

reviews

## "Above and Beyond"

Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane

September 26 - November 2, 1996

If there ever was a moment when artists wanted to disappear, to convert their biography into nothing more than a list of exhibitions, leaving only their names attached to their work, that moment has most certainly passed. Despite all that has been said about the demise of the individual artist as the origin of meaning, it now seems that origin is everything; or at least, we imagine we can find sense in a work by tracing the route between art, artist, and cultural origin. Not only do we need to know where artists come from, we also have to know where they've been to get where they are now.

"Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian Interactions" is a case in point. Co-organized by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (Melbourne) and the Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane) and set to tour nationally through 1997, it is an exhibition firmly locked into the politics of cultural influence, as much as it is concerned with questions of cultural or individual identity. It is, as curators Clare Williamson and Michael Snelling argue in the catalogue, located in "a space characterised by complex interchanges between Australia and the many cultures of the Asia-Pacific region manifested across governmental, commercial, and cultural spheres." The exhibition thus involves a sort of cultural trade, but this is hardly a trade in objects; instead, it seems to be more about trading places.

According to the curatorial premise, each artist and each work momentarily becomes a sign of the impact of overlapping influences. It is significant to know, for instance, that "Simryn Gill's family is originally from India, she was born in Singapore, raised in Malaysia, educated (in part) in the UK, and now moves between Australia and Singapore." Through this grid of reference points, we are invited to read various details from Gill's *Wonderlust*: a suit made from coconut bark; a pair of shoes, each nailed to a coconut; and eleven rapidly deteriorating banana skins, each engraved with a selection from a Len Deighton spy novel. As in Malaysian-Australian Emil Goh's *joo siew*, a virtual shrine to his mother ("whose Chinese name forms the title of the work"), we are informed that "this small installation suggests the various cultures which are active in Goh's mother's identity and

which have in turn fed into his own." In a similar vein, Pat Hoffie's *The Last Boy Scout* reportedly takes "original canvases painted in Manila by a family of artists to advertise Hollywood movies about United States culture appropriated and recycled by a Scottish-born Australian artist who reworks them in Australia and collages items purchased in Manila and repaints the surface to recontextualize them as a different kind of art."

While the exhibition's exemplary objective does, at times, seem to slide a bit into an oversimplified view of "interaction"—things are endlessly signposted to ensure that we get the point—there are moments, such as in Melbourne-born Neil Emmerson's *The Rape of the Lock* lithographs which offer Beardsley-esque portraits of Chinese Cultural Revolutionary hero Lei Feng, that hint at something far less neatly related. In the current exploration of the intersections and overlaps between Australian and Asian art, what we really need is a carefully researched historical exhibition that maps Asia-Pacific influences on the development of the modernist pictorial style. For whereas "Above and Beyond" gives us a glimpse of recent relationships, we should remember that this trade is neither new, nor all one way.

Peter Anderson

EMIL GOH, *JOO SIEW*, 1996,  
DETAIL. PHOTO KENNETH  
PLEBAN.

