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History? It's a thing of the past

Visual arts

The New Republics,
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, until June 4

Review **Robert Nelson**

ONE OF the most intriguing aspects of natural history is the term itself. How, you ask, can history ever be natural? And what kind of history can nature have, given that key evolutionary changes are prehistoric by millions of years?

When the ancient Greeks spoke of natural history, the word "history" included our concept of narrative, but was also more general in meaning, extending to a systematic record of related phenomena. In its roots, the word history meant knowing. Ironically, the ancient idea of history was similar to the concept of science, a discipline that deals in facts rather than sagas or opinion.

In an age of relativism, the term "natural history" is archaic; but behind its quaintness, it reveals an attitude to nature that touches on our recent past. Not long ago, European biologists scoured the colonised globe for specimens that greatly enlarged and enriched the categories of science. It was a noble project, though it also seemed to legitimate a darker and distinctly human history, namely the seizure of native lands and the effacing of indigenous systems of knowing.

In this exhibition, there are at least three references to natural history. The silk-screen prints of Rebecca and Kenny Baird, the sculptures and prints of the Trevor Gould (these artists are from Canada) and the sculptures and photographs of Fiona Hall, disquietingly reflect on the otherwise benign empiricism of natural history.

The exhibition gathers the work of 14 South African, Canadian and Australian artists on the basis that the artists all belong to now autonomous countries that, however, have been indelibly stamped with the colonial assumptions of Europe. They are all "new republics", except that Australia has to be described inconveniently as a "near republic".

The curator and catalogue writers do well not to labor the similarities and differences between South Africa, Canada and Australia. Instead, the show presents artists coming to terms with their colonial history on an individual basis.

Some of the works are conceptually slight, but many cohere productively around the themes of nature, science and the related systematic social reorganisation of life.

Trevor Gould presents images of specimens collected for the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew by Sir Joseph Banks, the head botanist. Beneath a register of botanical illustrations, small sculptures show a furtive person beside a palm tree. This cryptic work seems to allegorise the two-way trade between centre and outpost: nature is transplanted from the colony to nourish the imperial centre, while culture is transplanted from the imperial centre to the colony. In her photographed sculptures, Hall shows plant species sprouting from sardine cans. In each, the lid is peeled away by a key to reveal not the roots of the plant but a human form, usually emphasising the sexual organs. The cultural aspect of natural history is further expressed through the titles, in which the Aboriginal name of each plant is recorded alongside the botanical and the vernacular name.

In her *Bounty Hunting*, Hall alludes to the violence implicit in this renaming. The work is a series of severed heads knitted with celluloid ribbon, in fact video-tape recording the colonisation of the South Pacific. The terrifying empty skulls recall head-hunters' trophies, a systematic violence to which the Europeans reciprocated with superior might and more delicate aesthetic overlay.

The subjection of Australian Abor-