

# Searching for Wonderland

## Land down under

Vast, arid, unforgiving, and utterly awe-inspiring is the Australian landscape—its desert heat merciless, its Dreamtime<sup>1</sup> timeless. In the imagination of many perhaps that is all there is to the country: a land of opportunities where everyone is settled in some outback place, prays for rain to come, and negotiates one contradictory black-white frontier or another. If all of one's experience of this great Southern Land is a night with Baz Luhrmann's epic film *Australia*<sup>2</sup>—which appropriates humour, kitsch and historical facts in a post-modern pastiche of a story—then one would be forgiven. But ever since I came to Taipei in the summer of 2010, I am continuously provoked to demystify stereotypes held about Australia, notions of which should have long expired. Having to explain, for instance, that we have had the courage to say 'sorry' to the first Australians<sup>3</sup> and, despite the obstacles of old thinking, have progressed to address some of the unfinished business of our colonial past<sup>4</sup>. That not all 'whites' have had the privilege of belonging to a ruling majority and a multiplicity of voices is now emerging, daring to re-write the story of our 'immigration nation's'<sup>5</sup> hard earned multi-ethnic identity. And yes, some think that geographically Australia belongs in Asia. The reactions would range from disbelief and confusion to curiosity, even intrigue, but invariably they would lead to the one question: how do we define ourselves as Australians to the world today?

For a nation-continent our geographic isolation<sup>6</sup> has been inseparable from how we view ourselves. Living in the *land down under*<sup>7</sup> continues to carry a degree of anxiety about being overlooked by the rest of the world, even today in the age of instant global connectivity. Besides, as we contemplate a Post-Western world order there is a growing pressure to be less complacent about our good fortune of living in the *lucky country*<sup>8</sup> and more proactive in defining an evolving idea of engagement with the Asia-Pacific on

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<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal belief system shaping the physical, spiritual, and moral world—the oldest continuing cultural traditions in human history

<sup>2</sup> Luhrmann, B. (Dir.), *Australia* (2008), 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox

<sup>3</sup> 'Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples', delivered by Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia, Australia Parliament House, 13 February 2008, [www.aph.gov.au/house/rudd\\_speech.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/rudd_speech.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> For more, see SBS TV landmark documentary series *Immigration Nation: The Secret History of Us*, exploring Australia's century long struggle to overcome the White Australia Policy [www.sbs.com.au/immigrationnation](http://www.sbs.com.au/immigrationnation)

<sup>6</sup> Blainey G. (1966), *Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, Sun Books, Melbourne

<sup>7</sup> The term was made popular by Australian band Men at Work who recorded the hit song 'Land Down Under' for their album *Business as Usual* (1981)

<sup>8</sup> A phrase, taken from Donald Horne's book *The Lucky Country* (1964), used to describe all that is great about Australia: weather, lifestyle, resources.

terms not all our own. Inwardly, at the deeper levels of our society, our sense of national self is changing too. Australian statecraft is dynamically influenced as much by political leadership as it is by the views of citizens who come from widely diverse cultural backgrounds, places, and paths of mobility, and whose views exponentially broaden with each next generation. These shifting dynamics create instability as to *who* we are, and *where* we fit in the global scheme of things, but they also encourage openness and freedom that are seldom seen in old societies, anywhere in the world.

Illustrating these changes is the Lowy Institute's recent research<sup>9</sup>, which asked Australians across several age groups to define the 'region Australia is a part of'. For those 60 years and older, Australia is British and it ought to remain invested in its Anglo-Saxon tradition with all the pedigree of the old empire. Those in their early 20s, however, see Australia as a multi-racial nation moving away from such old values and becoming more confident as a pluralistic and tolerant society of the Asia-Pacific region<sup>10</sup>. Certainly, such differences of opinion create tensions within the civic space of our democracy but they also hold a clue to the evolution of Australia's place in the world<sup>11</sup>, potentially a bridge between old and new order—East and West, North and South.

This is the context within which the idea for *Wonderland: New Contemporary Art from Australia* emerged. As the first multi-art form survey exhibition of Australian art in Taiwan, its intent has been to introduce a multiplicity of perspectives that would serve as entry points or insights into the changing nature of the Australian experience. Australia is—as tourist guides promote—a wonderland. But it is also much more, and some of it not all that convenient. Thus considered the artworks in this exhibition express the dynamic processes of rethinking our national self, our evolving values, our place in the world, and our growing sense of environmental responsibility. A great work of art has the power to convey us to another reality, to take us to places in our heart, soul and mind impossible to reach by other means. That is also how we share culture between one place and another, experiencing and interpreting it individually while benefiting us all as a community<sup>12</sup>.

In surveying contemporary art, the exhibition brings an unusual cross-section of media, art forms and processes: found objects sit next to hand-made sculpture; documentary video next to abstract moving images; paintings next to interactive installations. Explored in their own right the 43 artworks also offer diverse pathways leading to

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<sup>9</sup> Lowy Institute of International Policy, [www.lowyinstitute.org](http://www.lowyinstitute.org)

<sup>10</sup> One tenth of the population regard themselves as Asian-Australians

<sup>11</sup> Wesley, M., 'Australia's Place in the World', Griffith Asia Institute Brisbane Perspective Asia Lecture, 29 July 2010

<sup>12</sup> See Carroll, A., 'Ignorance is not bliss: Art and its place in Australia-Asia relations', *Asialink Essays*, Dec 2009, No 10

another kind of wonderland: one found in inspiration, curiosity, and unexpected encounters. Further, 22 prominent art critics introduce the historical and cultural contexts within which each artist has evolved their practice. Together, we all hope the exhibition expresses a fresh proposition of contemporary Australia, and new ways of thinking about and exploring art.

## **‘Sorry’**

A compelling milestone in Australia’s most recent history is the Government’s formal apology to the *Stolen Generations*<sup>13</sup>—a powerful and deeply moving moment of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Created as a celebration of ‘the apology’, Julie Dowling’s video installation *Oottheroongoo (Your country)* documents her journey to her ancestral country. It is an overwhelming gesture of forgiveness, and a courageous experience of wonderment, mourning, and transformation. Referencing ethnographic photography but only to challenge stereotypes held about Aboriginal people, Bindi Coles’ *Sistagirls* series is a colourful tableau celebrating the diversity of Australian society while, at the same time, claiming agency over the representation of Aboriginal identity. Anna Davern deploys dry Australian humour in order to broach similarly uncomfortable truths about the nation’s past. In *Nag* and *Nagaina*, Australia’s most iconic animals—the kangaroo and the koala—appear larger than life and so powerful they have taken over the British Empire, thus, symbolically affirming a more authentic place for their Australian-ness. To this end Joan Ross invites us to re-enact the becoming of modern day Australia by sharing the ritual of an Australian summer picnic. From the First Fleet of convict ships that arrived from Great Britain to today’s diverse migrants everyone is bringing their artefacts to contribute to the cultural mix. The bush is reconfigured, and the nation’s flag morphs into an Australia Day fireworks celebration.

## **No part is immune from the changes of its counterparts**

In the Australian Aborigines Dreamtime there is a common mythological story about a serpent of enormous proportions with powers so great that it can replenish the creeks and rivers of the land. As it slithers across Country, the Rainbow Serpent<sup>14</sup> forms deep

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<sup>13</sup> The term ‘Stolen Generations’ was first used by Australian historian Professor Peter Read to describes the practice of removing children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent from their families. On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd presented a formal apology to Indigenous Australians, including to the Stolen Generations.

<sup>14</sup> Broadly adopted name

channels and gullies, collecting and distributing water, creating not just the rivers and mountains of the landscape but the flow of life itself. But if disturbed, this giant can be unforgiving, causing irreversible destruction. Today, across the continent, its powers are felt most palpably in areas threatened by the impacts of climate change. In *A Living Body*, Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski focus on the increasing extremes of weather-induced disasters across the region. Drawing upon the wisdom of the ancient Aboriginal culture, the artists have embedded words from the Ngarrinjjerri tradition into the dry coastal ground of the Coorong as if to warn us: *this land is a living body*. Martin Walch has lived all his life in Tasmania and for many years has explored every region of the island. In *Mist Opportunities*, he invites us to not only contemplate the wilderness<sup>15</sup> but also to reflect upon how the land has been eroded by ongoing development that has irrevocably altered its natural ecology. Here is a drowned, grey post-apocalyptic world. Continuing this theme Jasmine Targett contemplates the magnificent evening sky set ablaze in vivid multi-colours not as a romantic sunset but an atmosphere filled with toxic gases. *Atmosphere: and your troubles, like bubbles, will disappear* examines the state of the Earth's ecosystems as if they were bubbles on the verge of collapsing. It challenges us to imagine a new nation self, proactively engaged in a global responsibility towards the ecological balance of the Planet.

### **Lost paradise**

In classical Western thought Nature was always seen 'as something to either fear or love, as something chaotic or harmonious, and as superior or inferior to humans. But what has remained dominant is the belief that [Nature] has an essential quality separate from human beings, and that it can be understood objectively through science—as a thing'<sup>16</sup>. During the Enlightenment many exotic animal species were hunted down for collection displays to such extent that their numbers dramatically declined, some becoming extinct. The rare Australian lyrebird was also a highly prized trophy appreciated for its distinctive tail and ability to mimic sounds heard in its surrounds. Kuuki's *e. Menura Superba* is a robotic simulacrum of the famous bird, which interacts with the audiences so to encourage a more intimate appreciation of its unique behaviours. In the hands of Kylie Stillman old books become archaeologies of idiosyncratic knowledge rather than prescribed systems of collecting and cataloguing. The painstakingly carved *Flock* expresses ideas beyond the words contained within the books of which it is made. There is a disquieting sense of

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<sup>15</sup> The Tasmanian Wilderness was inscribed in the World Heritage List in 1982, and it is home to several animals that are either extinct or threatened on mainland Australia

<sup>16</sup> Nordhaus, T.; Shellenberger, M. *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007

nostalgia and melancholy about a paradise that might be forever lost, one that words could never retrieve.

In contrast to critiques of the cultural constructs inhibiting our ability to serve as nature's custodians not just its explorers, Fiona Lowry reflects upon its mysterious and seductive powers. In *I am just a mirror* the landscape's alluring presence plays off against urges we hold within ourselves. The defused image draws us in, daring us to engage in the physical encounters acted out in an imaginary forest, no matter how secretive or revelatory they might be. Innocence is surrendered to temptation—we can't stop what's coming. Jess MacNeil's video *Revolution*, of a clear morning light catching the cascading waters of a magnificent fountain and the ghostly shadows of people passing by, is a poetic homage to the magnificence of our existence: past, present and future morph into a momentary scene of life's eternal flow.

### **Wonderland that is within**

Media artists often incorporate special kinaesthetic and audio awareness into their works in order to transform our reason-perception into non-verbal signals that tap into our all-sensory intelligence. Biofeedback is one way by which to stimulate a synesthesia of perception. George Khut's *The Heart Library* features a 'biofeedback mirror' experience, which translates a participant's heart rhythms into an immersive environment that responds to the changes in their psycho-emotional state. The work encourages us to become more attentive of the subtler world of our embodiment. Elizabeth Delf's sculptural garments *Revolutions* further elaborate on this theme, inviting us into a space between form and non-form so to more acutely appreciate everyone's unique sense of self. For *Thought noise/wave-form preludes* Cath Robinson recorded artists' thoughts as wavelengths and punctured the data on music scrolls to be played via music boxes. When interacted with simultaneously they produce an abstracted composition of the original embodied phenomenon.

A different kind of dislocation occurs when we look through one of the small peepholes that Alex Davies has built into the wall of an empty room. At first we see the room and ourselves from behind, then suddenly our personal space seems invaded by strangers standing next to us. We turn around but no one is there: an uneasy feeling begins to creep in. Through a combination of physical and digital choreography Matthew Gingold's *Flying Falling Floating* creates disorienting illusions of bodies defying, as well as succumbing to, gravity. The work alludes to the paradoxes of daily living: sometimes spinning out of control at others just coasting along; soaring through on a high or

tumbling down to the depths. Also challenging conventional thinking about our embodied experiences, Daniel Crooks subjects the movement of real bodies to a spatio-temporal manipulation. His *Static* series apply a digital process whereby real situations morph into painterly moving images that induce a sense of spatial disorientation and warped time.

### **Strange worlds of Art & Science**

Perhaps it is mostly in those places full of uncertainty and paradox that wonderland is to be found. Albert Einstein famously proclaimed that the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. He regarded it as the source of all true art and all science, and thought of people who couldn't pause to wonder or stand rapt in awe as being as good as dead for their eyes are closed. Artists who work to unravel new perceptions and experiences—indeed who heighten our understanding about the complexities of the world around us—help us *see* its mysteries. Some of the most innovative Australian art works of the past decade have been created through collaborations between artists and scientists. Their joint projects inquire into the lesser known or less apparent realms of reality: be it biological or artificial.

Much of Jon McCormack's work is created by computer software written by the artist that is based on biological models of development. For *Morphogenesis* a rule-based model determines the digital growth and form of selected plants and evolves them virtually. The process leads to strange yet familiar forms of archetypal Australian flora: a wondrous but impossible nature. Dedicated to the creation of worlds that could only happen in an abstract computational space, McCormack has observed that 'for humans nature and the wild are more than just consumable resources, they are an aesthetic necessity. But, any attempt to design artificial nature will mirror our limitations: being part of the entity we are simultaneously trying to recreate and destroy'<sup>17</sup>. Julie Ryder's work with scientists from the Australian National Botanic Gardens led to the creation of the series *Transmorphing*, which mixes traditional textile techniques with Scanning Electron Microscopy and digital imaging. The result is a fantastical species of futuristic plants more likely to be found in the biotech lab rather than in the natural environment. Matthew Gardiner creates unique kinetic objects, *oribots*, that combine the ancient Japanese art of origami and robotic engineering. His work serves as a metaphor for the myriad exchanges of energy that engross the infinite inter-relatedness of our world. Chris Henschke was the first artist-in-residence at the Australian Synchrotron, a massive machine that accelerates electrons to almost the speed of light. As electrons are deflected through magnetic fields they create extremely bright light, which is captured and

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<sup>17</sup> Cavallaro A., Ivanova A. eds., artist statement, *Unnatural Selection*, Novamedia 2004, p.45

recorded, and then rendered by the artist as the moving image artwork *Lightcurve*. The premise of the work is not so much to illustrate a phenomenon but rather to make us reflect on the things we take for granted, or can't always perceive in art and in life.

### **All of us in it, together**

One of the prominent works in the exhibition is the interactive audio-visual installation *Sound Chamber* by Kynan Tan and collaborators. Presented as a giant inflatable dome, the project deconstructs timeworn conceits about what an art experience should be. In its shared matrix of activities, the social network is central while the artwork is distributed between the public space of the gallery, the private space of participants, and the global networks it links to. The work enables a collective celebration of the pleasure and joy of all of us being connected to one another.

As the artworks affirm *who we are*, at its most inspirational, is a great mixture of things, hybrid experiences, an evolving creation of an Australian self that is made of all of us. *Where we are*, at best, is determined by our aspirations to be an exemplary democracy—modelling rather than asserting itself in the region—and a country that is an intrinsic part of the grand ecology of our Planet. It is indeed a work in progress, may it be a wonderland.

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