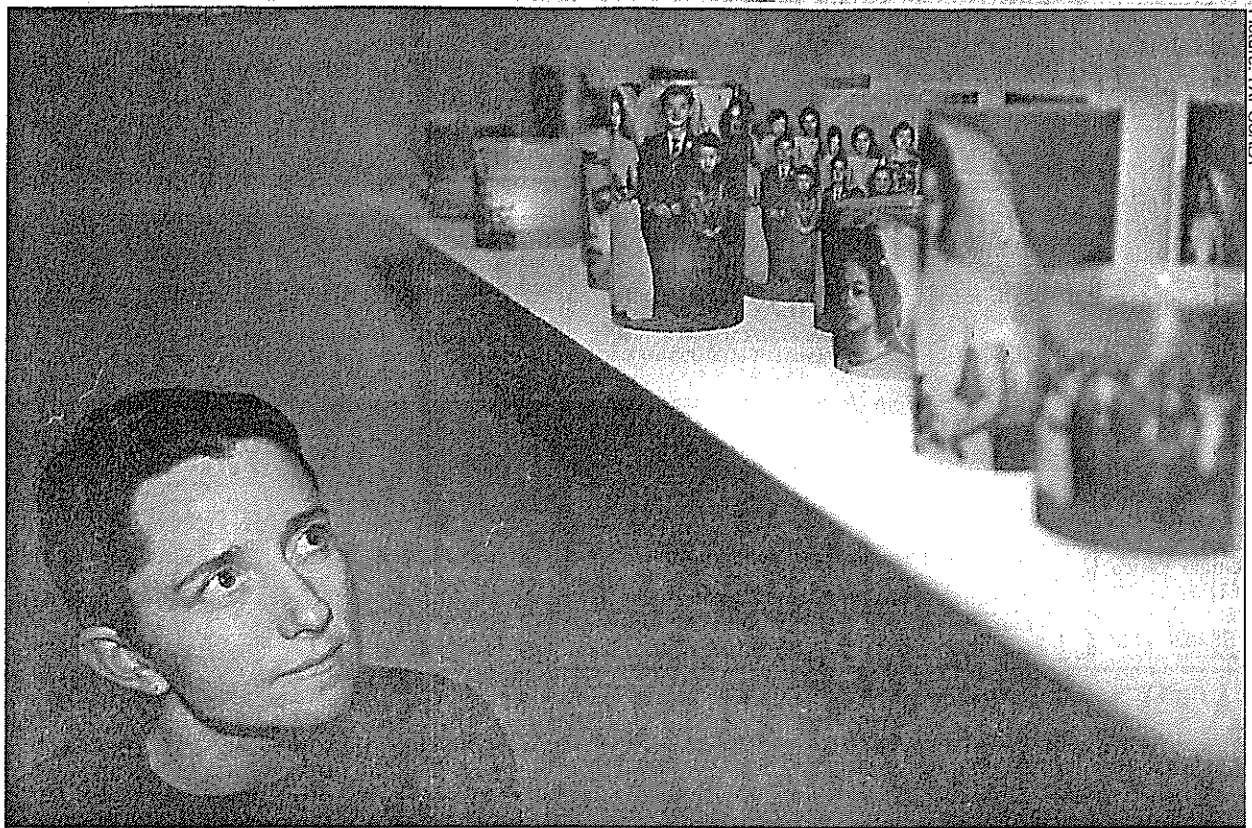


Visual arts: Scattering stereotypes



Picture: PNT SCALA

Clare Williamson: A typical view of Asia unfairly marks it as a monoculture or as an exotic 'other'

New ways to question

By ANDREW STEPHENS

ASIAN art is one of those broad categories prone to stereotype and prejudice. For most people, it probably brings with it images of delicate brush-and-ink drawings, serene stone Buddhas, scroll paintings, indecipherable Asiatic scripts and all manner of Oriental mysticism.

Fax machines, wooden coffin-cum-travelling-trunks, business suits made of coconut-palm bark and an installation of miniature silk caps somehow upsets the old lychee-cart, and deliberately so.

But the question posed by the *Above and Beyond* show at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art is further complicated because it explores the work of Australian artists of Asian descent as well as non-Asian Australians. Goodbye stereotypes.

There are 13 artists in the exhibition and Clare Williamson, who curated the show along with Michael Snelling from the Brisbane Institute of Modern Art, says a typical view of Asia unfairly marks it as a monoculture or as an exotic "other".

"And what it really has is a multiplicity of cultures, religions, political

systems and languages, far more so than Europe," she says.

The artists include people born in China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and the Philippines, and Williamson says the quality of the work up for selection was so good that she and Snelling included five more artists than they had intended. But the main focus has been on offering a different perspective to the usual "cultural exchange" presented in such things as Astalink (under which Australian art is exported to Asia) or the Asia-Pacific Triennial, where Asian work has a forum for Western exposure.

One of the artists, Simryn Gill, is a perfect example of how hard it is to categorise cultural identity: her family is from India, she was born in Singapore, raised in Malaysia and educated partly in Britain, and now lives between Australia and Singapore. Lindy Lee was born in Brisbane to Chinese parents. Kevin Todd is from Ireland, lives in Tasmania and spends time studying Islamic art in Malaysia.

Guan Wei and Ah Xian arrived in Australia as a result of the Tiananmen Square killings.

Simryn Gill, uses identifiably Asian materials: coconuts, banana skins (hung like a flock of flying ducks on the wall) and palm bark. *Wonderlust*

has as its main image a man's business suit woven from coconut bark and makes references to the economic imperialism affecting Asia. As Clare Williamson says, it is a symbol for contemporary Asia: it empowers and undermines because it is at once "native" and "Western".

Other works include a set of votive candles made by Emil Goh, which plays with the notion of the Asian shrine — yet the images on the candles are of his mother in her Western bridal and casual clothes (she was brought up in a French missionary convent). Williamson says it suggests the various cultural influences at work on Goh's "Asian" family and on himself.

Thus there are a whole range of cultural questions raised; but Williamson says the show is not about a world of lost ethnicities "voyaging without a compass on a choppy post-colonial sea".

As it tours the country over the next year, she expects it will provoke more questions than answers about Asian-Australian cultural exchange and identity.

📍 *Above and Beyond: AustralAsian Interactions is at ACCA, Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra, until 15 September.*