faith were both facing momentous internal and external threats: the Muslim Turks were at the gates of Belgrade, and the split between Catholics and Protestants would soon lead to the terror of violent religious and civil war.

The insecurity of our times at the turn of our century and in a new millennium is central to Guan Wei's work in this exhibition. As an immigrant Australian brought up

with different perspectives on history (he recalls as a child the stand off between China and Taiwan and also the Cultural Revolution), Guan Wei explores secret or forgotten histories and raises crucial questions of fear and security in our times. Some of his most recent works dealt with Australia's rejection of refugees and boat people attempting to come to this country. Guan Wei continues to employ a certain patina of humour, with his trademark of the little pink figures that he has adopted since coming to Australia. But the little pink figures can suffer and drown as they attempt to escape from whatever desperate situation they leave behind them, only to be repelled from suddenly inhospitable shores. Guan Wei's painting on the subject and his theme of the history of human migrations in every time and place seem to echo the words of Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar who has said in relation to the deaths on the US Mexican border: 'It is an unacceptable tragedy that in the 21st century people still die trying to simply cross a border between two countries'.¹⁴

Guan Wei created the new series in this exhibition, cryptically entitled 'Looking for the enemy', after a residency in New York, a city absorbed with the aftermath of attack and the imagery of the 'war on terror'. In this powerful new series of paintings invading fleets pollute the Pacific, even if it is open to question who is invading whom. In the two paintings in this exhibition we see Australia being invaded, or possibly rescued, by armed forces, and the 19th century bushranger and folk hero Ned Kelly is defying his pursuers. The bushrangers and very bourgeois settlers along with emus, kangaroos and a 19th century image of Aborigines are together in a landscape where a helicopter is disgorging more armed invaders/rescuers, festooned across a barren terrain with incongruous place names like 'Mt Relief' and 'Bay of Plenty' and even, most remarkably, 'Demigod'. But who is doing the invading? Or who the rescuing? Are they Ours or Theirs? And who would They be, anyway? And who was Ned Kelly, apart of course from being the ultimate Australian iconic figure, along with the archetypal 'digger'? Outlaw or defender of human justice? Irish patriot or cop killer? Robin Hood or just plain robbing villain? Or all of these, as may very well have been the case? Are the Indigenous people the ones being invaded or the white settlers? And are the settlers and the bushrangers in confrontation or collusion or just being iconically Australian, like the soldiers disembarking from the

helicopter? Who indeed and what is 'the enemy' in this binary – the oppositional juxtaposing of fear and security?

Wong Hoy Cheong adds a further dimension to the enigma by reversing brilliantly the colonial gaze with his pseudo-documentary 'RE-Looking', merging real and imaginary histories, with the theme of the establishment of a mythical Malaysian/'Melakan' empire and the consequences of its decolonisation upon some of its former Austrian subjects, who have come to live in Malaysia in hope of enjoying a better standard of living than offered to them in their former homeland, presumably crippled economically and socially by the experience of being colonised, as has indeed been the usual experience of victims of European colonisation. Their better life entails working as cleaners and taxi drivers, but things would be even worse for them at home, where streets still bear names in Malay and are adorned with crossed crises. The account records the founding of the empire by a 17th century 'Melakan' sultan Iskander Shah, who follows up a series of military triumphs by seeking a world empire¹⁵, in the manner of his namesake Alexander. Eastward is naturally the path of empire for him too, the global shape of the planet ensuring that Europe is east of Asia just as Asia is east of Europe. His invasion fleets go round the Horn and link up with the Ottoman Turks to accomplish the conquest of Hapsburg Empire. Nor is there anything intrinsically absurd in the concept of European peoples being colonised by Asians: most of Southeast Europe was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire for nearly 400 years, and most of Russia accepted the authority of the Golden Horde for over 200 years. Vienna was in fact besieged by the Turks in 1529 and again in 1683. The fact that it has usually been Asians and Africans rather than Europeans who have been on the receiving end of colonialism, is merely a transient phenomenon of a particular time in human history. The video is presented as a production by the imaginary Malaysian Broadcasting Commission, with the conventional paraphernalia of historical maps, 'newsreels' cunningly giving the appearance of old film about to disintegrate, and commentaries by a Malaysian 'authority', suitably understanding and sympathetic to the conditions of the immigrants, and by an Austrian, marvellously serious, reflective and judicious in the best manner of Teutonic scholarship. The charming and sophisticated young Malaysian presenter in Wong Hoy Cheong's video maintains the relentlessly insinuating

and complacent know-all style of his profession (seen on television screens around the world), except for certain surreal interludes when he eats what appears to be dirt.

Wong Hoy Cheong's work is another reminder that artists can confront us with the deep ambiguities in our views of the world, how colonisers and colonised are equally changed by the process, and how our views are shaped by the victors. Guan Wei has analysed 'mediated information flows' as Laura Murray Cree points out¹⁶ and Bennett's 'Camouflage' series the way our vision is mediated by camouflaged distorted modes of representation. News broadcasts every evening on television deny connections which might seem obvious such as the link between the London bombings and the war in Iraq. The charming young Malaysian commentator in 'RE-Looking' provides a view of the world which is simple and straight forward and totally assured of its own validity. It is a fantasy world but where is the fantasy and where the reality? Once again who is the enemy? The message from Wong Hoy Cheong is that anybody can be colonised and anybody can be a coloniser. Or in Dadang Christanto's terms, anyone can be a victim and anyone an oppressor.

Safeguarding Australia's security should necessitate in the first issue an understanding of the nature of cultures which have come to be regarded in some quarters at least as potentially threatening to this country. This is especially the case when such cultures are strongly represented in our own country. In the last issue the greatest security for any nation should be the sense among its citizens that this is a nation committed to tolerance, respect and human rights. But such sentiments are all too easily overtaken by fear and suspicion of our fellow citizens (the other within) and of those 'others' outside our borders we have defined as our enemies and come to fear. And perhaps the greatest fear of all: to come to resemble what one most fears. Art is not produced in a vacuum: it responds to the socio-political climate of its times. Goya to the Napoleonic invasion of Spain. Picasso to the horrors of the civil war in his country of birth; the Dadaists and German Expressionists to the overwhelming chaos, disillusionment and baffled rage of post-World War I Europe; post Second World War artists to the exigencies of Cold War confrontation. Artists today respond to the pervading sense

of insecurity and consequent concern for security that has compromised the euphoria of the dawn of a new millennium.

Anxiety is multiplied by uncertainty. The artists represented in this exhibition, from Australia, the Pacific, Vietnam, Malaysia, China, Indonesia and Pakistan convey with their wholly diverse insights the prevailing malaise: the mood of present anxiety and future tense.

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Notes:

Research for this project has been supported by an ARC Research Council Discovery grant 'The Limits of Tolerance in the 21st Century' and by research support from the Australian Research Council's Asia Pacific Futures Network. This essay has in part been based on communications with the artists who I thank. I would also like to thank Dr Glen St John Barclay for his assistance in research.

- 1 Christian Boltanski, in conversation with Tamar Garb in Didier Semin, Tamar Garb, Donald Kuspit, 'Christian Boltanski', Phaidon, London and New York, 1997, 2001, p. 37.
- 2 Salvador de Madariaga, 'Morning without Noon', 1974.
- 3 Christine Chinkin 'The Language of Human Rights Law' in Caroline Turner and Nancy Sever (eds.), 'Witnessing to Silence: Art and Human Rights', Exhibition Catalogue, Drill Hall Gallery and Humanities Research Centre, ANU, 2003, p.13.
- 4 Simon Wright, 'Out of Print: gordon bennett', Brisbane, Griffith University, 2004, pp. 78-79.
- 5 Linda Colley, The Guardian quoted <http://www.aljazeeraah.info/pinion%20editorials/2003%20opinion%20Editorials/jul...> Consulted 2 August 2005.
- 6 Dadang Christanto [Charles Darwin University, Newsroom, <http://www.edu.au/newsroom/stories/2003/april/count/>] Consulted 15 January 2005.
- 7 Robert Cribb, 'The tragedy of 1965-66 in Indonesia', unpublished paper, 2005.
- 8 'I still remember during December 1972, all my family stayed underground... in the centre of Hanoi. Bombs everywhere ... all women including my grandmother and my mum was praying...' Tran Luong communication with the author 11 August 2005.
- 9 Nicholas Thomas, 'Possession: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture', Thames and Hudson, 1999, p. 269, quoted by Simon Wright in unpublished communication, 2005.
- 10 Ann Robinson, 'John Pule', Arts Foundation of New Zealand, <http://www.artsfoundation.org.nz/johnpule.htm> Consulted 29 July 2005.
- 11 Dadang Christanto [Charles Darwin University, Newsroom, <http://www.edu.au/newsroom/stories/2003/april/count/>]. Consulted 15 January 2005.
- 12 Anna Sloan, 'A Divine Comedy of Errors: Political Paintings by Saira Wasim', catalogue, 'Transcendent Contemplation: The Art of Saira Wasim', <http://www.sairawasim.com/>, Consulted 2 August 2005.
- 13 Saira Wasim artist statement <http://www.sairawasim.com/statement.html> Consulted 16 August 2005.
- 14 Alfredo Jaar <http://www.insite97.org/artistlink/jaar>, Consulted May 2003.
- 15 Exhibition Guide 'Wong Hoy Cheong', Panduran Pameran, Kuala Lumpur, 2004.
- 16 Laura Murray Cree 'Looking for Enemies' exhibition catalogue, essay Sherman Galleries, 2004, unpaginated.

PAST IMPERFECT:FUTURE TENSE

PAT HOFFIE

Suppose you are an artist beset by a sense of the cruelty of the world and the fallibility – or worse, criminality – of the ideological systems designed to make that world perfect. Suppose you are a witness to your times but see in the miseries and follies around you something more than particular historical causes and effects, something larger that refracts, as if through a cracked prism, or reflects, as if in a smudged mirror, the workings of a society at war with itself and men and women at war with their own contradictory selves.¹

1. THE INFECTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Nobel prize winning author J.M. Coetzee's novel 'Waiting for the Barbarians' follows the critical journey of a Magistrate in a tiny outpost of an un-named Empire. The journey is both a personal one and an historical unfolding; it follows the cataclysms of a disintegrating Empire and the associated crisis of conscience of the central character.

Both the time and the place of the story are uncertain. 'The *mise en scene*' that describes a 'civilised man' living in regulated comfort in an outlying settlement populated by a few 'natives' easily fits the well-established genre of historical narrative. But there is also a sense in which the novel seems to eerily act as a harbinger for the coming age. And although the setting is clearly far removed from

our own particular piece of invaded turf here in Australia, with a little bit of interpretive licence it is not too difficult to read the responses of the Magistrate as metaphors for our own ethical dilemmas in an era where intellectual and creative responses seem imperative.

Written in 1980, the writer's unflinching description of the vortex of violence that engulfs the Magistrate's orderly life seems prescient, as if Coetzee had already been delivered the details of scenes of terror that haunt our present daily lives. As if he was already familiar with the motivations, enactments and responses associated with the events in Abu Ghraib, or with the aftermath of a growing list of civilian bombings, or with the descriptions of skirmishes in countries which are still bitterly engaged in defending the unfolding manifestations of Empire.

As, of course, he was.

Coetzee's early experiences - he was born in Cape Town in 1940 and educated both in South Africa torn apart by apartheid, and in the United States - provided him with more than enough examples of the violence of oppression and terrorism to enable him to re-create a fictional world that all-too-accurately seems to predict future events.

For the mechanisms of terror are age-old, as curator Robert Storr reminds us:

The willingness to believe that terrorism is a total aberration is a mixture of voluntary forgetfulness in the hope of restoring a sense of security and of a simple ignorance of history. In the last century and a half terrorism has in fact been frequent and nearly universal.²

Elsewhere in the same publication Storr infers that the roots of terrorism go back much, much further, and traces examples of 'terrorist women' to the 5th Century BC, where the sisters Antigone and Ismene, characters from Sophocles' Antigone, head-strongly defy state order. When the state demands punishment for her crimes, Antigone takes her own life in a final act of defiance.

However, in today's world memory and history are rare commodities. In terms of the daily press, the current 'global war on terror' is presented as having emerged as a specific US-led response to the events of 9/11. However, to a number of other countries, this state of crisis – along with a variety of manifestations of terror - has existed as part of daily lives for much, much longer.

Rather than being the catalyst that launched us into the current global crisis of terror, the annihilation of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre may be a more appropriate metaphor for the point at which the 'war on terror' metamorphosed into an ideological struggle as well as a protracted military mission lead by the US.

And if this is the single event that is most used to herald the onslaught of the 'war on terror' in a global sense, then the single event that brought any sense of the implications of contingency with the world order home to Australians was the bombing of two night clubs in Bali on 12th October, 2002. Of the 202 deaths, 88 were Australian. Almost overnight the sense of being a safe outpost removed at a distance from the hotbeds of ongoing global violence disappeared. Almost overnight Australians were encouraged by the media to feel as though they too might be somehow implicated as targets of an un-specified violence.

In the earliest pages of Coetzee's novel the Magistrate is brought face to face with the realisation that the

order of his world-as-he-knew-it can no longer hold together. And although this awakening was triggered by the proximity of the Empire's violence into the borders of his own comfortable world, the shattering of his past illusions does not come about through acts performed on him personally. Those follow later. Rather, the complete and irreversible change in his understanding is brought about by himself, on himself. It happens at a point at which he permits his own gradually growing, inescapable awareness to disturb him. And at that moment, he is launched into a new perspective of the world – a perspective that recognises the links between the smallest details of his everyday life to the lives – and deaths – of those around him. This knowledge, he realises, is an infection from which he will henceforth never be released.

But it is the knowledge of how contingent my unease is, how dependent on a baby that wails beneath my window one day and does not wail the next, that brings the worst shame to me, the greatest indifference to annihilation. I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering.³

The Magistrate's new awareness brings with it all the accompanying costs and responsibilities that such awareness demands. He is almost immediately conscious of the price of this knowledge – it is knowledge which, once partaken, automatically expels the recipient from any Edenic gardens of comfort and complacency. This knowledge is an infection. And, once contracted, it is an infection from which there can be no pharmaceutical cure.

The knowledge that rends the Magistrate's life apart is the knowledge that provides an understanding and acknowledgement of the processes of complicity. It is an understanding that each of us has a tiny burden of responsibility in the face of a tsunami of nihilism.

Knowledge comes from the ability to bring loose facts and data together in a way that makes a provisional and interconnected sense of things. In the media-saturated world we live in, knowledge, like memory and history, also seems to be a rare commodity indeed. Instead of a cohesive body of accumulated facts, the presence of information in the form of bytes, facts, statistics

and evidence form the loosely bound, floating islets of our everyday lives. For those who attempt to make connections between such rafts of information, and head out to secure some points of anchorage between these free-floating signifiers, there is a swim that must go against a relentless current of 'news'. And for those who try to take refuge for a time from the exhaustion of such data, the thick, fetid swamps of media imagery still lurk to snare any attempts to reach any continents of sense.

Yet this is the journey that artists undertake in their attempts to make connections that are made to seem impossible by the daily narration of everyday events.

They embark on such swims in an effort to re-imagine new possible ways of responding to the world we live in. Like the Magistrate in Coetzee's novel, their sense of the interconnectedness with the world is both a blessing and a curse that few are capable of realising. For most of us, the trip-wire between cause and effect has been broken. The more-or-less comfy stresses of our daily lives seem to exist on a parallel universe to the happenings of the media world – the world-at-war-beyond.

Artists like those included in this exhibition, are instead driven to respond to this 'infection of knowledge' through illusions of connectedness that make new relationships seem possible. For illusions, it seems, have forever played a key role in imagining who we are, and who we might be. Even in the face of terror.

And who am I to jeer at life-giving illusions? Is there any better way to pass these last days than in dreaming of a saviour with a sword who will scatter the enemy hosts and forgive us a second chance to build our earthly paradise? I lie on the bare mattress and concentrate on bringing into life the image of myself as a swimmer swimming with even, untiring strokes through the medium of time, a medium more inert than water, without ripples, pervasive, colourless, odourless, dry as paper.⁴

2. ETHICS OR AESTHETICS? THE RESPONSE OF ART

There are those critics who believe that art can offer no appropriate critical response to a culture of violence. That the business of art lies elsewhere.

There are others, like critic Paul Virilio, who perceive processes of violence reflected even in works that attempt to side-step the violent realities of the era in which they were produced. In the publication 'Art and Fear', Virilio makes connections between the reductionism of modernism and the era that spawned it.

For example, others before this have attacked modern art's dance of the seven veils, the stripping of art's subjects and materials down to the bare bones of an insubstantial representation. But it is Virilio who names the process violence, pinpoints the fear that subtends it and makes the connection between this violence and the violence of the battlefields of the Great War, for example, when the first abstract canvases appeared and the human figure was literally and figuratively blasted to bits...⁵

In a text that is fraught with inconsistencies and ambiguities, Virilio seems, nevertheless, to be making a plea for a responsive art that refuses to accept that the continuation of war is inevitable. Rejecting political correctness, and launching a tirade against 'the fashionable scientific and artistic idea of the human body as a technologically assisted survival kit that has outlasted its usefulness', Virilio calls for art practice that can respond 'with pity' to the situations and horror of the era we live in.

Virilio's demand for a 'pitiless art' seems to be a call for a renewed practice of the art of empathy; a call for the renewal of skills of responding in ways that are conscious of connectedness. Of compassion. All of which may seem somewhat out of date in an era where dispassionate commentary is at times maintained at the level of an autism that affects our culture at its deepest roots. The vehemence of Virilio's condemnation of the current age at times topples into an almost incoherent rage.

Whether Adorno likes it or not, the spectacle of abjection remains the same, after as before Auschwitz. But it has become politically incorrect to say so. All in the name of freedom of expression, a freedom contemporary with the terrorist politics Joseph Goebbels described as 'the art of making possible what seemed impossible'.

But let's dispel any doubt we might still have. Despite the current negationism, freedom of expression has at least one limit: the call to murder and torture. Remember the media of hate in the ex-Yugoslavia of Slobodan Milosevic? Remember the 'Thousand Hills Radio' of the Great Lakes region of Africa calling Rwandans to inter-ethnic genocide? Confronted by such 'expressionistic' events, surely we can see what comes next, looming over us as it is: an officially terrorist art preaching suicide and self-mutilation – thereby extending the current infatuation with scarring and piercing. Or else random slaughter, the coming of a THANATOPHILIA that would revive the now forgotten fascist slogan: VIVA LA MUERTA!⁷

In Virilio's sneering and ironic description of the limitless transgressions that abound in recent world politics, he suggests that the understanding of terms such as 'freedom of expression' have been terrifyingly transmogrified into the scripted enactments of events such as those he lists. It is as if the will of art to heedlessly transgress boundaries has eclipsed into life.

And if such claims seem far-fetched, then it is chastening to note the importance our own time places on the ways in which the calls to arms are made. The recent move to redescribe the war in terms of an ideological struggle rather than a military mission lead last week (at the time of writing) to the decision by US Congress to forfeit the term 'war on terror' in favour of something more appropriate to changing public responses. President Bush almost immediately overruled the attempt. However the public confession by Congress that all the available 'tools of statecraft' would be needed to defeat the so-called 'enemies of freedom' suggests that the imagining of the global state of terror needs constant and vigilant inventiveness. Senior administration figures within the Bush government are now speaking publicly of the need

to construct a 'battle of ideas' that might be capable of creating an imaginary construct where the 'enemies of freedom' are kept as smoky spectres just outside our range of vision.⁸ Against such claims Virilio's alleged links between the artistry of terrorism and the events of the late twentieth century seem less far-fetched....

The need to keep the enemy faceless, nameless is essential to the role of fostering a state of terror. In Coetzee's novel, the barbarians that wait on the fringes of the Empire like an invisible force threatening to destroy its order and civility, are as much a figment of the imagination as they are a reality. When one or two are captured, tortured and abandoned to their fate, they seem so far from those semi-human entities that keep the 'civilised' awake at night. Up close, identifiable, they seem all-too-vulnerable. All-too-human. The indeterminacy of the barbarians is essential to their capacity to provoke fear.

In Australia, the faces and names of those asylum seekers placed under mandatory detention are kept secret. As are the terms of their sentences. The names of victims lost in the SIEV X maritime tragedy of 2001 are withheld. Signs of the humanity of those we most fear is denied. Similarly, the links between those barbarians and the civilisations of the past are quickly forgotten. The fact that Iraq has had a long and rich Persian heritage, for example, is over-written by images of nameless individuals *in extremis*. The more formless and un-knowable the barbarians can be rendered, the more efficiently the state of fear can be maintained and escalated.

For Coetzee's Magistrate, the truth comes almost too late. After attempts at reconciliation with individual outsiders, his realisation comes that that which is most to be feared lies within. And this self-realisation carries with it a toll that comes close to self-destruction as he turns his rage on the Empire that has moulded him:

"You are the enemy, Colonel!" I can restrain myself no longer. I pound the desk with my fist. 'You are the enemy, you have made the war, and you have given all the martyrs they need – starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here! History will bear me out!'"⁹

Against such odds, the production of art that attempts to give features and forms to the real locus of terror, or that attempts to name the names of those rendered invisible, may seem futile.

3. THE IMPOSSIBLE TASK OF SECURITY: TERRORISM FROM WITHIN

Why, in an era of media-saturated representations of the atrocities of war, should the response of art be essential? Why, in a world inured to the violence of representation, might we need more imagery by artists? Opinions vary.

In Robert Storr's excellent analysis of the background to and reception of the series of 15 paintings by German artist Gerhard Richter titled 'October 18, 1977', he cites a range of critical responses to the work. The title of the series commemorates the day the bodies of four of the infamous Baader-Meinhof social-activist-turned-terrorist group were found dead or dying in the high-security Stammheim prison near Stuttgart. Controversy raged across Europe about the cause of the deaths of members of the group, and the incident caused the deepest divisions in Germany.

In 1989, when the series was first exhibited publicly, Richter was conscious of the special standing this series had within his own well-established oeuvre. He was aware that the choice of radical subject matter by an established artist at the height of his career would appear like an irony sure to attract controversy. And it did. Critical responses to the work included damning indictments of the work's ineffectuality; that, painted and presented so long after the event, the works could do little more than evoke a dark, sentimental pathos.¹⁰ And yet others recognised the redemptive strength of the series in bringing back an historical episode that had been repressed by the state.¹¹ Perhaps the most interesting response, however, came from critic Peter Schjeldahl, who identified the tension of the series as coming from 'a head-on collision of irresistible estheticism and immovable moralism, the fire of the voyeur and the ice of the puritan'.¹² In spite of, or perhaps partly as a result of, the level of controversy the works attracted, international interest in the series was maintained at the highest level as the works continued to be exhibited at prestigious galleries across Europe and the US for two years until they were purchased by the Museum

of Modern Art in New York for an undisclosed sum. The artist's own point of view about his series of painting seems willfully elusive if not ambivalent. In responses to the statements of critics, he seemed to take pains to always move the debate away from the specific events that surrounded the lives and deaths of the members of the Baader-Meinhof group, and re-position it firmly back towards the cooler subject matter of painting. And yet other statements reveal that his awareness of the impact of the subject matter is clear:

..there's something else that puts an additional fear into people, namely that they themselves are terrorists. And that is forbidden. So this terrorism is inside all of us, that's what generates the rage and fear, and that's what I don't want anymore than I want the policeman inside myself – there's never just one side to us. We're always both: the state and the terrorist.¹³

The images in Richter's paintings are based on 12 police and press photographs drawn from a vast archive of images documenting the history of the Baader-Meinhof group and the Red Army Faction. The publication from which this essay quotes, written by Robert Storr when he was Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, was published by the Museum as a means of extending the understanding of the context of the series and in an effort to avoid overburdening the exhibiting of the works with didactic panels and photographic images. It therefore includes a number of reproductions of photographic documentation of the time. Richter's images famously take on the subject matter of photography and 'the death of painting'. Yet this particular series stands apart within his oeuvre for the way in which he takes the facts and data of events and extends them into images where our capability of making intellectual, emotional, ethical and poetic responses to the tragedy of life and the apparent futility of art in the balance.

The subject matter of violence, terrorism and fear has long provided one of the most primary forces for the production of art. Earliest images on cave walls are evidence of attempts to give form and face to fear, in an attempt to both placate the power of terror and master the fear. Witchdoctors and shamens have taken on the invisible and formless presence of terror in the embodiment of ritual....

as if the ritualised enactment of the facing of fear can be used as a conduit to manage the forces of fear in ways that are most productive to the community. The images of war and of oppression and of injustice and suffering painted by artists abound throughout art history. From Grunewald to Goya to Golub to the artists included in this exhibition the subject has generated imagery that is unforgettable.

And yet. And yet war rages on. The manufacture of terrorism continues unabated. Why, then, must artists continue to address this subject when the role of art in challenging such extremism seems ineffectual?

Coetzee's central character is a Magistrate. His role is an arbiter of justice; an ideal that forms the best mechanism civilised people have invented to secure equality in an unjust world. Yet his own revelation includes the central realisation that this, too, is a poor substitute for the will to imagine a better world.

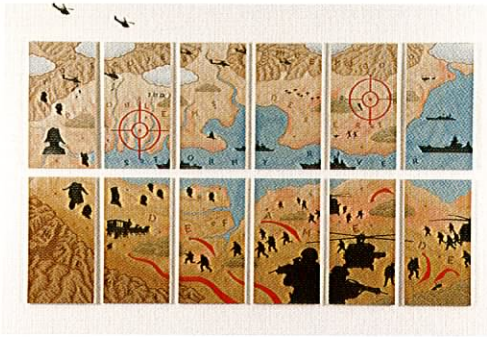
'But we live in a world of laws,' I said to my poor prisoner, 'a world of the second-best. There is nothing we can do about that. We are fallen creatures. All we can do is to uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice to fade.'¹⁴

And the ones who take up the responsibility of keeping memories of justice alive are the artists. Memories of justice, of compassion and memories of the price of fear and terror. Artists allow us brief, liminal glimpses into what we might be. They dare to dream dreams that are, in Virilio's terms, 'pitiful', and dare to unsettle our understanding of who we think we are. They remind us of what each of us is capable of: terror, and hope.

PAT HOFFIE

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Queensland College of Art
Griffith University.

- 1 'Thirty Years Ago Today', in 'Gerhard Richter. October 18, 1977', Robert Storr, The Museum of Modern Art, 2001, p.137.
- 2 'Thirty Years Ago Today', in 'Gerhard Richter. October 18, 1977', Robert Storr, The Museum of Modern Art, 2001, p. 70.
- 3 'Waiting for the Barbarians', J.M. Coetzee, Vintage 1980, p. 23.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 5 'Translator's Preface', Julie Rose, 2002, in 'Art and Fear', Paul Virilio, Continuum, New York, 2003, p. vii.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp 57, 58.
- 8 Matthew Davis, BBC News, Washington 27/07/05; 'President Makes It Clear: Phrase Is "War on Terror"', Richard W. Stevenson, Grapevine, Texas, The New York Times, Aug. 3, 2005.
- 9 Coetzee, *ibid.*, p.125.
- 10 Critic Sophie Schwarz quoted by Storr, p.31.
- 11 Critic Benjamin Buchloch quoted by Storr, p.32.
- 12 Critic Peter Schjeldahl, quoted by Storr, p.35.
- 13 Artist Gerhard Richter, quoted by Storr, p.134.
- 14 Coetzee, *ibid.*, p. 152.



WHERE'S NED KELLY
2004 (180 x 306 cm)

Acrylic on 12 canvas panels. Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney



SEARCHING FOR THE REAL NED KELLY
2004 (180 x 306 cm)

Acrylic on 12 canvas panels

GUAN WEI

Guan Wei was born in Beijing in 1957 and graduated from Beijing Capital University in 1986. Following the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989, Guan Wei left China to take up an artist-in-residency at the Tasmanian School of Art. He undertook further residencies at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and the Canberra School of Art, ANU, before settling in Australia in 1993. He has gained a significant reputation in the last decade both in Australia and internationally. His work has been included in numerous national and international exhibitions including 'Face Up: Contemporary Art from Australia' (Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin 2004), the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial (1999), Australian Perspectives (1995), 'Silent Energy' (Museum of Modern Art, Oxford), 'Mao Goes Pop' (MCA, Sydney) and 'New Art from China' (Hong Kong and Taipei) all in 1993. He was awarded the prestigious Sulman Prize at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2002.

In the 2003 'Art and Human Rights' exhibition he was represented by a monumental painting on the theme of refugees which was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia. Many of his most recent works have been inspired by traumatic issues such as the plight of refugees and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. His two paintings in this exhibition from the series cryptically

entitled 'Looking for the enemy' are ironic commentaries on war and 'security'.

He suggests that for many the search for security is fraught with fear and trepidation. In these paintings Australia is being invaded by armed troops who are hunting the 19th century bushranger and folk hero, Ned Kelly. But who is Ned Kelly and who indeed is the enemy?

Guan Wei has commented that when he came to Australia: 'Consciously or unconsciously, I embarked on a journey of exploration of my own identity... Identity needs time for it to be proven and it is a two-way, interactive process... In my first few years here... I floated freely between two cultures, fascinated by my role as an outsider. As time elapsed, however, I went from seeing Australia as something strange, to something familiar, to something for which I had a conscious appreciation. I see Australia as an enormous natural testing ground. I myself am making attempts to transform Western and Eastern culture...'

(Quoted in Larry Strange (ed.), 'Asia-Australia Institute, University of New South Wales...: A celebration of the 30th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between Australia and China', Office of the Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural New South Wales. p. 80.)



LITSUS
AUGUST 15 2004

Performance by Dadang Christanto, Tuqgunung Tan Aren (R) and Kilau Setanggi Timur (L), Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University.



SEARCHING DISPLACES BONES
AUGUST 1 2004

Performance by Dadang Christanto and Kilau Setanggi Timur, Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University.

DADANG CHRISTANTO

Dadang Christanto is a leading Indonesian artist, with a considerable international reputation, who has been living in Australia since 1999. He was born in 1957 in Tegal, Central Java, and studied painting in the 1970s in Yogyakarta, graduating from the Indonesian Institute of Arts (ISI). A painter who also is known for his performance works, sculpture and installation art on themes of human rights, peace and social justice he has exhibited in many exhibitions, including in Australia, Brazil, Cuba, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Canada and the United States, and continues to exhibit in Indonesia. Major exhibitions include the First and Third Asia-Pacific Triennials (1993 and 1999), the Havana Biennale (1994), 'Traditions/Tensions', Asia Society Gallery, New York (1996), 'Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future', Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, the XXIV Biennial de Sao Paulo, Brazil (1999), and the Gwangju Biennale, Korea (2000). He has also been a lecturer at the University of the Northern Territory and the University of NSW.

Dadang Christanto's art is characterised by a deep empathy for human suffering and all victims of injustice. He was represented in the 2003 'Art and Human Rights' exhibition at ANU with a major installation, 'Red Rain',

incorporating 1,965 small drawings of heads and related to the killings in Indonesia in 1965 when his own father disappeared. This work is now in the Collection of the National Gallery of Australia which, in addition, commissioned a bronze sculpture 'Heads from the North', made during a residency at the ANU. The Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased Dadang's great sculptural installation 'They give evidence' in 2003 for the opening of its new Asian Gallery. This installation represents figures of the dead who have returned to bear witness to the wrongs inflicted on them and on others. Collectively they invite us to seek a future in which there will be no more such victims. In 'Litsus', which will be performed as part of this exhibition, the audience must either stand by or participate in the violence. In the second part of this performance, seen on video in this exhibition, 'Searching displaces bones' we see a wrapped body carried, slowly unwrapped and subjected to forensic examination by a young girl, who may represent the next generation of victims. These two performances encapsulate the essence of Dadang Christanto's art, of which he has said: 'I want to initiate communication that liberates...Liberation from the burden of history filled with wastelands of blood and tears'

(Dadang Christanto, 'Beyond the Future', Catalogue of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, 1999, p.200)



RE: LOOKING
2002-2003 pal dvd / 36 minutes / edition of 4 / collaboration with Mohamad Arifwaran. Courtesy the artist and Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.

WONG HOY CHEONG

Born in Penang, Malaysia in 1960, Wong Hoy Cheong studied in Malaysia as well as the USA graduating with a BA in English literature from Brandeis, an MA in Education from Harvard and an MA in Fine Arts from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He returned to Malaysia and quickly gained a national and international reputation as a painter, installation and video artist. He has taught at The London Institute / Bandar Utama College, Malaysian Institute of Art and the University of Massachusetts, USA. He was Artist-in-Residence and Visiting Fellow at a number of art institutions and Universities including, The Australian National University, Central St. Martins, London, and Goldsmith College, University of London. He has also taught at the Center for Advanced Design in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His work has been shown in major international exhibitions such as the 'Second Asia Pacific Triennial' (1996), 'Cities on the Move' (1997-99), and in the Gwangju Biennale (2000), Venice Biennale (2003), and Liverpool Biennial (2004).

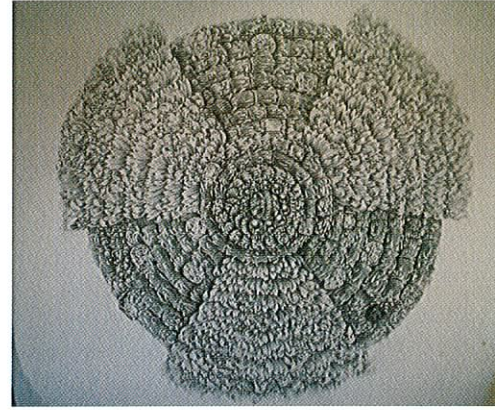
Critical themes underpinning his work have been history, indigeneity, ethnicity, migration and postcolonial identities, as well as issues of social justice. His monumental early project 'Of Migrants & Rubber Trees', which encapsulated his own family's history, was an example of the strategies the artist employs to suggest new approaches to history

and the need to reassess constantly the supposed objectivity and authority of history.

Wong Hoy Cheong's 'RE: Looking' in this exhibition explores, among its other themes, colonialism and the role of the media in shaping opinions, utilising counter-factual information in a fabricated 'documentary' supposedly broadcast by the imaginary Malaysian Broadcasting Company 'MBC'. 'RE: Looking', which was shown in the 'Z.O.U.' exhibition at the Venice Biennale of 2003 curated by Hou Hanru, is a video and a website (www.relooking-mbc.com) and is also an installation where people watch the supposedly real documentary in a living room setting. It purports to examine the impact of the former 'Malaysian Empire' on a post-colonial Austria. 'RE: Looking' used only one professional actor Mohamad Arifwaran.

Wong Hoy Cheong has said that: 'the work is meant to challenge how we perceive the real and the fake, and the perceived histories on both sides of the divide – the former "colonizer" and the "colonized". This is even more disconcerting for Malaysians. Some people found the "de-victimizing" of Malaysia's real history – of once being the colonized, the victim – politically incorrect.'

(Wong Hoy Cheong interview with Gerhard Haupt and Pat Binder <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/islam/eng/2004/09/wong/index-print.html>)



NAME FOR A SLAVE WHO DREAMS LIKE AN ARISTOCRAT (U235 DREAMING): A FRENZY OF PROFIT TAKING.
2005 (106 X 114 CM)

EX DE MEDICI

For some two decades eX de Medici has gained a reputation as an Australian artist whose professional career has been wilfully and capriciously maintained (by herself) at a position left of the official art world's centre. She describes her professional motto since 1996 as being 'to seduce and destroy'.

EX describes her tertiary education as being as recalcitrant as the career that followed: she finished her third year in the Canberra School of Art Painting Workshop in 1983, her final year was spent at the Canberra School of Music in the Electronic workshop as adjunct to her work in performance and installation.

Also well known as a tattoo artist, eX confirms that she has long had 'an issue with skin'. Her involvement with tattoo culture has provided a rich pool of experiences and imagery from which she draws. Her series of large-scale drawings began in 1996, of which the three works in this exhibition form a part, bear evidence of the artist's ongoing fascination with surfaces. And in this work the term 'only skin deep' seems to be contradicted in objects whose richly elaborate surfaces reveal a labyrinth of details that add complexity and irony to the forms they embellish. The image/objects in eX's works are often centrally placed. Like icons or emblems, their



TERRA (APPLICATION OF THEORY: DE-CLOAKING THE APPARATUS) 610
2005 (106 X 114 CM)

(L) Charcoal on paper

immediate impact suggests an easy reading, an immediate recognisability. Skulls, nuclear signs, helmets – they can be neatly fitted within a lexicon of ready-made symbols associated with violence. However, represented as they are, wrapped in their fluffy flurry of surface, they demand a re-think. It is as if the hard-core directness of their communication has been muffled and ruffled. What are these symbols re-fashioned in party bunting and petals? And hidden amidst the surface softness, other more prickly details can be spied – spiky truths and glittering diadems, the booty of pearls or bubbles and the vertebrae of glittering creatures.

These are perplexing images – both flirtations and aggressive. There is a coquettish sado-masochism at play – something both tough and tender. They force us to reassess the connections between brutality and artifice, and to be cautious about wanting what we see in case we might get it. The artist makes no secret about the fact that this series was begun in a direct response to the re-election of the Howard government in 1996, after which she made a conscious decision to respond to what she and many others describe as arch conservatism in Australia. Her aim at this time was to produce the most blatantly conservative objects she could conceive. Here are works that are wilfully critical of the deathly consequences of blind obeisance to ideology.

TRAN LUONG

Tran Luong is a painter who now also works in video, new media, performance installation and conceptual art. He was born in Vietnam in 1960 and graduated from the Hanoi Fine Arts Institute in 1983. In his early paintings, which became increasingly abstract, he drew on themes of nature. He was one of the so-called 'gang of five' young artists in Vietnam, all graduates of the Fine Arts Institute, who came to international attention in the mid 1990s and participated in shows with that group in Vietnam, The Netherlands and the UK. He was the Founder and Artistic Director of the Contemporary Art Center, Hanoi, Vietnam from 2002 to 2003 and is also now a curator, advising on several international contemporary curatorial projects. As an artist, he has participated in solo and group exhibitions throughout Vietnam, and in The Netherlands, France, Germany, Argentina, Japan, Thailand, China, Singapore, the UK, South Korea and the United States. His video work 'Flowing' in this exhibition was exhibited at 'The Second Fukuoka Asian Triennale' 2002 and subsequently purchased by the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. The video encompassed his childhood memories of growing up in Vietnam during the American war and is informed by his Buddhist beliefs. Tran Luong has written:

"Chay – Flowing" is my self explanation for growing-up, observing, absorbing and accepting, based on the

positive philosophy I learnt from Buddhism. I grew up in the eventful period of Vietnamese history. Like many other children living in Hanoi, from the 1960s to the beginning of 1973, we left the city many times for rural areas to avoid American bombings. It was also possible to be bombed in rural areas, however it was thinly populated and the danger of being wounded and killed was less. In my memory, around me were kind-hearted farmers and nice peaceful ancient villages. We lacked any food or electricity, and since we strangers had to move regularly, we had no place to study especially. I was able to go to school only after coming back to Hanoi in the beginning of 1973.

The war came to an end in 1975, after which the fight against the Khmer Rouge broke out as I was just graduating from High School (1977), and in 1979 China attacked Vietnam in the north. This was a period of hunger and economic difficulties that were extended to the years of Open Door in 1986, 1987... My life – as an artist – has become easy to breathe since around 1992, but Vietnam in the early days of Open Door period had to face many evils such as pollution, corruption and illiteracy as it grew acquainted with the free market economy...'

(reproduced from the Catalogue of the 'Imagined Workshop: The Second Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale', Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2002, p. 131.)

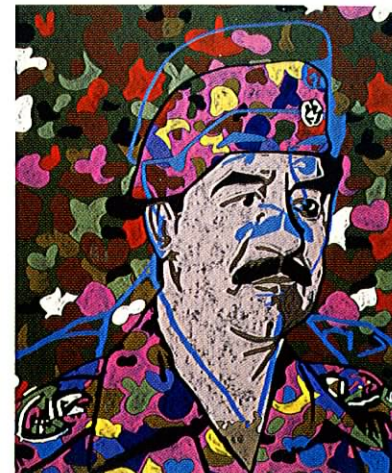
GORDON BENNETT

Gordon Bennett's legacy is a rich undertow of images that have tirelessly grappled with the problems associated with racism, identity and representation since he graduated from the Queensland College of Art in 1988. Even before his training as an artist, Bennett had long witnessed the effects of racism in Australia first-hand and understood all-too-well the divisiveness of race politics in this country.

He writes:

... Aboriginal people know the reality of internment, both in the physical sense of Aboriginal reserves where people needed a written permission slip (the 'dog tag') to leave, and in the psychological sense of fear of, and the language used to describe, the Other. There may not be any razor wire but language can build walls and imprison people as effectively as fences.¹

Bennett's presence looms towering amidst contemporary Australian painting. Brooding, formidably intelligent, taking no prisoners in the high stakes of post-modern culture, Bennett's work attacks from within, quoting, appropriating and ceaselessly re-inventing in attempts to foreground issues that bind art history to today. And if the acidity of



CAMOUFLAGE #5
2003 (182 X 152 CM)

Acrylic on linen.
Courtesy the
artist, Brisbane.

this artist's critique seems at times almost too much to bear, it is worth remembering that his work is always, in the end, most deeply critical of his own position – that for his own self-criticism he keeps the sharpest knife of all. The works for this exhibition use the events of 9/11 as a template from which to launch yet another attempt at re-connection: with other Others, with those experiencing almost intolerable loss, with the past, with dead artists, with his divided self. His 'Notes to Basquiat' series is rich with poignancy – it is as if the words on his canvases might be lists descending towards futility: a) faith, b) choice, c) despair, d) dread. Or, equally, they could be visual offerings in the face of a terrifying nihilism.

His 'Camouflage' series takes the face of Saddam Hussein and re-creates it into the looping forms of domestic wallpaper. Sometimes the figure is unrecognisable – a gas-masked, camouflaged everyman who has invaded even the most banal backdrops of our everyday lives. Watching, waiting, trapped in the mundane camouflage of respectability, it is as if this spectre of horror has emerged from the very blandness of our own being.

¹ Gordon Bennett, in *Artists' Biographies*, in *Isle of Refuge*, catalogue, curators: Ashley Carruthers, Rilka Oakley and My Le Thi, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW COFA, 2003



HOLY MATRIX
2005 (23 X 32.8 CM)

Gouache on artist board.



LAMENTATION OF INNOCENCE
(GENOCIDE)
2005 (23.4 X 30.6 CM)

Gouache on artist board.
All works courtesy the
artist, Chicago.

SAIRA WASIM

The meticulous execution of Saira Wasim's paintings draws from the rich tradition of Mughal painting. She was trained in these skills at the National College of Art in Lahore, Pakistan, where she graduated with a major in miniature painting in 1999. The contentious political subject matter of this artist's work has been described by a number of critics as providing the other opposite pole that creates tension in her work. However, there is also a sense in which the political tenor of her work is entirely in keeping with the ongoing tradition of what is more popularly termed 'miniature painting'.

Saira Wasim was born in March 1975 in Lahore, the cultural capital of Pakistan. It is a city dotted with mosques, gardens and historical buildings, many the legacy of a magnificent Mughal past. The country Pakistan was created in 1947, with the partition from India forced on the subcontinent by the British government when they passed control of the territories back after the colonial empire left the country.

Recognition of Saira's work by the US was quick to follow her move to Chicago in 2003, when she was invited to participate in the prestigious Whitney Biennial. A number

of invitations for her to lead workshops and participate in residencies have since followed.

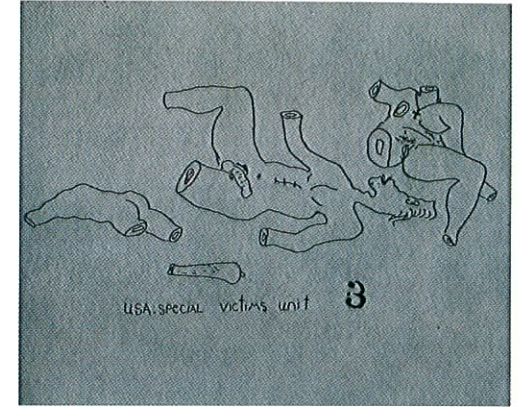
Painted in response to the theme of this exhibition, 'Holy Matrix' features a Mullah who carries aloft a brown flag bearing images from the first teaching book of the Urdu Qa-edah – a primary learner in which here the ABC is scattered into nonsensical drifts. As this image moves from left to right around the central disc a strange and chilling transformation gradually takes place when the blind dogma of ideology gradually works its frightening magic.

The second painting titled 'Lamentation of Innocence (genocide)' features figures that lie in a huddled mound; animals intertwined with humans are all caught together in a net of death. Unlike so many of Saira Wasim's earlier work, this image does not depict specific events. Nor does it aim criticism at specific religions, communities or nations. Rather, it offers a simple picture of senseless slaughter; one that manages to elude the category of propaganda in favour of more poetic allusions. This intimation of futility is, in part, what lends this painting its particular poignancy.

JOHN PULE

Niuean born artist John Pule is one of New Zealand's most respected artists; a writer and a painter who breathes poetry into even the most critically aggressive of his works. Born in Liku, Niue in 1962, Pule emigrated to New Zealand in 1964. He now lives in Auckland. Although his work is deeply evocative of a sense of the Pacific, this artist's work is characterised by a richly individual voice that is capable of speaking across cultures. Professor Nicolas Thomas has described the searing individuality of his voice as having 'no precedent in either traditional Polynesian art or in modern Western genres.'¹

Pule's return visits to Niue have continued to nurture the stories of that place that has lingered with him since they were first told to him as a child by his aunt, Mokka Famu Falemanogi. In Pule's work, the magic of memory is infused with the hard facts of history and the brutal presence of events in current times. Although many of Pule's themes are darkly critical, there is a sense in which the forceful spirit of his attacks are infused with an equally forcefully potential for regenerating productive engagements for the future. The imposition of Christianity on Island people has come in as a particularly heated



OPERATION KIWICRACKER
2003 (50 X 60.5 CM)

All artworks from 'The American Series', etching on paper. Edition of 30. Courtesy the artist and Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland.

target. In works that simmer with an unsettling and semi-articulate grief, Pule attacks those who carried retribution and guilt in the place of revelation to the Pacific.

John Pule has done a number of works responding to the events and aftermath surrounding September 11. The works in this exhibition, collectively titled 'The American Series', is among these. Pule describes his first response to the event:

I made these prints while sitting in front of the television during the America's Cup, at the same time a plethora of images (featuring the) bombardment of the invasion of Iraq (were running next to advertisements for) American crime investigation dramas (such as) 'CSI' and 'Criminal Intent'.²

For Pule, the daily presentation of 'current affairs' as an inextricable part of entertainment is an absurdity that demands response.

¹ Nicholas Thomas, 'Possessions. Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture', Thames and Hudson, London 1999.

² Email from John Pule to Kirsty Divehett, Gallery Manager, Gow Langsford Gallery, New Zealand. 9th August 2005.