

In the video of the senses

Thirty years of Lyndal Jones's work makes for a powerful show, writes Corrie Perkin

At the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, in a small dark grey room, a man is crying. His face fills a video screen, tears drip down his cheeks. As you approach the screen, the man — in his mid-40s and dressed in a suit — appears to be aware he has an audience. Embarrassed, he checks his emotions. The crying stops.

The installation, by video artist Lyndal Jones, is called *Crying Man*, part of her *Tears for What Was Done* series. An electronic device responds to the movement of visitors and operates the video, making the man start or stop crying.

For the viewer, the experience is deeply moving, and reminds us how some people feel shame when they cry in front of others.

ACCA's survey of Jones's career, called *Darwin With Tears*, opens tomorrow and is one of the most ambitious exhibitions of its kind undertaken since the gallery in Melbourne's Southbank opened in 2002. Spanning more than 30 years of Jones's work, it is also one of its most powerful.

Jones has always been interested in the inner nature of living things: humans, animals, birds, plants. In the 1990s she was inspired by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* to explore issues of human and animal sexuality, gender difference, sexual selection, erotica and desire. Her works invite us to become participants rather than mere observers, and the emotional investment is immense. Little wonder that viewers emerge from Jones's world feeling uplifted, inspired, stimulated, exhausted.

"It's not ice-cream," she says of her work, adding that she prefers to leave it to the viewers-participants to make their own conclusions. "I think that the role of art is to make a contribution that extends the range of choices: not to tell people how to think, but to say, 'Here is another way of thinking, here's another lot of ideas to add to the pot'."

Since the early 1980s Jones has combined her movement and performance art with multi-media technology. In the early days her video work was filmed on Beta tapes. Now, she roams the digital-art domain, a 21st-century artist who has embraced the laptop and its potential with enthusiasm.

Juliana Engberg, ACCA's artistic director, had been wanting to present an exhibition of Jones's work for four years. "Lyndal opened a way for a psychological and semiotic engagement with issues of femininity," she says. "Her contribution has been to offer a kind of sensuality to the feminist project. She has led the way in video and performative encounters in art. She is a continual experimenter."

Jones's work is in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Melbourne's Australian Centre for the Moving Image and the Queensland Art Gallery. In 2001 she was Australia's representative at the Venice Biennale and in 2005 was one of two Australian artists invited to exhibit in DMZ 2005, at the Demilitarised Zone in Korea.

She was a recipient of an Australian Artists Creative Fellowship (a "Keating award") in 1993-96 and her 10-year series of digital works, *From the Darwin Translations* — the subject of her PhD — has been widely acclaimed.

During the 1980s Jones taught movement at the Victorian College of the Arts. She is presently associate professor in multimedia and director of research at the school of creative media at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Her academic career, and the university environment, she says, provides her creative work with a scholarly and research backbone.

"One way is to see universities as centres of learning. But, of course, in a very small



'It's like when you clear out a cupboard — every single thing has a memory': Video artist Lyndal Jones reflects on the survey of her career

Picture: David Geraghty



Celebration of the form: Still from *Room With Finches*, 1995

country like Australia universities are also among the largest patrons of the arts."

Jones's landscape of ideas is vast and varied. There are some recurring themes, however, and the ACCA survey has given her an opportunity to review and reflect upon those themes and how, over three decades, they have contributed to her oeuvre.

Water is one. Jones was born in Sydney in 1949 but grew up in the Riverina (her father was a stock and station agent) and she went to school in small towns such as Hay, Deniliquin and Narrandera.

"It's interesting how some things return," she says. "I've always understood what it is to think about water. It's always been a precious commodity, going right back to when I was a child."

In a new project, she is one of several artists, academics and climate-change experts

involved in transforming a heritage property called Swiss House — in Avoca in central Victoria — into an energy-efficient space. The Avoca Project will include a series of artist residencies, performances and events over the next 10 years.

After university and a stint teaching drama, Jones moved to London in 1974. She was captivated by the city's performance-art scene, and began studying movement while her artist partner at the time studied film.

"Both of us were part of an English art scene that really didn't care about boundaries in art forms," she recalls. "People were doing performance, others were doing film and art and video. Often you all worked together. It was a really lovely time."

Jones joined a performance theatre group, Cunning Stunts, which later became a well-known cabaret act in Europe. In 1977 she

returned to Melbourne and eventually became a drama lecturer at teacher's college before moving to the VCA.

In 1978 Jones devised a five-part performance piece called *At Home*. Staged at Carlton's La Mama theatre, it was set outside the building with performers going in and out of doors, and up and down the external stairs. Audiences were often passers-by who saw what was happening and, intrigued, sat down.

A turning point was art critic Mary Eagle's response to the La Mama season. "I think my career was pretty well changed by Mary Eagle," Jones says. "She wrote beautifully and insightfully in *The Age* about that work. The theatre reviewers didn't write anything, they couldn't handle it, but Mary Eagle said things that were really important. So I thought, 'Right, that's fairly simple, I'm a visual artist. People in the visual arts in this country seemed to understand what I'm doing, so that's it.'"

Jones started thinking about new ways to show her work and experimented with a hand-held video camera as a way of documenting performances, hers and those of others.

After dozens of exhibitions, artist-in-residence programs in Australia and overseas, a Venice Biennale and major projects such as the *Darwin* series, video remains her chief source of inspiration.

Jones's home and studio is in a two-storey red-brick converted stables in inner Melbourne. Computer screens sit on a table. The absence of canvases, brushes, oil paints and the like is a reminder that video art — through its sheer efficiency and compactibility — gives artists new ways to create, produce and display.

Over a cup of tea in her sun-filled kitchen, she recalls the 2001 Venice Biennale at which she presented *Deep Water*, a site-specific video installation that connected the Australian suburban swimming pool with the canals of Venice. "That particular year was the most

video-rich of any biennale that has been held there, before or since," she explains.

"It was of its time internationally, even though in Australia there was a bit of difficulty coming to video at first."

The news that Sydney video artist Shaun Gladwell will be Australia's 2009 representative at Venice is very exciting, Jones says. "In the history of art, video is a very broad palette and I think Shaun's work is fantastic. What I love about his work, and the way I suppose I would identify any connection between his work and mine, is that they're kinesthetic, even though there's a very different kind of physicality in what we do."

The ACCA exhibition is a celebration of the art form as much as the artist. Visitors wander past Jones's work — images of birds then an aviary of live finches; a piece called *Spitfire* in which sexy-talking women's voices accompany vision from a fighter pilot's cockpit; a video work of a penis that transforms in real time from limp to erect; and images of giant tortoises on the Galapagos Islands — and marvel at its power to provoke thought.

One of the highlights of the exhibition will be neon signage on the gallery's northern external wall, saying: "Tears for what has been done". The large lights will be reflected in water that gathers in 150 44-gallon drums, "another powerful symbol of the Australian countryside", says Jones.

Jones agrees there is a lot to digest in the one show. But because the videos are on five-minute cycles, "it means if you stay for five minutes you actually do get it. You have to be able to do that in the visual arts because people wander through and grasp moments."

"The really lovely thing for me with this exhibition is the chance to put all these things together. And it's a buzz to see the old work again. It's like when you clear out a cupboard — every single thing has a memory."

Lyndal Jones: *Darwin With Tears* is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, May 24-July 20.