



DIVIDED WORLDS

2018 ADELAIDE BIENNIAL OF AUSTRALIAN ART

Various venues, Adelaide, Australia

REVIEW by CHLOÉ WOLIFSON

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 surroundings 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,

the placement of a huge work (each of the three panels is 300 x 200 cm) at the top of a staircase in a thoroughfare is far from ideal for a painting that requires time and space for contemplation up close and from greater distance.

It's hard to forget this when entering the adjacent large gallery space where the parts of a dismantled Honda vehicle are strung up across the end wall with bamboo and jute tied using a traditional Japanese wrapping technique. This work by Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, *We Hung Mammoth* (2015), is hung adjacent to the large yet delicate abstracted landscape painting suite *Oratunga Burra Suite* (2017) by John R Walker. The two spark a challenging conversation. However, Lisa Adams' small, photorealist paintings with their intense psychological underpinnings referencing surrealism and cinema require close consideration, which could have been achieved in a more intimate gallery space.

The Basement galleries of AGSA finds the politically driven text work of Vernon Ah Kee applied in shiny black to the black wall next to the stairs, with a standalone spectre-like painting by the artist next to the landing. While it could be read as a signal-point between the physically divided worlds of the brightly lit white galleries above and the darkened galleries below, the positioning does not allow the work the attention it demands, before the visitor arrives at the bottom of stairs to be confronted by Roy Ananda's exploded

Dungeons and Dragons-inspired installation *Thin walls between dimensions*.

Although presenting artists an opportunity to develop ambitious work is laudable, part of the curator's role is to envision the physical exhibition and problem-solve. Given that the Biennial's overall theme embraced division, rather than unfolding a more straightforward journey between artworks, it was even more important that the individual resonance of works be considered – yet many works were not afforded the best chance at this due to these unusual presentation choices. A lack of explanatory text accompanying artwork captions also plays a role here.

I am not suggesting audiences should be spoon-fed via didactic texts and obvious placement of work. Viewers who take the time to explore the show across its various locations are rewarded with threads and questions that emerge between different works and the settings themselves. However, this experience would have been enriched by the inclusion of even the briefest of explanatory texts accompanying each work, allowing further detail to be uncovered and further divisions and connections to be considered.

Other highlights include Australia's recently-appointed Venice artist Angelica Mesiti's two-channel video work *Mother Tongue* (2017) at Samstag Museum, telling stories of divided worlds through song and performance, and the luscious close-ups of stripped-back floral stamens in Maria Fernanda Cardoso's *Naked Flora Series* (2014)



Top to bottom
ANGELICA MESITI
Mother Tongue, 2017
two-channel HD video
Photo: Bonnie Elliott
Commissioned by
Aarhus European Capital
of Culture 2017 in
association with the 2018
Adelaide Biennial
Courtesy the artist and
Anna Schwartz Gallery

CLAIRE HEALY AND
SEAN CORDEIRO
Mondo Futuro (still), 2017
Photo: Jonah Cordeiro
Courtesy the artists
and Roslyn Oxley9
Gallery, Sydney

TAMARA DEAN
*Elephant ear (Alocasia
odora) in Autumn* (from
series *In our nature*), 2017
pure pigment print on
cotton rag
150 x 200 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Martin Browne
Contemporary, Sydney



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 ovoid.

at Jam Factory. At the same venue was a dramatic installation by ceramicist Kirsten Coelho, who alongside Khai Liew 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 queued at the bar, chatting around Cordeiro and Healy's work *Mondo Futuro* (2017), while others sat in the gallery café (emblazoned with a Ghospatrol mural 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 ovoid. 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 gardens. An exceptional venue, the museum



Top to bottom
Installation view
KIRSTEN COELHO
2018 Adelaide Biennial
of Australian Art: *Divided
Worlds*, Jam Factory, Adelaide

LINDY LEE
The Life of Stars, 2015
stainless steel
dimensions variable
Photo: Charlie Xia
Courtesy the artist,
Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney
and UAP, Melbourne

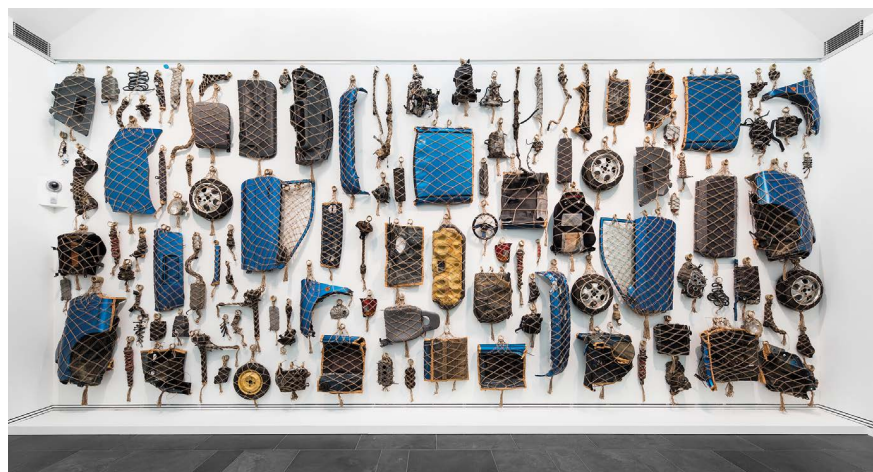
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JOHN R WALKER
Oratunga Burra Suite
(detail), 2017
archival oil on polyester
(7 panels)
240 x 180 cm (each)
Photo: Peter Jones
Courtesy the artist
and Utopia Art Sydney

Top to bottom
Installation view
SEAN CORDEIRO
AND CLAIRE HEALY
We Hunt Mammoth, 2015
2018 Adelaide Biennial
of Australian Art: Divided
Worlds, Art Gallery of
South Australia, Adelaide
Installation view
ROY ANANDA
Thin walls between
dimensions, 2018
2018 Adelaide Biennial
of Australian Art: Divided
Worlds, Art Gallery of
South Australia, Adelaide
Courtesy the artists
and Art Gallery of South
Australia, Adelaide

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. ▽

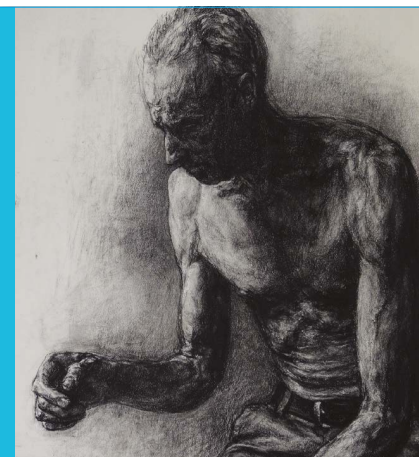
The 2018 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art runs from March 3 to June 3, 2018.
adelaidebiennial.com.au



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Peter Grziwotz, Study as St Jerome for a self-portrait (detail) 2016. charcoal on paper. Image courtesy of the artist.



GABRIELLE COURTENAY

16 - 27th May 2018

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