

SEVEN HISTORIES

It would seem to be generally acknowledged that we have moved from a community with one criterion for determining inclusiveness to a more polyvalent community. Clare Williamson's measured catalogue essay for the exhibition 'Seven Histories of Australia' argues for a complex accounting of the many histories which comprise our perceptions of this country. Far from being a rhetorical exercise, the curator describes her project as 'urgent' – in part to deny the self-assertive representations of racism and nationalism and in part to resist a 'national cultural identity' – the institutional quest to appropriate aesthetic phenomena.

This signing of intensity is enticing and she has scrupulously left its unravelling to the seven artists. In 'Seven Histories of Australia' we see a fine balance between form and reality, art and history.

Like oral traditions and folklore, visual artefacts are indices of a local cultural experience which has been erased by the formal structures of narrative history. They bring the past into the present in a way that no transcription or description can duplicate. For this reason the visual archive is typically deployed as a supplement to a separate linear narrative. This appendaged relationship is overturned in 'Seven Histories', an action described by Williamson as 'a giving way to a spatial orientation which positions diverse people, places and events within contemporaneous relationships'. While 'archives' are emblematic of 'the people' in their dealings with history, to translate this into art requires not emblematic terms, but a creative questioning which leaves open the relation between institution and individual imagination.

Methods and sources approximating historical research – diaries, place, art objects and everyday artefacts – are animated by the specific genre of autobiography. Lauren Berkowitz and the collaboration of Anne Graham and Jacqueline Clayton turn archival flotsam into memorials. In *Woven histories* Berkowitz precariously stacks rolled A3 Microfiche print-outs from the Prahran Archive held by Stonnington City Council. References to her family's trade as cabinet-makers and their memorabilia are interspersed with copies of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur's 'Proclamation to the Aborigines', of 1829, forming a potentially incendiary crossword tower stopping short of the gallery lights. More ephemeral still is her *Heart's-case*, a modulated concentric planting of indigenous and imported flowers, where nature's harmony momentarily triumphs over art and life. Graham and Clayton's *Doing time* relies on the viewer knowing that the artists have 'done time' teaching art in prisons. Their vast grid of prints from glass

negative mug-shots of women incarcerated in the early twentieth century (Police and Justice Museum, Sydney) commemorates lives captured 'for history' only by the regulatory realism of the corrective archive.

Others work with the intimate scale of the testimonial to correct 'the beautiful lie' or, in John Wolseley's case, to fabricate one. Fiona MacDonald's 're-curated' series 'Close' comprises woven photographic extracts laid over a history of Rockhampton's botanical gardens – a shadow archive forming a museological microcosm imprinting racial, sexual, class and the artist's family history over the surface of this most picturesque and popular leisure ground. HJ Wedge's paintings adapt the tropes of oral history, combining text and image with cartoon-like clarity, telling of colonial life continuing in the present day. Wolseley's conceptual whimsy combines meticulous obsession with naturalistic detail and a fanciful map of Gondwana – the drifting apart of great landmasses some fifty million years ago – to suggest ecological devastation. Elizabeth Gertsakis and Gordon Bennett work on the archive of art history itself, Bennett reclaiming its snowy white peaks and Gertsakis its lurid educational troughs – the nineteenth-century debasement of seventeenth-century originals by artists such as Veronese that welcomed bewildered post-war immigrants to Australian schools.

What exigency drives these critiques of history? 'It's five minutes to twelve in the history of the world' announces panel one of Elizabeth Gertsakis's triptych *Three devotions (What time is it?)*. This is the candy-coloured world of fundamentalism where decent (white) citizens do battle with the forces of evil. Forget the pilgrimage of modernism – this is the category of the absolutely new: the catastrophe completing an age. Gertsakis's concern with extremism's endgame is taken up by others. In Wedge's adjacent painting *Feelings*, a four-leaf clover of 'peace and love' is pierced by the arrow of 'hate' (male and female, black and white). In the final panel of Gordon Bennett's celebrated *Home sweet home*, 1993, the artist writes in the self-effacing HB pencil of the diarist: 'I've been living in the suburbs ... all the barbeques ... all the violence ... it's like it's repressed and pushed onto the Aborigines ... black shadow monsters from the Id.'

Such partial attempts at imaging a truth – a contemporary fusion of documents and the imaginary – work to deny a world where public life and private lives belong to the archive of political and economic calculation. Of such a future Francis

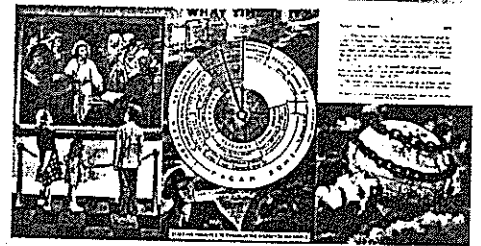
Fukuyama observes: 'In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.' Barrie Kosky recently called for the banning of grandiose expressions such as Cultural Tourism, Multiculturalism, Uniquely Australian and Creative Nation.² The call for relative evaluation is reinforced by these seven artists, who between them have listed many of Saint Augustine's seven cardinal sins. In 'Seven Histories of Australia' the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical loses its significance.

¹ Francis Fukuyama, 'Have we reached the end of history', *Rand Library Collection*, Chicago, February 1989, reprinted in *National Interest*, Summer 1989.

² Barrie Kosky, *Adelaide Advertiser*, 3 October 1995. Kosky calls for the 'banning of the following expressions and obsessions: Cultural Export, Cultural Tourism, CDROM, Multiculturalism, Uniquely Australian and Creative Nation'.

Seven Histories of Australia, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 22 September – 29 October 1995.

Jo Holder



ELIZABETH GERTSAKIS, *Three devotions (What time is it?)*, 1995, colour bubble jet print, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. Photograph K. Plehan