DIVIDED WORLDS
2018 ADELAIDE BIENNIAL OF AUSTRALIAN ART

Various venues, Adelaide, Australia

REVIEW by CHLOÉ WOLIFFSON

In her opening remarks about the 2018 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, curator Erica Green of Samstag Museum imagines the show as an allegorical prism – absorbing, concentrating and synthesising elements of the human condition and producing a spectrum of Divided Worlds. Traversing the city’s North Terrace between the exhibition’s venues – Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), Samstag Museum, Jam Factory and the Museum of Economic Botany and its surroundings in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens – extends this allegory, as visitors find themselves moving between the classical architecture of AGSA and its institutional neighbours, the long, shade-free stretches of streetscape leading to Samstag and Jam Factory, and the verdant surrounds of the Botanic Gardens.

In her catalogue essay, Green elaborates on four possible themes within the exhibition’s overarching one of Divided Worlds: The worlds of “time, the cosmos, evolution and nature”, that of “human beings: our society, our past and our future”, “the world of harmony, spirit and love,” and finally, “speculation and imagination”. These themes are broad enough to encompass Green’s selection of 30 Australian artists, and they emerge naturally when moving through the show.

While Divided Worlds is a catch-all theme typical of biennales, Green is open about what she calls this “generous perspective”, stating that her “guiding ethos, artistically, was eclectic” and led by her dialogue with artists and the opportunity for them to realise otherwise prohibitive projects in this substantial institutional context. This curatorial approach is admirable but in the execution of this vision the exhibition leaves something to be desired.

A striking example of this is the presentation of works on the ground floor of AGSA. Ascending the stairs, visitors are met with the three-panel painting Kangkura-KangkuraKu Tjukurpa – A Sister’s Story (2017) by the Ken Sisters. While it is difficult to think of a more stunning piece to open the show with in its primary venue,
Upon leaving, the night-time iteration of Lindy Lee’s sculptural centrepiece outside AGSA, *The Life of Stars* (2015), was enveloped by a light show projected onto that and neighbouring buildings, with children posing for photos in front of the sparkling void.

At Jam Factory, at the same venue was a dramatic installation by ceramicist Kristen Coelho, who alongside Khai Leow and Tim Edwards at AGSA represented an increasing incorporation of design and craft practices into such exhibitions – a divide between worlds that continues to be blurred.

The exhibition’s launch during Adelaide Festival’s opening weekend on the terrace outside AGSA was commendably democratic: the general public were invited inside alongside artists to enjoy the exhibition – some quizzed at the bar, chatting around Coelho and Healy’s work *Mondo Futuro* (2017), while others sat in the gallery café (emblazoned with a Ghospatrol tarp for the Biennial) as if it were just another afternoon, seemingly oblivious to the surrounding activity. As I was leaving, the night-time iteration of Lindy Lee’s sculptural centrepiece outside AGSA, *The Life of Stars* (2015), was enveloped by a light show projected onto that and neighbouring buildings, with children posed for photos in front of the sparkling void. Wandering back down North Terrace afterwards, the crowds were out in force, enjoying the lights and debriefing on the Festival shows they had just seen.

The next morning, I ventured to the Botanic Gardens to explore the Biennial displays at the Museum of Economic Botany and elsewhere in the garden. An exceptional venue, the museum
represents the last of its kind in the world. Dedicated to the study of ‘useful’ plants, its quirky taxonomic displays set among impressive period architecture were joined by the photography of Tamara Dean, sensitively presented on a wooden frame structure which seamlessly created a mini-gallery at one end of the museum. The figures in Dean’s works crouch in ponds and fields recalling those the visitor has just walked through. Elsewhere in the gardens, Christian Thompson realised an expanded version of his photographs with an audio installation of beautiful song that filled the Palm House.

The otherwise tranquil gardens were disturbed by the constant background buzzing of racing cars driving around a track nearby. It seemed curious that these two cultural events would occur simultaneously: one a multi-arts festival with branches extending through the city, and the other a place to watch cars drive in a circle. Divided worlds indeed.

The 2018 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art runs from March 3 to June 3, 2018. adelaidebiennial.com.au