



The New Republics
Rebecca and Kenny Baird, Richard Bell
Gordon Bennett, Dominique Blain
Elizabeth Gertsakis, Trevor Gould, Fiona Hall
Moshekwa Langa, Brett Murray, Jin-Me Soon
Leila Sujir, Clive van den Berg, Sue Williamson
Curator: Sunil Gupta
Organised by The Organisation for Visual Arts, London



The New Republics

The New Republics is an oblique critique of a former European power through a study of its effects on two former colonies, now two Republics – Canada and South Africa – and one near-Republic, Australia. Canada, South Africa and Australia all struggle with a similar legacy: Canada where the Anglo-French legacy continues with Quebec's bid for independence; South Africa where people survived the apartheid state but now seek a unified

classical Canadian landscapes. Rebecca and Kenny Baird incorporate native symbols in their collaborative works on paper. Dominique Blain uses archival photos and print materials in installation. Leila Sujir's video documents the secret stories of mother and daughter which personalise the national history. In South Africa, Sue Williamson's and Brett Murray's text-based work incorporates transcripts from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Moshekwa Langa bases his ambiguous poetic on deportment and gesture



Gordon Bennett, *Realism of a Peasant Woman in 2 dimensions or Red Square*, 1996-7

state with new national symbols; and Australia where Aboriginal cultures have been decimated and are now working towards land reclamation and self-determination. The contemporary art practices in these three countries – formerly sites of European 'discovery' – reflect the bitter racial struggles and ongoing contest of colonial authority. In Australia, indigenous artists, such as Richard Bell and Gordon Bennett, present a critical, alternative perspective of white settlement. Elizabeth Gertsakis elaborately frames first-person reflections on the migrant experience and Fiona Hall blends various cultural references together in intricately wrought taxonomies. In Canada, Korean emigré artist Jin Me Yoon produces photographic self portraits in front of

and Clive van den Berg subtly represents the impact of war and settlement on the natural landscape. Together the artists in *The New Republics* compile a multi-faceted vision of three republican aspirations at the turn of the century. The grand narratives slowly unwind in myriad personal perspectives from melancholy observation to overt critique to proposals full of hope for the future.

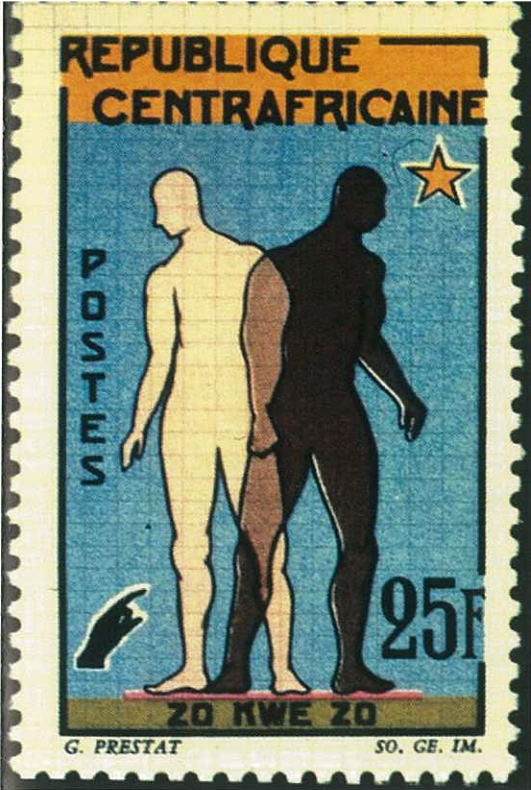
Rebecca and Kenny Baird
Toronto/Los Angeles
The collaborative work of these siblings reflects their concern with their identity (Cree/Canadian) alongside a painful engagement with the inaccuracies of official accounts of First Peoples' history. Interested in the *prima facie* of

First Peoples' existence and their 'ownership' of land, Rebecca and Kenny Baird allude to the strata of conflicting claims on natural history. As they say, their work 'refers to the sweeping brutalities of colonial land divisions and to the fluid, pan territorial, transcendent meanings attached to the wild by Native cultures. Above all, the work retains a voice that cannot quite be determined, something that points to the luminous mysteries of the earth.'

Richard Bell
Morree, NSW
Bell's single painting depicts his concern with the degraded position of Aboriginal people in Australia, especially in relation to the law. These issues are particularly pertinent in relation to current public debates on mandatory sentencing. Bell maintains that through the imprisonment, harassment and emasculation of Aboriginal men, the State breaks down the family unit, destroying the core of Aboriginal culture. For the artist, the acronyms of the title refer to the various state agencies and legal orders (Apprehended Violence Order and Child Support Agency) that he sees as central to the State's legitimization of the persecution of Aboriginal men.

Gordon Bennett
Brisbane
Concerned with the dynamic interplay between binary opposites – for example, abstract/figurative, black/white, good/bad, inclusion/exclusion – Gordon Bennett is interested in both the Australian modernist Margaret Preston and the cross-cultural issues that her practice provokes and the multi-disciplinary approach of the Dutch modernism of de Stijl. Bennett explains: 'The play between the figurative and the abstract in these works is important. The "figures" are in fact two-dimensional abstract shapes and should not be confused with actual people. Rather they are quite grotesque representations, isolated details from early Australian modernist works functioning as signs of Aboriginality. Similar to Rorschach blots, these shapes are recognised by the viewers' consciousness as black figures. Their meaning depends largely on the sense of place in Australia's radical politics of that consciousness. This placement is extremely relevant to our times in Australia and our much-touted national identity.'

Dominique Blain
Montreal
'Social and political history ranks first among the materials employed by Dominique Blain – it is her primary field of reflection and investigation of the social relations, political institutions and ideologies that have marked the twentieth century and shaped today's world. In Blain's work, this historical substance, rigorous or random, authorised or concealed, factual or troubling,



Elizabeth Gertsakis, *Perforate Nation: South Africa*, 1999

becomes the site of inscription of an imaginary that builds on fragments of memory belonging to her time.' (Loise Déry, excerpt from *Dominique Blain-Mediation*, Musée du Québec, 1997)

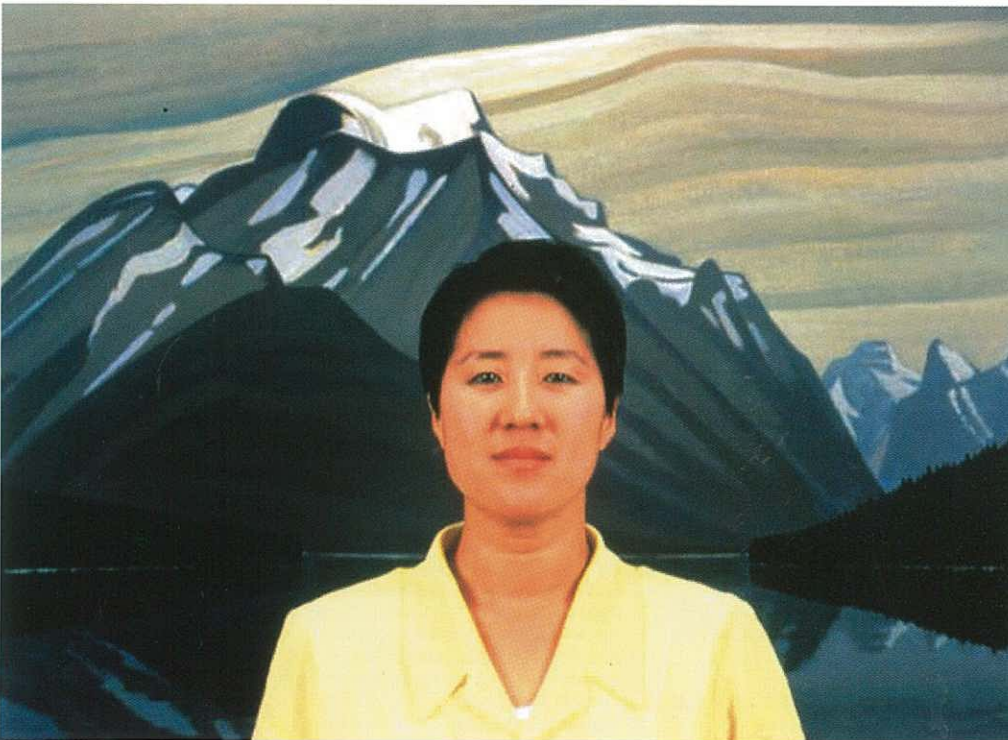
Elizabeth Gertsakis
Melbourne
Working with stamps, Gertsakis raises issues around the role of government in nation building and the development of national ideals and aspirations. She explains: 'In researching the Universal Postal Union it is possible to trace the upheavals of nation building. I have taken a small image of national heroism and enlarged it so that each stamp is once again perforated into fragment "stamps" from which it can be reconstituted. Each fragment of these enlarged stamps would, in their re-assembly, make up the national sign. These works were specially perforated by the same machine that perforates the entire stamp issue of Australia.'

Trevor Gould
Montreal
A series of standing model figures comprise a scene atop a bench, set against illustrations and a model palm tree. A curious scene, perhaps the scene of a crime. What are these 'leaf thieves' are doing? Gould's reference is to the Botanical Garden, or more precisely the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew. We are reminded of imperial endeavours to contain and systematise geographical space. Under Sir Joseph Banks, Kew's head botanist, the Gardens played a major role in developing the natural resources of Britain's expanding empire. Bank's collecting excursions coordinated science and exploration, colonial trade with expository practice. Through transplant, hybridisation and subsequent exhibi-

tion in Botanical Garden conservatories, botanical specimens were transformed into cultural entities. Clearly, these natural specimens are constructed out of and from within social and ethno-botanical narratives.

Fiona Hall
Adelaide
Hall literally knits together videotape selected from a program of films that depict a history of European colonisation and conflict in the Pacific. In doing so, she creates a series of severed heads, reminiscent of head-hunters' trophies and resonating with the human toll of European conquests in the Pacific, suggesting the legacy upon which new republics have been and will be built. In other works, Hall draws together botanical, vernacular and Aboriginal language in describing different plants which are rendered in cut tin and seem to sprout from sexual organs. The title of each work includes the Aboriginal name of the plant species, the botanical name, and the vernacular name given by settlers. Blending botanical images and terms with sexualised body parts, Hall refers to anthropological and sociological discourses which classify entire species.

Moshekwa Langa
Johannesburg
Moshekwa Langa's photographs are taken from a larger body of work concerned with mass cul-



Jin-Me Yoon, *Regard*, 1999

tural representations of the body and masculinity. The subjects are up-close and suspended in air, simultaneously flying, martyred, objectified and criminalised, highlighting the various meanings the body – and figuration generally – may have within different cultures.

Brett Murray
Cape Town
'These works are part of an ongoing reflection on the "Truth and Reconciliation" process unfolding in South Africa, a process whereby perpetrators of the crime of Apartheid reveal their pasts. My wall sculptures attempt to expose the ambiguity of "Truth". By revealing private stories and hidden truths, by reflecting on the ambivalence between memory and by understanding where the fixed notion of truth lies. By questioning and revealing these shifting memories, histories and truths in all of us who have lived through and are living in an emerging country.'

Leila Sujir
Montreal
A fable of our time, Sujir's video uses storytelling, humour, magic and history to explore themes of immigration and colonisation and the effect of these experiences on future generations. The narrative follows the story of Jeanne, an archivist researching racist policies throughout the twentieth century and her daughter Usha, an administrator in an airline company. Usha develops a relationship with Devika, a cleaner, sharing her family history and learning about Devika's experience as an emigre and the devastating impact of government development policies.

Clive van den Berg
Johannesburg
As van den Berg says 'there is little information about love between men'. In an attempt to counter-balance a history of men that emphasises 'crime and punishment', the artist focuses



Moshekwa Langa, *My life as a Disco Queen*, 1998

on a more positive and productive history of masculinity. Often manufacturing narratives, in the absence of historical sources, the artist emphasises a sense of belonging and connectedness to the land. Featured in many of these narratives is a figure of the dutiful man on the battle field, a site where nations are often defined and borders demarcated.

List of Works

Rebecca and Kenny Baird
Land/Listen, 1999
Silk screen prints
Artists' collection

Richard Bell
Acronym: AVO, CSA, etc, 1999
Acrylic on canvas
Artist's collection

Gordon Bennett
Realism of a Peasant Woman in 2 dimensions or Red Square, 1996-7
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection, Melbourne
Mecanno, 1996-7
Acrylic on canvas
Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
My Boomerang Won't Come Back, 1996-7
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection, Melbourne
Black Swan, 1996-7
Acrylic on canvas
Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Bellas Gallery, Brisbane

Dominique Blain
Denatured Africa, 1991
Assemblage, book, display case
Artist's collection
Horizon, 1997
Emulsion on film, wooden frame, chain and pulley
Artist's collection
India, 1987
Photo-transfer on newsprint, wood frame
Artist's collection

Elizabeth Gertsakis
Perforate Nation: United Kingdom, 1999
Perforate Nation: Australia, 1999
Perforate Nation: Canada, 1999
Perforate Nation: South Africa, 1999
Novajet colour prints, perforated by Australia Post's government printer
Artist's collection

Trevor Gould
Leaf Thief, 1998-99
Watercolours and mixed media installation
Artist's collection

Fiona Hall
Bounty Hunting, 1999
Weaving from video tape and video covers
Artist's collection
Atnyem (Alyawarr) / Acacia Kempeana / witchetty bush, 1999
Julunayn (Bundjalung) / Brachychiton rupestris / bottle tree, 1999
Karrawari (Pitjantjatjara) / Eucalyptus microtheca / coolibah tree, 1999
Kutlych (Nyoongar) / Anigozanthos manglesii / kangaroo paw, 1999
Marra (Kuku Yalanji) / Cycas media / rickety bush, 1999
Yurlurnkuru (Warlpiri) / Xanthorrhoea thornstonii / black boy, 1999
Sardine cans and tins
Artist's collection

Moshekwa Langa
My life as a Disco Queen, 1998
Ink-jet prints on vinyl
Artist's collection

Sue Williamson
Cape Town

One of the most shocking deaths on police detention was that of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko at the hands of the Port Elizabeth security police in 1977. Also implicated in the killing were the medical doctors who gave him a clean bill of health shortly before Biko died of injuries received at the hands of the police. For his part in Biko's death, Chief District Surgeon Dr Benjamin Tucker was eventually struck off the rule in 1985.

Nomonde Calata is the widow of Fort Calata – once a popular community leader in the small town of Cradock, in the Eastern Cape. He was one of the 'Cradock Four' who were abducted, killed and burnt by security police in 1987. Colonel Harold Snyman was implicated not only in these deaths, but in the death of Steve Biko.

Jeff Benzien was a notorious security policeman based in the Western Cape who boasted that he could 'break' any prisoner in less than 30 minutes with his torture methods, one of which

involved tying a wet bag around a prisoner's head, thus cutting off the person's air supply. Activist, now parliamentarian, Tony Yengeni was one of his numerous victims. Benzien received amnesty for all his actions in February 1999.

Jin-Me Yoon
Vancouver

This series of four photographs attempts to critically dismantle the terms of inclusion and exclusion through which national identity is constructed and challenges the claims of the nation-state and nationality. Taken from a larger installation, *Group of Sixty-Seven*, these photographs of the artist and her mother evoke a sense of respect and regard between the two women. Referencing Canadian landscape painting and its relation to national values, each of the subjects looks out from an historical painting by Lawren Harris, *Maligne Lake*, *Jasper Park* (1924) and into another painting by Emily Carr *Old Time Coast Village* (1929-30). Both Harris' and Carr's images are potent symbolic representations of regional and national identity which the two women are caught between.

Australian Tour

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
28 April to 4 June 2000

Canberra School of Art Gallery
14 July to 30 August 2000

University of South Australia Art Museum, Adelaide
21 September to 28 October 2000

Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts
8 November to 17 December 2000

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VICTORIA



Cover image: Fiona Hall, *karrawari (Pitjantjatjara)*, *Eucalyptus microtheca*, *coolibah tree*, 1999