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Contemporary Art & Cultural Critique

Cycle tracks will abound in Utopia
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art
6 August – 26 September 2004

New Social Commentaries
Warrnambool Art Gallery
4 September – 17 October 2004
by Christine Morrow

Two recent exhibitions displayed work that foregrounds social and political critique: a curated show at a metropolitan gallery (*Cycle Tracks will abound in Utopia*) and a regional gallery's prize exhibition comprising entries submitted in open competition (*New Social Commentaries*). These exhibitions followed two similarly-themed shows from 2003: *Utopia Station* at the 50th Venice Biennale, with its series of scrappy installations featuring heavy-handed politics and, closer to home, Monash University Museum of Art's *Feedback: Art, Social Consciousness and Resistance.* The concern with overt critique expressed by self-consciously political work may represent a new mood in contemporary Australian art.

Above: Alban Hajdinaj
Eye to Eye, 2003
Video on dvd, colour, sound, subtitles
4 minutes, 30 seconds
Courtesy of the artist and gb agency, Paris

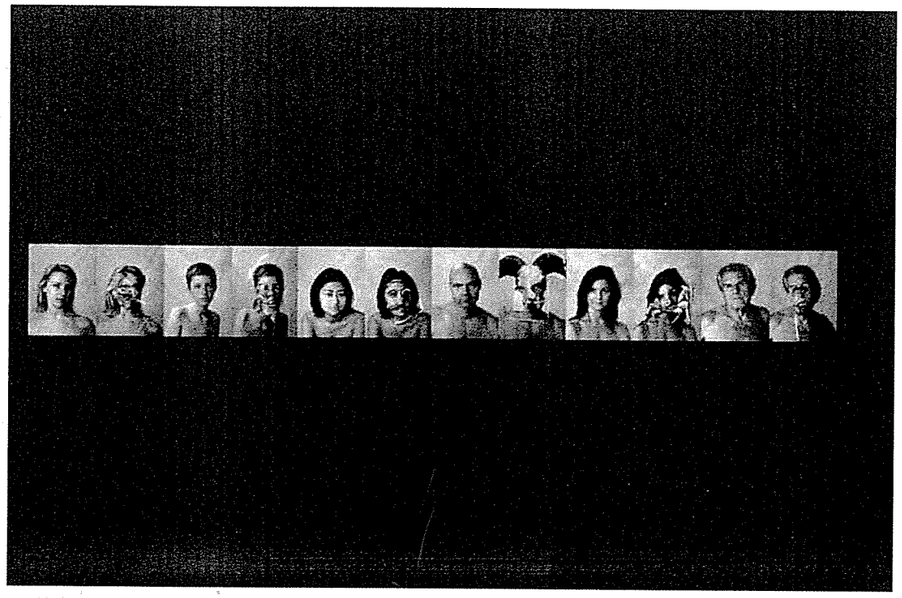
While the theme of the *Cycle Tracks* exhibition was 'utopia', it had a much looser structure than this concept might suggest, drawing on a wide pool of references from economics, political protest and activism rather than simply showing works that depicted or critiqued utopian visions. Utopia comes in a wide selection of flavours and the principal one served here was socialist. If there was a single concern addressed by most of the works that gave the exhibition its logic, it was communality and collectivity, particularly the power of collective action to engender social transformation.

Of all the arts, literature has proven the most sympathetic medium for exploring utopian themes and if utopia were a book, you'd find it under both Travel and DIY. It is no accident then that the most compelling work at ACCA, the one that provided the richest insights into utopianism, was also the most literary: Guan Wei's lush, narrative wall-painting. It depicted a series of scenes much like book illustrations designed for an epic poem, an *Odyssey,* a *Gilgamesh* or a similarly vast allegorical tale of natural disasters, mythic events, population movements and struggle.

Three works in *Cycle Tracks* took high-density apartment blocks as their subject. With their vertical mastery of space, tower blocks are often viewed in terms of the Enlightenment project, representing the triumph over gravity by human intellect and achievement that began with tall buildings and presumably ends with space travel. But when considered in terms of housing, these buildings are the subject of tired and tiring back-and-forth utopia–dystopia debates.[1] One camp claims that high-density housing serves communitarian principles: it is a tool for social engineering, facilitating positive social interactions through sheer proximity, as detached housing cannot. The other camp claims it encourages only negative social interaction leading to sad ghettoes full of criminals, crack-heads and junkies.

The three works by Alban Hajdinaj, Martin McInerney and Callum Morton edged towards the latter position. Each conceived such buildings as drab, colourless, soulless, even ghostly since the works were neither concerned with the actual people who might live in the buildings, nor what lives they might lead there.

The curator of *Cycle Tracks,* Juliana Engberg, struggled to integrate the numerous video works within the space and resorted to stylistic gimmickry to vary the presentation, incorporating projections, multiple screens and the placement of monitors at various heights on the wall, on the floor and stacked on top of each other. In both



Above: John Bodin and Penny Jensz
Visceral, 2004
Type C photographic colour print collage
36 x 264cm
Courtesy of the artists

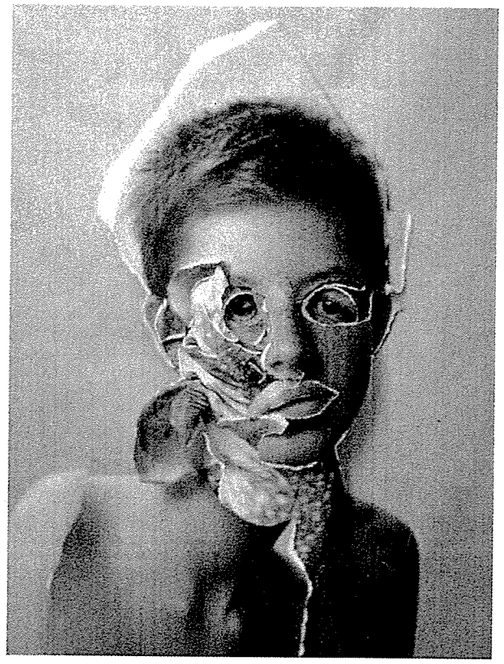
Edward Bellamy's and Samuel Butler's 19th century conceptions of utopia (in *Looking Backward* and *Erehwon* respectively) machines were banished because of their tendency to tyrannise and enslave the humans that made them. I found a little unintended irony in the odd spatial arrangements the monitors were forced into, designed to overcome the tendency of each to look exactly like the clunky, squat, black plastic monitor next to it.

The best video works tackled economic themes head-on. A deceptively straightforward video by Katya Sander called *What is capitalism?* documented a series of staged interviews. The interviewer stopped passers-by as they traversed an otherwise empty stretch of scrubland. They were asked the same question in turn, 'What is Capitalism?' and they gave the various off-the-cuff, and not particularly insightful answers you might expect. What was intriguing, though, was that the video's staging – interviewer and subject encountering one another in the country – rehearsed the motif of Courbet's famous painting *The Meeting* (1854), which depicts the artist encountering his patron, Alfred Bruyas, and the wealthy man's servant while out walking. Sander's work echoed Courbet's concern to put the social, economic and political relationship between artist and patron under the spotlight by insisting that the artist's role is to interrogate the political and economic system in which he or she participates.

An exhibition can never be exhaustive of its subject matter but an obvious omission haunted *Cycle Tracks.* You cannot hold an exhibition anywhere in Australia with the words *utopia* and *tracks* in the title and avoid the issue of Aboriginality. For *Utopia* is the name of an Aboriginal community north-north-east of Alice Springs that has produced some of Australia's greatest artists in Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Gloria and Kathleen Petyarre. And tracks can refer to the mark humans and animals leave in the landscape, a dominant motif on many Aboriginal paintings, ceremonial body markings and cultural artifacts. The absence of any work by Indigenous artists was experienced as a real lack within the exhibition, an omission that was named and amplified in the exhibition's title.

Other examples of artists adopting positions of cultural critique could be seen in the exhibition *New Social Commentaries* at Warrnambool Art Gallery. This exhibition's approach was more varied than ACCA's because of the wider scope for interpretation offered by the theme of social commentary, and because no one can predict what work will be submitted in competition for a prize.

Mostly, the subject of social commentary was well understood by the artists themselves and adhered to by the selectors, with some of the various themes encompassing commentary on family relationships, consumer culture, asylum seekers (including detainees) and the war in Iraq. But there were one or two odd inclusions. Marcel Cousins' painting *From Shinagawa* depicted what appeared to be an enlarged Japanese train ticket. The work was accompanied by a text that identified the creation of cultural identity as its theme. What exactly a Japanese train ticket might communicate about the formation of cultural identity was left unexplained.



Left: John Bodin and Penny Jensz
Visceral (detail) 2004
Type C photographic colour print collage
36 x 264cm
Courtesy of the artists

There were several instances where artists made claims about social commentary in the text accompanying their work, claims that the work itself simply could not sustain. Merrin Eirth presented a large-format oil painting featuring geometric motifs and chemical names and numbers. The explanatory text elaborated a consumer's fear and confusion when faced with chemical additives listed on food packaging. As the painting had none of the forcefulness of the text with its qualities of wild diatribe, I wondered whether she ought not to have submitted the text alone in the form of concrete poetry.

Elizabeth Newman was another artist whose explanatory text made unsustainable claims. Her installation *Soul...* was selected as the prize-winner and comprised an installation of glossy magazines on a coffee table, a clock on the wall, a mattress on the floor, a painted hessian banner, t-shirts and posters. The artist's statement implied that *Soul...* critiqued the way in which, under capitalism, the human subject is constituted through acts of consumption. However the installation was conceptually underdone, possessing no overall coherence except as décor. The loose, theoretically disparate elements failed to convince the viewer that their conceptual disconnections were deliberate or necessary. If this installation of furniture, posters and t-shirts was intended as the locus of some anti-capitalist resistance, then it was one that could only have been conceived within the pages of an IKEA catalogue. The artist's priority was the creation of a hip ambience generated by laid-back consumer items and a slacker aesthetic. You could almost see the quotation marks around the ironic slogans on the posters and t-shirts. I think the title gave it away; the ellipsis signals an omission in a sentence; in this case, it was social commentary that Newman avoided. *Soul...* used all the right jargon but failed to live up to the claims it made for itself. It seemed to lack the courage of its own convictions.

By contrast, a collaborative photographic work by John Bodin and Penny Jensz, entitled *Visceral,* fulfilled and even exceeded the claims the artists made for it. Its concerns were enumerated as 'race, deception, fear and primal instinct'. The photographic portraits employed the techniques of montage to create grotesque distortions of the subjects' physiognomies. They spoke of the deception of everyday appearances and hinted at discontinuities and ruptures that lie beneath the surface of the faces we show to the outside world, revealing the evil, torture, madness and existential terror that skulks there.

The paradox raised by a competition focused on social commentary is that it will principally attract works that the entrants self-select as being 'critical'. Social commentary is a much more elusive concept than 'landscape' or 'works on paper'. Sometimes artworks readily identified by their authors as social or political commentary are the most unsubtle; sometimes those works that offer the richest insights or are the most powerfully oppositional do not trumpet their own claims to critique the loudest.

Christine Morrow is an artist who lives and works in Melbourne.

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[1] For a recent discussion of this debate, focusing on Callum Morton's work, see Peter Timms, *What's wrong with contemporary art?* Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004, pp 82-86