

What's in, as in inside

VISUAL ARTS NEW04

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,
Southbank, until May 16

Robert Nelson Reviewer

The stated idea behind *New04* is to reveal "who's hot" this year. ACCA commissioned seven artists to produce work independently — not to fulfil a single curatorial theme.

From a structural point of view, you could expect an incoherent outcome, as of a prize, where artists of disparate preoccupations vie for attention. But the exhibition, curated by Geraldine Barlow, seems to have a theme in spite of itself. It's all based on an inside/outside dichotomy, where you seem to oscillate between being within a space and being shut out from it.

The most confronting work is by Anthony Hunt and Stephen Honegger. They've produced a huge PC, a beige computer of Brobdignagian proportions, which stands like a colourless bureaucratic sentinel at the entrance to the largest space. Because it's the size of a small room, you stand outside it fully expecting to get inside. Alas, there's no door. The A drive is inaccessibly high and you couldn't squeeze in the slot anyway.

Beside the impassive tower, you feel a bit like a virus, a messy alien who doesn't belong in the corporate perfectibility of control and conformity. You feel super-sized, inferior and bullied. Even as the machine has dated — and is imminently obsolete — it assumes the air of an antique marble, abstracted, mute and aloof, leaving you disempowered, frustrated and out in the cold.

Sangeeta Sandrasegar's work is apparently warmer: it's a kind of gazebo or temple with stepped pyramidal roof into which you feel beckoned by light and softer floor and intimacy, almost as if a haven of collectedness in a dauntingly cavernous hall. But when you step inside, the environment becomes creaky and shaky. A light with a screen of cut-outs panels spreads eerie linear shadows on the walls, which quiver and sway in your wake or with the movement of



Detail of Guy Benfield's *Om Supreme Bhagavan*.

other people sharing the sanctuary.

There are creepy-crawlies on the outside and you figure out that the spiders have woven the web-like ornaments of the lantern, further casting nets of shadow on the walls. With some Gothic horror, you recede from the vertiginous snare to contemplate the greater serenity of the outside.

Tom Nicholson's work is all about being inside or outside national borders. Tracing the geographical definition of states arbitrarily determined since 1900, a team of people march through Melbourne, bearing banners of disembodied faces. The visual effect of the video is striking; however, you'd never guess the intended content from the result. In spite of a beautiful catalogue essay by Ray Edgar, the poetic congruence between the idea and the image is not strong.

Nor is it compelling in Guy Benfield's re-enactments of countercultural grunge of the

1970s. With echoes of Yves Klein, performers paint with their hair on a knee-high lazy Susan. As art-about-art, the artists are on the inside and you're on the outside. It looks a bit like gratuitous caprice. But set in retro space-age furniture, the ugly works harbour a vein of bitterness and aggression. This is revealed in a catalogue essay by Ashley Crawford, boastfully declaring that the artist "had to unlearn the crap he had been taught at the VCA" by "painting Nazis".

Good work doesn't need arrogance. With deft instalational elements, Parekohai Wahakamoe's work plunges you inside the forest, where you contemplate serenely the prospect of being inside or outside of ecology and a mythological framework that unites humans and nature in traditional societies. You sit on black tree stumps and enter the woods via narrative, poetically explored in an essay by Juliana Engberg.

Finally, Nadine Christensen's work is all about being inside a room, looking through apertures feigned through the art of painting. The floor is covered in matting, which — though yielding an antiquated holiday air — creates a grid, so that the whole chamber seems to be a diorama with Albertian perspective. The inside is set to a universal Cartesian scheme that also makes a claim on the outdoors. Some of Christensen's imagery refers to other frontiers, like the technology of mobile phones.

Inside and out, this exhibition exceeds its curatorial statements, which fairly declare that the artists "were not thematically selected" but that many artists share an interest in memory and narrative. Maybe this all goes to show that such ideas — like the metaphor of inside and outside — enjoy an artistic relevance that is of the moment.

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