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The Future's Not What It Used To Be.....

Chapter Art Centre Cardiff 21 September to 4 November.....

The title of the show is a riddle of reflection and reversal. I assume that the future that 'used to be' was heady, utopian and modernist.

Such a view of the future is no longer sustainable and, like our planet, is flagging. The exhibition envisions the future and the present as a confluence of survival and absurdity mediated through the perception of time.

Vernon Ah Kee has described the experience of placing his hand on top of a prehistoric rock painting of a hand, the paint as vivid as though it had been painted yesterday rather than 20,000 years ago. To make contemporary art as an indigenous Australian might be said to place oneself between a rock and a hard place: between a jargon of authenticity and the confusion of form and meaning of a dislocated culture. This contradiction is manifest yet resolved in Vernon's large-scale, conceptual text work: a commissioned installation for a light-box stretching across several

doorways outside the entrance of Chapter. The text is a quote from the native American Chief Seattle, upon the consignment of his tribe to a reservation and the sale of land to create present day city of Seattle. It reads, ‘theendoflivingandthebeginningofsurvival’, the spacing removed from the words gives the statement the formal character of a pattern poem. Chief Seattle was a significant diplomat who did his best to help his people survive genocide. His original speech from which the line was taken was likely translated into ‘trading English’ used for barter. His words were embellished and transformed in the 1970s by a screenwriter and became stereotypically synonymous with the then emerging issue of ecology. Vernon is keenly aware that dislocation and overwriting of culture and language shape the experience of indigenous peoples: he has chosen a fragment of text that remains uncompromisingly potent.

Centrally placed and framed by the doorway as you enter the exhibition, Patricia Piccinini’s tableau *The Long Awaited*, 2008, is a gentle grotesque. An ageing long-haired mer-creature – part human, part seal, part manatee languishes on a day bed in the affectionate embrace of a young boy. Flecks of trimmed hair and traces of dandruff rest on the boy’s sweater and skin. Where his

young hand touches the creature's shoulder there is a heightened juxtaposition of hairy wrinkle and smooth, marbled innocence.

More realistic than a waxwork, the tableau is nonetheless theatrical. The mixture of novelty and age is unusual and surprising. Piccinini's wider body of work thematically plays with the idea of genetic manipulation. The figures are oddly shaped, sleepily institutional clones for which we have a duty of care. Unlike Diane Arbus's photographs of real-life human anomalies, these works are close to film props and remain somewhat cuddly. Although Piccinini's clones are provocative on many levels, from another perspective the works remind me of urchins: Victorian genre paintings of, say, a chimney sweep boy, with a tear in his eye. Such painting evoked great sympathy in the bourgeois viewer for an individual's plight, but when confronted by the disenfranchised politicised as a class, the aesthetics of sentimentality quickly evaporated.

Described by the curator Deborah Smith as an epic work, Matt Bryans' *Untitled*, 2007, involves erasing newspaper portraits and clippings. The fragile, heavily worked pieces of newspaper are then pinned and tiled to make whole wall or room installations. The erased marks are far from mechanical; they are careful elements of composition that form a convincing sensibility.

Ephemeral and feathery, the works accumulate over time in the manner of an archive of information rather than as a quester legend epic. There are parallels with the form of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, its nuanced details and prolonged plot could be said to echo in Bryans' obsessive task. The erased portraits usually leave the eyes intact, giving the paper a mesmeric or uncanny effect akin to a mass of peacocks with their eye-feathers creating a dizzying crowd. Bryans likened the experience of working in his studio to Winston's in George Orwell's *1984*; he also drew a synesthetic analogy with the search for a channel on the radio. Between channels there is noise, similar to his erased marks but, once connected a clear sound emerges, presumably analogous to the intact eyes in his prints. Various accounts of the experience of mass culture – Edgar Allen Poe's descriptions of crowds or Marshall McLuhan's tribal conception of mass media could be alluded to but the work is more piercing than any reference; the silent wall of eyes has the presence and wonder of cave art, but is acutely connected to the age of recent news.

Marjetica Potrc's sustainable community shanty shacks – a utopian project ventured into the margins of culture as an act of brinkmanship – testify to the global acceleration of marginal living zones both rural and urban. It could be said that the edge of the

modern city, the *banlieue* has been extended almost into a global continuum. Potrc's makeshift, buildings echo earlier models of the improvement of living conditions: the post-war pre-fab or Ralph Erskine's Byker Wall, designed in close consultation with the community. Her prototype designs are tried and tested in urban slums and fragile rural communities. The work made for Chapter, *Acre: Rural School*, 2006, was first built and used as a primary school/community centre, in a remote area of the Amazon rainforest. In Chapter's gallery it has been reconstructed by staff from drawings and is presented as a new product, essentially a porch that offers shelter, learning and well-being, while occupying and implicitly criticising the white-walled space for art. Despite the thin problematic membrane of white-painted walls, Potrc's *Acre: Rural School* echoes Chapter's ethos. Chapter grew from an environment of community art throughout the city and valleys and this community atmosphere still pervades the art centre.

Tony Albert's modest-sized watercolour paintings occupy the last wall of the show. Their subject matter is the violent death of an aboriginal man in police custody and ensuing riots. Painted in black and blue they politicise aesthetics not only through obvious subject matter but also through form. Goya-esque figures with guns, visually integrated into their bodies by having been painted

wet into wet, battle against black protesters. The figures are painted in overlapping translucent layers, with a subtle articulation and intimacy that violently contradicts the subject. The connection to aboriginal painting from history and prehistory produces meaning as protest, persistence and resilience through time and through form.

Stephen Lee is a sculptor.