

# Visions of past with no future

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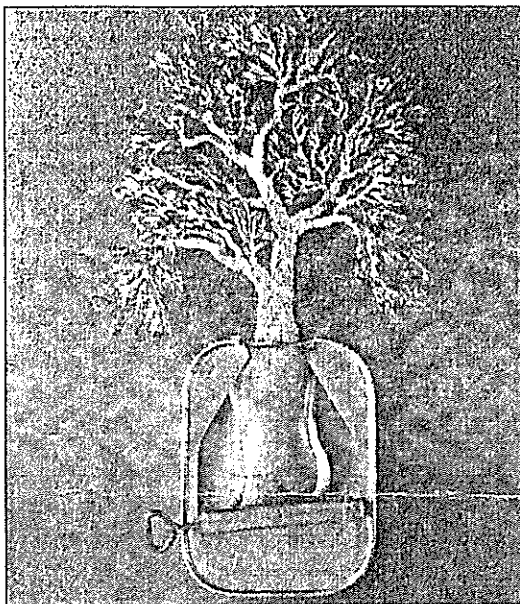
WITH a title such as *The New Republics*, the exhibition at Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art was bound to spark high expectations. Sadly, the limbo of our nation's republic debate means that the prevailing mood of this very elegantly selected showcase of Australian, Canadian and South African work is all rather melancholy and ironic. Despite some solid ideas and well-hewn forms, the theme of the exhibition dominates to an extent that the display reflects unfortunately on its antipodean context.

The outcome of last year's referendum was obviously not anticipated when British curator Sunil Gupta was in Australia selecting work for this international collaboration. Indeed, it is worth pausing to contemplate just how different the viewing experience of *The New Republics* might have been if Australians had voted the monarchy out instead of choosing to maintain the constitutional status quo.

Unfortunately, such thoughts are idle speculation. Tempting though it is to imagine the jubilation of artworks reflecting a nation in transition to political maturity, the viewer is faced with the frustrating reality that it takes years of politics in art to facilitate publicly sanctioned social change — apparently even in countries as free as Australia.

*The New Republics* brings together some strong visual statements in an eclectic grouping of two and three-dimensional art works. There are videos screening in one room, enormous poster photographs in another, as well as some convincing forays into new things to do with painting, printmaking and sculpture.

Yet such material variety is what most viewers of contemporary art practice have probably come to expect by now. What is notable about this exhibition is the way it allows each artist's work to play off against the central theme of the exhibition. The result is a jumbled conversation buzzing with questions about where our culture sits on the republic issue and teasing out a discussion that



Colonial duplicity: Fiona Hall's *Karrawari*, 1999

has more or less reached a stasis at the federal level.

Some of the most pleasing works in this exhibition are by Australian artists, though some examples date back a few years so they might have been viewed before. Gordon Bennett's melange of Aboriginal and European modernist painting traditions from 1996-97 sets up an optical geometry of styles and traditions that create pertinent visual metaphors about Australia's historical layers.

Equally thoughtful, Fiona Hall's severed heads, *Bounty Hunting*, are woven in videotape unravelled from European films about the South Pacific conquests. In another room, her beguiling sardine tin sculptures offer incarnations of much-loved early sculptures. Aimed at the duplicities of colonial settlement, these witty objects comment on the subordination of indigenous populations via popular entertainment and the seemingly benign mission of science. In this context, early film and botanical classification become hard evidence of one culture subsuming the heritage of another.

Canadian artist Trevor Gould's installation *Leaf Thief* makes a neat partner to Hall's tiny erotic objects. A series of small male figurines are modelled at floor level, doing mysterious things with leaves and trees in front of what appear to be botanical sketches. Like local model-maker Ricky Swallow, this artist's canny vignette pictures an aspect of human behaviour in a way that encourages the viewer to judge its moral significance. In Gould's case, his spotlight is on the "leaf thieves" who contributed to the grand collection of specimens at Kew's Royal Botanic Gardens during the heyday of British colonisation.

Yet more clever ways of conveying the discomforts of colonial history are invented by South African artists Sue Williamson and Brett Murray. Williamson's *Truth Games* impresses with its sliding perspex text, slotted into horizontal

runners that overlay enlarged media images of identities implicated in the deaths of black consciousness leaders such as Steve Biko and Fort Calata. Looking a little like a solid Venetian blind, this triptych illustrates how truth is a negotiable and shifting force in South Africa's history book.

Murray's three wall pieces play on similar ideas but with a stronger sense of humour. Of his three large head silhouettes, the one with the blackboard interior and circling bottles of white chalk is the most memorable metaphor for the way European settlement has erased and rewritten indigenous identity and memory.

Leaving this exhibition, I couldn't help but wonder where colonial history and political responsibility are headed in Australia. These artists prompt thoughts about the past with little sign of envisaging a future.

*The New Republics*, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, until June 4, then Canberra, Adelaide and Perth.