

**29.10.15**

**TO BE 'WITH' BUT NOT 'OF' THE WEIRD**

Artists: Heath Franco—*Alterland*—Australian Experimental Art Foundation, July 10<sup>th</sup>—August 8<sup>th</sup>; Patrick Heath—*Happy Mediums*—Format Systems, August 13<sup>th</sup>—September 3<sup>rd</sup>; *Birth Of The Cool*—Syd Ball, Dick Watkins, David Aspden, Michael Johnson— and Geoff Wilson—*Interrogated Landscape*—SAMSTAG Museum—July 17<sup>th</sup>—September 18<sup>th</sup>; Deborah Pryor—*Tangled Saints*—Australian Experimental Art Foundation, August 21<sup>st</sup>—September 19<sup>th</sup>; Paul Hoban with Scott Pyle—Greenaway Gallery, September 2<sup>nd</sup>—October 11<sup>th</sup>; Fiona Roberts—*Intimate Vestiges*—Format Systems, September; Simone Kennedy—*Re imagining the mother*—South Australian School of Art gallery, August 31<sup>st</sup>—September 11<sup>th</sup>; Nazia Ejaz—*Jaali/Screen*, July 3<sup>rd</sup>— date; Dadang Christanto—*1965*—October 2<sup>nd</sup>—October 31<sup>st</sup>; Fiona Foley—*Biting The Cloud*, Jason Wing—*Overseer/Officer*, and Brad Harkin—*Palm Valley*—CACSA October 9<sup>th</sup>—November 22<sup>nd</sup>; *Tarnanthi*—various artists—Art Gallery of South Australia and other venues—from October 9<sup>th</sup>—January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016; Roberta Rich—*I'm Cornered*—and Rhiannon Jones—*Unviewable Acts in Space*—FELT Space, October 8<sup>th</sup>—October 24<sup>th</sup>

by Ken Bolton

**YES, “BETTER THAN JAMES BROWN”!**

I have penned farewells to art criticism before. But the break never lasts. Like most Australians, or those I know, I rarely stop thinking about art. What else is there? Philosophy, politics, history. Yes. But for me, as for you I expect, these are shaded by literature and visual art. Still, I did for a while think this might be the last of it, that I had stopped, should leave it, walk away etcetera. I had missed quite a number of shows through illness, a caesura preceded by a period away interstate; as well, there had been a run of shows that I 'liked' well enough but didn't actually care intensely about. But there are things to say—and once you have said them, to yourself, there is nothing to do but try to nail exactly what you mean and to see where it goes, what might be the implications.

All of which is to say, I know it's been a while. And *'FormGuide'* suggests I cover a broader field than I do, limited as I am by gallery hours, *Doucette's* limited range, my wig blowing off in the wind and so on. The burro is a real problem: slow and unwilling. I had it tied outside FELT Space one time—she is only very small—and a woman was admiring it, saying *What a dear sweet thing*, and offered to *carry* it to my car for me if I liked. In fact I was about to ride. (I was forced to lead it away, and hide for a moment. Then off through the back streets to Hugo Michell's) Anyway, enough of me!

## SOLID WITH THE WEIRD

Heath Franco's *Alterland*—at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation, over July and early August, was high impact, and rather overpowering and entirely amusing. An installation of some very large projections and some smaller, and a set of TV screens in a small circle—talking to each other, but angled so that the viewer could take in each one. On entering the gallery one met first a giant proscenium archway on which was projected a quasi military, honour-guard line of male figures on either side of the central opening.

These figures ranged from enormous close-to, to less than life-size for the most distant. The figures on either side of the archway reached over it and high-fived with both hands, the biggest figures disappearing to be replaced at the more distant end of the two lines, that then moved towards us again, ratcheting forward with each new and victorious clap of hands and forming a kind of human tunnel. The males were all colourful: various Las Vegas *1001 Nights* versions of ethnic head-gear and scarves and veils and epaulettes etc; and each figure was wearing no pants, so one had an impression also of a chorus line, a male scrum, a gay Edinburgh Tattoo, with swinging, dangling willies, smiling white teeth, designer stubble: middle-eastern chic, as it might be derived from male models in the Freddie Mercury mould. It seemed joyous and funny

and slightly threatening, and it was visually overpowering. Each male was, I think, the artist, cleverly made up and cleverly varied. A similar set up occurred at the far end of the gallery, though still more disco-silvery and a more like a futuristic wrestling or boxing promo, but also with a wild soundtrack of percussive repetitions and repeat-patterned gestures of victory, dominance and excitement. My memory is of elegant dark glasses, designer stubble and silver cloaks, fists pumping in the air and grinning teeth.

The exhibition as a whole was a satirical presentation of maleness, of show-biz maleness, or spectacular masculinity. Aside from these large and intimidating Busby Berkeley airshow-flybys of massed male bodies in full heroic chortle, there was one other biggie: a cranky male upper body and head, in leather headgear, looking like a torturer or executioner, or someone very into bondage. The face breathed heavily and as if painfully so that the leather flap covering the mouth was caused to move a little with each heavily amplified breath.

Smaller single screens showed a succession of male types, in an outrageous range of Mighty Boosh-styled get-ups. Each one presented as a type, or 'humor' (ingratiating, over-confident, diffident, guilty, bluff, larrikin, self-pitying, machismo, intimidatory, insinuating, sly, guileless, dad-like, tough-guy, lounge-lizard and so on: goth, bikey, emo, bozo, bumpkin, smoothie, hard man, metrosexual), each one via a single gesture or expression, a shrug, a scowl, a raised eyebrow, a plea, a demand. A similar range, though smaller in number, was to be found on the circle of TV screens: but these (also pantless: willies swaying at bottom of the screen) were TV talent show urgers or judges: each with a gimmick like big glasses, silly patterned shirt, wildly bright and odd cardigans and jumpers, nutso facial hair etc—and they each had a special way of clapping and nodding at the same time, as if to declare discerning approval and they reaffirmed it, repeated it, encouragingly, ad nauseam. Again, they were very funny: the best part of the joke was their seeming total self-confidence and that they reminded of the mandatory celebrity nonentity with a huge ego and a very simple schtick—around which their annoying personality was built or behind which it was hidden. And, as with the rest of the show, each was in fact Heath Franco. ***Alterland*** was a display of a range of masculine types—revealed as amusingly prop-dependent, untrustworthy, sham, dubious or easily challenged.

But, though we're trained to consume TV and all of us do, the medium itself has no tug, no aftermath of lingering charm: non-corporeal, non-physical: we have learned from television to look straight through this new window to what is shown: we don't interface much with the screen or image as materially present or styled. There is usually little reason to. Of course TV was the index against which much of Heath Franco's work asked to be read. It was loveable comedy (a la *The Mighty Boosh*: a similarly nutty, provocative and naughty intimation and innuendo, and a similar

daggyness) but forgettable. Some dimension was missing. Materially it is inherently light on. In fact, the most material aspect, the sound—very loud—remains more vividly present than the imagery, more memorable. The imagery, though, was great.

*Alterland's* themes were a kind of critique of masculinity, or a reading of its tactics of intimidation, personability, insinuated compliance or agreement and claim to power. Bravo. And yet it was rather low comment on them: that is, telling enough, but already available—at least 'in principle'—in the entertainment culture. It would be amusing, in forty years time, as a young person, to come across these mugging images in a state gallery: one would feel instant affection for the visual lingua franca, the humour and think, *Across the years, I share an affinity with this nut—ha ha!* Perhaps. But it wouldn't be valuable for the quality of its insights and critique. They are those that Mick Molloy and others are already delivering. Technically the projections were impressive, for their manufacture and impactful presence, for the abstract patterning of images. But insubstantial.

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Upstairs at Format at about this time (August 13<sup>th</sup>—September 3<sup>rd</sup>) **Patrick Heath** was showing ***Happy Mediums***. I liked this show. It was almost too unpretentious: one thought at first, "I've seen this stuff: it's that same old *new materiality* that's going around, often via set-piece demonstration." I also thought, *This looks like Eduardo Paolozzi but drained of the colour*. Then I thought: But actually, that's why I like it, it is improved as monochrome, more 'to-the-point'. From then on I was on-side.

***Happy Mediums*** was a proliferating body of small sculptures, mostly on the Paolozzi model of towers and edifices, archways—30cms to a metre or so—that echoed (in Paolozzi's case foreshadowed) the aesthetic of Italian 'Memphis' design: but minus the colour, greyed-out. The same kooky Aztec or Inca or Amerindian totem-pole principles, made bizarre or comically abject and ghostly. Paolozzi always seemed to me too crassly fun-fair and Lego-like. Heath knew Paolozzi's work, the allusion to the earlier artist was intended. Though not throughout—there was more going on. As monochrome plaster of Paris the objects seemed both weirdly 'not there', to be signs, and heavier, more bodily than they would have been if coloured—and they alluded by this grey uniformity, to their being poured and cast: they were 'things done' and they were 'surrogates'. So a small grey hamburger bag, for example, looked amusingly dinky, boutiquey almost, and heavier than a real one ever could. Well, a bag of plaster of Paris *would* be heavier than your average hamburger, true. The small towers—Brancusi as well as Paolozzi?—many combining amusingly outré component parts: a banana, a thong, dentures, a glass with bent drinking straw—seemed able to slow our viewing and to reveal their varied composition the better

for being grey. The objects proposed themselves as 'ideal' versions of their form. Ideal and abject at the same time.

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## COOL NEW WORLD OF THE PAST

*The Birth Of The Cool* sounded an attractive title if you didn't know that particular album. As well, the show had David Aspden in it—but also Dick Watkins, Syd Ball, and Michael Johnson. Here Samstag showed a small selection of the hard-edge painting—as it was often called in Australia at the time (the 60s and early 70s)—that filled the galleries (in the view of the conceptualists and post-object artists, who regarded it as one further mindless end-game of formalist painting). It 'filled the galleries' (Gallery A, Coventry Galleries and Central Street in Sydney, but not all the galleries)—yet wasn't particularly popular—as befits a new movement. It was one version of 'the new', and approximately abreast of comparable painting elsewhere. It seemed exciting, but, to many, a little unsentimental, brusque. And the 'advanced' (rather than 'conservative') opposition that represented 'the future' were well in place before the 70s were far underway. The 'Greenberg doctrine', which spoke for the movement, was by this time on the wane.

Later Michael Taylor was not as interesting nor as showy as I expected him to be. So much for my preconceptions. All four were good in their early days, and their works seemed closely related. Early Syd Ball was very good: sort of dour and firm. And Dick Watkins was pretty terrific—amusing. The exhibition surveys 1963—1973, works from the latter part showing where they went next. Not quite so interesting in Ball's case, not at all in Johnson's. (Both tacked back towards decorative expressionism via Lyrical Abstraction, a term whose referent is pretty much forgotten these days.) Later David Aspden was bad. (Those tectonic, star-like leaf shapes—maple leaves on a pavement, a designer camouflage?) But Dick Watkins was great in the early and mid 80s. As he had been earlier. The pictures here had energy and wit and confidence. Major pictures were missing: 'Moose *The Mooche*' for example. Inevitable, I suppose.

Anything but extensive, the show could not quite delineate the movement, let alone survey it. There should have been more. It is a Sydney phenomenon, as it is represented here, and so would seem not to regard *The Field* as central or summative. So no Melbourne. Other artists might have been more profitably included: Central Gallery's Tony McGillick, or Rollin Schlicht. Schlicht was interestingly all over the place in the 70s: the paintings moving from hard-edge to a kind of Nabis-Matissean abstract which brought 1905 (via Matisse's late cut-outs) to meet Olitski

and Stella and Noland—viz., the painting called '*Nabis*', long a fixture in the AGNSW. For a time he was channeling Gauguin! Tony McGillick produced a couple of works that, wittily, were folded faded denim, I remember: hip jokes about the zeitgeist but also about the polygonal, 'shaped' canvas that was showing up at the time (Stella perhaps leading the way). McGillick died youngish. Rollin Schlicht pulled the plug and moved overseas—to return a few years back, and resume painting. Peter Booth might have been included, or Dale Hickey. But they are Melbourne. Was ***Birth Of The Cool*** about 'the cool' in Australian abstract art, or a specific movement? Who else was good, anyway? I can mostly remember stuff I didn't like. David Rankin. But there was Lesley Dumbrell? Robert Jacks? (Not very Sydney.) The busy Alun Leach-Jones? John Firth-Smith's narrow but effective repertoire of gestures and breadth?

Opportunism would explain the misleading title: the works were hot as much as they were cool and *The Birth Of The Cool* was a jazz LP collecting stuff recorded from the end of the 40s through to late 1950s—Miles Davis with various others like Gerry Mulligan. Not, now, very exciting. Were all these artists into jazz? Does it matter? (More important is that so many trained and practised as architects and draughtsmen. Some of their chill derives from this, and also perhaps an inability to work scale so well.) The Melbourne artists were 'cooler' than the Sydney gang (think of ***The Field***), well, cooler temperature-wise. Did that make them hipper?

***The Field***—and the four on show here—were 'cooler' than Abstract Expressionism—in MacLuhan's sense of the temperature metaphor—less 'heated', less huffing and puffing, less expressive rhetoric, less expressionist scatter and splash. (Cool styles, McLuhan would have it, doing less wild semaphoring, could rely on their fewer signs or moves counting for more than hot styles that pulled all the stops out to persuade, cajole, emote.) Cooler still were the Minimalists and the Post-object crowd—gnashing their teeth, waiting for this lot to go away.

Local audiences might be aware that Margaret Worth, associated with Ball at the time, produced work just as good, showing the same degree of understanding and a similar feel.

The Samstag gallery is so big and so richly appointed that these paintings now looked small and a little like decor, where, in a more usual white cube, they would look big still and as though they were *meaning to say something*. They had certainly been intended to. And a case can be made for this period as, I think briefly, producing something new and *not exactly* a copy of overseas art.

The upstairs gallery at Samstag is more forgiving—and there was the Geoff Wilson show, ***Interrogated Landscape***, a retrospective exhibition covering three or more decades. Work that you might decide was conservative, but it was very good at what it was about. South Australian

landscape. It was cooler and way less gimmicky than Jeffrey Smart's work. So, not corny. And it was more genuinely about looking (though, to be fair, Smart may never have declared that focus). It didn't have Stewart MacFarlane's narrative interest. Was it like Ken Searle's work? Ken Searle, though, is not much remembered in Adelaide. The big plus of the show was Wilson's attachment to the same landscapes and motifs, so that we saw them change from decade to decade, change with the influence of styles outside his own, and change with seasons, change as the land use changed, even as individual buildings aged. Some apprentice work showed Hindley and Rundle and streets, and some inner city areas, lanes, backstreets, as they were in the fifties.

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## TO DROP NO STITCH

Following Heath Franco at the AEF was Deborah Pryor's *Tangled Saints* (August 21<sup>st</sup>—September 19<sup>th</sup>). Franco's show had been in a darkened space and the walls were black for Deborah Pryor, the lighting subdued. This time the darkness of the AEF was silent. *Tangled Saints* was in many ways a great show—by which I don't mean to signal that in some way it wasn't. Opening late in the SALA month period, it was, I guess, the AEF's SALA show.

SALA was effectively captured in 2015 by CACSA, I think. That is, if you confined yourself to just the CACSA-branded *CACSA Contemporary* exhibitions—at various venues around town—you had pretty much seen the more interesting end of the SALA spectrum, and saved yourself a lot of unrewarding viewing and trundling about. So, a good idea. These exhibitions weren't tightly curated—but they *were* the relevant 'usual suspects', each revealing something of what they are currently doing. A casual snapshot of 'the new' in Adelaide.

I checked some of them briefly. It all looked up-to-the-minute contemporary. Not all the artists were easily distinguished from each other or recognisable by their styles, I noted. I did note interesting and characteristically selfless work by Matthew Bradley at SASA: part of his ongoing surveillance of superpower activity, and of superpower surveillance of the planet. The artist showed a replica, in brutalist cement, of an enormous bunker somewhere in China—that the Chinese government never comments upon. (What does it do, what is it for? Does it have a doomsday function? Can it be anything 'good' for the rest of the world?) It is big enough to be very visible from outer space. This was a highlight. And I saw, at Light Square, James Dodd's painting machine in action, still being refined I gather, but working in a prototypical fashion. A sign of amusing things to come.

Are most Adelaide galleries, at any one time throughout the year, showing South Australian art? Most of them probably. But there is some point to the SALA concept: at this one time of year the punter can step out safely knowing *they will not come across any 'foreign' artist*, just us chickens. Is that a good thing? They will see an Adelaide artist who qualifies by being alive. Hard to fake. What I do think SALA might do—well, it would be too much to ask that every fifth year it be South Australian Dead Artists month... but one major departed artist should get a reviving show each year—or perhaps a movement or artistic grouping of the past. It might be a curatorial exercise for one of the courses teaching curating. It could be awarded a reasonable budget and curator fee and backing from the state. If we're on about local culture and local artists, why ignore the past? The present artists will die too—all to be necessarily forgotten?

Deborah Pryor's ***Tangled Saints*** was an installation, in mostly very subdued, but occasionally dramatic lighting, of painstakingly sewn, knitted and embroidered objects, often extensive in their duplicated number. One whole long AEA wall had a patterned line of a Victorian-looking domestic sort, or perhaps like the decoration that might be found in an old and ornate theatre or hotel: a line that ran at hand-rail height and which was made up, the viewer realized after a time, of linked piss-bottles, the sort used in hospitals, in the palest satiny pink and much decorated. These were keyed to the general theme of the exhibition: which was to do, I think, with care and suffering, with care and devotion that were to equal that suffering—as a comfort, or an earnest of care and fellowship with the sufferer—to mark love and devotion and duty. The 'vessels' Pryor showed also suggested penises (in very unheroic guise) and vaginas, and the tubing kept one thinking of fluids proceeding through bodies. Tubing arabesqued from beginnings to ends: suggesting orifices and bodily fluids. There were large shapes suggesting indeterminate internal organs, and a body-bag shape.

The imagery, the icons presented (scaled and controlled and muted and tamed by the feminine craft skills of sewing and embossing and embroidering), were all of comic, tragic, gentle, sardonic. Firm in their virtue. There was a huge amount of labour invested in these objects, a kind of testament that could not be ignored. It may have allowed and intended readings that said 'abject', masochistic, pietistic etc.

The expended craft went a long way to establish the show as weighty. And the gravity of ***Tangled Saints***' major parts allowed some quite simple objects (draped and folded material, under a harsh chiaroscuro, for example) to have huge impact, as image, as material presence. The exhibition was thoughtfully sparse as well as luxuriant in other respects. The whole suggested devotion and duty, and the past—a Christian, puritan or puritanical devotion and duty, gendered in its falling mostly on women. Puritan, or puritanical—or punishing? (Caring is still provided mostly by

women, perhaps even further removed from our gaze now that the sanction of religious approval counts for less. Home caring, given how little support it gets from government, is associated with suffering, deprivation and poverty, with hardship and isolation. It is, unreasonably, shameful and shaming.)

The exhibition was popular. I found it gently depressing. But this was because of the realities it put before us—and you have to live with reality. And so I found it also admirable. The hard work of its replicated detail stood as a metaphor for much of its meaning. (From a craft point of view it might be thought to add value in itself. Which it might, regarded that way, but ‘as art’ degree-of-difficulty counts for less, except where it makes itself part of the story, as here it might be said to.) The astounding amount of close and repetitive work also lent much of the show the character of an action, a deed done.

Pale pink was the dominant colour within the darkness and Pryor is not alone amongst younger women artists in being able to isolate its suggestion of mild pukiness and blandness and to hold these things humorously in tandem with the colour’s sweet charm. The physical distribution of ***Tangled Saints*** was intelligent and powerful. A tropicana-styled *vagina dentata* was the only false note in the show: it had all the exhibition’s craft skills demonstrated ‘in small’—and to some degree it tied thematically in being made to look also like a serving tray of the sort that might be brought to an invalid’s bed, crocheted and embroidered. It might have stood for female resentment? But it seemed an echo of exuberant 70s feminism—Judy Chicago, Vivienne Binns, Marie McMahon and others—which was not the feel of the overall show.

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**Paul Hoban’s** exhibition I was looking forward to. It delivered what I had expected and I was duly grateful. Hoban’s ***Wraptures***—at Greenaway Gallery (“Gag Projects” surely sounds like stand-up comedy) ran from September 2<sup>nd</sup>—October 11<sup>th</sup>, and some of the work was done with, some of the show was ceded to, Scott Pyle with whom Hoban, I think, has collaborated in the past.

The collaborations were okay, but had a sort of binary simplicity to them that, for my money, made them too easily assimilable as ‘design’. Hoban’s own solo works were more variously complex and entirely pleasurable to get lost in. This was most true of the three or so grey-keyed paintings, where the grey reads as monochrome—not representation so much as suggestion: like peering into endless and proliferating cloud or fog, through which there were many paths. The eye reads a varying monochrome with a different acuity than it does counterpointed colours, the

fine gradations bear a kind of meaning or suggestion that Hoban is able to make a great deal of. Not that these paintings had no other colour. It was there, but always as isolated incident.

The works were made by the usual elaborate procedures that complicate Hoban's pictures, import chance, the random, a degree of otherness—as happy accident, as stand-in for 'nature', as mystery, ambiguity, as red-herring. The '*Meander Get Wings*' paintings (three of them were shown, though there may be more in the series) had curlicue scribbles, or tangles of palest yellow-and-white, or of lacey filigree black. Where they were not these 'scribbles' they tended on the other hand to look like parentheses, curlicue brackets, or wobbly capital S's—or 'decoration'. They seemed 'arbitrary' like decoration—and patently added, also like signs, signposts. These marks floated humorously on the overall grey, which was squeegeed over a black ground and seemed made up in part of delicate pink and mauve tones, as well as letting the black underpainting show through.

The black filigree on top, the black obscured beneath, could be regarded as implying a shallow middle depth for the pinkish grey: except that, as a grey world-onto-itself, as each specific passage was, the suggestion each afforded of infinite depths was generally incompatible with that earlier reading: there was a local reading, that varied from passage to passage, and another for the 'whole'. The grey paintings didn't have large 'figures' or elements at play in them—so there was less to hold one *to* that overall reading, to any single, organizing gestalt. Beyond two metres one could see one liked these paintings, but in those I liked best there was nothing authoritative happening at that distance to reward you for staying there. The inclination was to move in and to engage with specific areas of the painting, resisting—or giving in—to the pull of other areas contiguous, lured by the teasing semaphore of the black lines, the yellow. The curliness of these gave the paintings a slightly rococo feel, a cheeky 50s/60s suggestion of lingerie packaging (Audrey Hepburn, eyeliner, long cigarette holders?). Echoing or seconding the black marks, the yellow-white seemed to float *within* the grey, not so distinctly to its fore. The 'parentheses' suggested algebra, set theory, something coded—but also graffiti. And a kind of tease. (They were a little like the scribbly marks sometimes found on gum trees, though less seismographic here. Or, as many were not upright but horizontal, diagrammatic moustaches.) There were other works there to like in the exhibition—the busy '*Tangle*' being one—but the three grey pieces were the pick and the peak for me.

Hoban is always interesting—partly for not being always obsessed with 'the perfect painting'. (Not to say that candidates, contenders, aren't produced along the way.) The undertaking, one feels, keeps him genuinely amused, and the viewer gets some of the same delight and surprise and involvement. The '*Wraptures*' pictures were lighter in register than much of his output. (There

were small messages—playfully unhelpful—inscribed in parts of some paintings, though you had to look for them: “the first half follows immediately from the conclusion” went one.)

The sometimes vaunted materiality in Hoban’s work—as with that of the late John Barbour’s, with which it has affinities—differs from the new materiality discussed at the AEF’s *Art On Tap* discussions: for one thing, it is less deliberately or consciously ‘gendered’ than many women artists’ practice. In Hoban’s work ‘the material’ is tied to the ironies of modernism, treated still via the conventions of painting, sculpture and *informel* installation—and so acknowledges a line that runs from Duchamp, Beckett, Bataille, Johns and Rauschenberg, Eva Hesse and others since. The panel of that *Art On Tap* discussion—Kate Power, Sera Waters, Louise Haselton—identified with something more vitalist than grim, more positive than sardonic. On the other hand the game and stakes seem similar, if differently loaded: logos, ideality, idea—opposed to ‘the material’, as uncooperatively null, non-verbal, and vindicatingly ‘nature’ rather than ‘culture’. Were the men attached to an episteme whose passing they regretted, mourned, ironized and elegised, while the women were more positively in favour of a farewell to all that patriarchal superstructure—and less attached to ‘the tradition’? Probably. Is ‘a retrograde essentialism’ appearing here? Probably not.

## WEIRD SCENES WITHIN THE GOLDMINE

Fiona Roberts—*Intimate Vestiges*—Format Systems, September. I have never seen this done so well before, in terms of execution, but it is way behind the times, getting on for being 80 years too late. Surrealism happened a long while ago—and maybe the last time this sort of thing might have looked up-to-the-minute was in the 60s. Even then many would have felt it was kitsch. Dali stands behind it, and Meret Oppenheim and Delvaux and maybe Ernst (though that begins to lend it respectability: think Dali)—and Hitchcock and Hammer Horror films. As someone at Format remarked: the straights come in and say Wow, how weird! and the weirdos come in and say, How boring! I’m with the weird on this. *Intimate Vestiges* consisted of drawing room furniture: soft, comfy, placid, respectable and so on, but the surfaces were made of tiny eyes and grasping fingers. Spooky. (Cue to hands bursting from the wall to reach for Catherine Deneuve in Polanski’s *Repulsion*.)

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Simone Kennedy’s *Re imagining the mother*—at SASA briefly in September: an exhibition of work towards a higher degree: it sampled, therefore, some highlights of distinct bodies of Simone Kennedy’s work over the last decade or so. It filled thesis and course

requirements, but as an exhibition it failed to represent Kennedy's themes very fully: whole bodies of work were there in précis form. Simone Kennedy's oeuvre is worth exhibiting in full—because it is puzzling and compelling and unusually various despite a fairly tight focus (on mother-daughter relations, the self and the body, disgust and beauty), but this was not that showing.

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Artist **Nazia Ejaz** showed a suite of works under the title, **Jaali/Screen**, at the Bob Hawke Gallery through the first half of July. It is a hard gallery to look good in, but her work did, and a hard space to command or unify, though, again, Ejaz did this. It was partly evidentiary photography: photographs of people displaced, impoverished, out of work, ghettoised. The exhibition consisted of 'veils' and screens, in many forms, that hid, or shielded us from recognizing these people: the 'Veils' and screens themselves were beautifully made and represented an Eastern (Indo/Moorish) architectural element that is a staple of old, romanticising notions of the middle east, of orientalism even. Ejaz's work employed the motif and the metaphor both decoratively and ironically to suggest elided knowledge, a bracketing-out of uncomfortable information. But the artist's statement for the exhibition says this succinctly, stating an interest *"in the binaries that act as filters and permeate multiple levels of our social perceptions and interactions."* Ejaz is influenced, she says, as we all are, *"by a complex system of an unconsciously acquired bias, manipulated by historical, cultural and ethnic affiliations, economics and media. In a desire to belong to a group we tend to distance ourselves from the 'other' while our response to that which is different defines who we are."* Further, the word *Jaali* has a dual meaning. *"While it literally means 'fine web', it also implies something that is 'counterfeit' or 'fake'. The interconnected and symmetrical structure of the screen creates awareness of a space beyond the gaze but obstructs it at the same time. The interplay of darkness and light de-centres conventional forms of seeing, looking and representing."* The exhibition was very well executed so as to exhibit the posited, evidential images—these playing to conventional sentiment. It also functioned to enact the screening that divides and occludes and makes 'other'.

**Jaali/Screen's** strongest suit was this last: the dual-functioning of the screen. The screening took different forms, was beautiful and 'mysterious' etcetera, and slightly disorientating. The photographic images themselves, of a documentary and journalistic character, had some power, but—a problem for any artist—such photos are a regular constituent of information-heavy, expository or history-telling visual displays, rendering them almost too conventional now to be considered a 'device'.

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Dadang Christanto's **1965**—at the Experimental Art Foundation through October—was headed by three performances on the opening night (and thereafter on screen within the gallery for the duration) while the gallery housed a long building made of discarded cardboard. Christanto's art has centered around the 1965 massacre of communists in Indonesia. Figures used to cite 1.5 million, or more. They have been progressively estimated downwards over time. One wonders how reliably. A half million is the current figure. The PKI had been the biggest communist party in the world at the time. The massacre was a firm step to the right and an oppressive move, tolerated and abetted by the West because it represented one domino that thenceforth would seem unlikely to fall. Indonesia is pleased not to deal with the issue of these killings and this suppression. Christanto speaks and acts to reinscribe the victims' number and their wrong within current consciousness. The performances relive the terror and suffering experienced then and in the wake of those events. Christanto regularly performs them.

The climactic performance had audiences throw small flour bombs the artist had made for the purpose. The artist sat at the foot of the gallery wall and the flour gradually transformed him into a greying, white, ghostly presence. The audience were placed in the position of being a firing squad. (The performance intended the process to enact the ostracism and occlusion of anyone associated with the victims—designed to render them suspect and hence permanently under threat and to mean their story could never be expressed: they must remain a-problem-to-hard-to-deal-with, a shame for the nation.) A significant element of this performance on the night was the interplay between artist and audience. The latter were very unwilling to detract from the artist's dignity. One of their number at some point broke ranks and went and lay beside him in solidarity. The process of expending all the flour bombs took a long time and the performance was very moving, creating a huge bond of sympathy between artist and crowd and tending, over time, to detach the meanings from the actors so that they were 'in the air', clearly understood by all participants no longer thinking of themselves uncomfortably as murderers but as assistants of Christanto's.

The cardboard building is effectively a tunnel and suggests a mausoleum—but also torture and killing, perhaps a hideout. It is filled with quick portraits of 'all' the dead—on cardboard scraps. The compromised medium and the impossibility of ever finally portraying all the un-named and unspoken-of dead are both intended factors here. The tunnel has an eerie feeling: an aftermath to something dreadful.

#

As part of *Tarnanthi* CACSA featured artists **Fiona Foley**, **Jason Wing** and **Brad Harkin**. Fiona Foley showed two works, one, *'Biting The Cloud'*, used the finely made letters of the phrase 'Black Velvet': separate standing metal letters in a classic font like Times Roman or Bembo. A metre or so high, all capitals.

The unlovely phrase 'black velvet', a reference—as with a knowing connoisseur's relish—to indigenous women as objects of white sexual exploitation and fantasy, is probably well-enough known. I haven't heard it in a long, long while—but its implied snicker means one grasps its meaning on first hearing and feels ashamed for doing so. (Have I ever heard it in my life? or perhaps only read it?) The lettering suggests glamour and status, perhaps the official status of legal documents. They stood upright in two rows in the CACSA end room. The 'B' of "black" given a darker, 'velvety' surface. Maybe the lettering is also reminiscent of some stocking or perfume lettering—luxury products. It is a great gesture, to simply give the words back—"Here is your phrase"—and posit it within the gallery system and society-endorsed (high) culture where it can stick in the craw. A second part of *'Biting The Cloud'* was a staged photo of the artist as a teenage girl, wrists tied together, made face a tall, dead tree, a school chair beside. It presents her as vulnerable—to ostracism, but also sexual abuse. The tree is cruelly gothic as a sign or symbol against the green of the bush behind—sharp, harsh, graphic.

The second work, *'Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom'*, was a bank of photographs of opium poppies: close-ups, and more distant shots of them with hills and sky in the distance behind. The blooms were pale pink and white. They are a pretty enough flower. The photographs were compositionally simple and avoided picturesque conventions of composition, as either flower-pieces or landscapes. Documentary then. What they pertain to is the supply of opium to indigenous populations in Northern Queensland, to subdue and enslave. It is something I didn't know about. And maybe it is not very well known. It is shameful and situates settler Australia more centrally in the colonial mold of positive exploitation, as well as theft and misappropriation.

Both pieces do useful political work then by obtruding this information into the white public gaze.

A great deal of art gets made in the manner of the opium piece. There is something dully null and inert about art that works this way. The method derives from the school project, I think. And art schools must allow it if not exactly encourage it: there are so many worthy themes that art has to deal with, right? Anyway, the stylistic method is effectively to divide form from content. The form will be something visual, posited—almost like a fascinator—on the wall and effectively lit. The content will be on the information panel somewhere discreetly nearby. The fascinator is simply a visual tag to announce or cue the theme. It doesn't possess any leverage over it, is unable to

offer it or inflect it in any particular way. It is assumed that our reaction (upon clicking the theme or subject) will be to rehearse to ourselves responses already inculcated and the opinions that go with them. Occasionally such work will tell you something new—as these photos did with me. I didn't know about opium used this way in Australia: but the photos didn't tell me about it, it was the information panel. The 'visual' component is something like a buoy, a marker, that alerts us to the information panel's presence.

One could do away with the object altogether, and simply have the gallery attendant cough politely and indicate, with a slow nod of the head, the information panel. A slight gesture from the arm perhaps, but subtle. (Some attendants don't know when to stop. And such a one might add, *Think of that, or Think about it!*) This would be a *ne plus ultra* of Post-object art.

**Jason Wing** displayed a constellation of manacles, made beautiful in the manner of *objets d'art*. One senses quickly that these will have been applied to humans and are part of white Australia's history of abuse, alienation, murder of Indigenous Australians. These works I think attempt to claim worth with the added ballast of their being well-made, or labour-intensive as craft-objects: beautiful, intricate, requiring a degree of skill. But this does not affect their status as art: they remain dead in the water: objects intended to advert to a content or a subject-area. Like a road sign. (Attendant indicates road sign—and you say, in your docile way, Ooh, slippery when wet. I see.) Fiona Foley has done terrific stuff in the past and will continue to, is probably making something terrific right now, but these were a little under par. Jason Wing's pieces similarly.

Brad Harkin's work—***Palm Valley***—in CACSA Project Space performed similarly to Foley and Wing's except that the 'fascinator' aspect was genuinely interesting in itself and suggestive *about* its subject, Palm Valley, as a distant locale and a specific eco-environment—but more importantly as an instance of indigenous knowledge and its reach and its own endangerment. There were two sculptural representations of the valley (about 30 cms square, both): one in glass, a computer modeling of the rise and fall off terrain, lit from behind so as to glow in a jewel-like way and to invite the viewer's curiosity as to its detail, how intricately it was made, the exact medium etc. The other piece may have been the same or similar modeling, but in this case not mounted on the wall but atop a plinth. It was black and seemed liquid and shiny as though it may have been oil or hot tar. Lit from above it was also made jiggle and tremor just slightly by the amplified sound of the soundtrack beneath it (an account of the location I think). Their physical form had both appear as wondrous and mysterious.

The valley was the site of an endangered species of palm whose origin always puzzled the white community who had ignored indigenous memories. The latter had become quite attenuated

themselves—influenced and suppressed as they were by the European Mission authority. DNA comparisons now make it clear that the tree was brought a thousand kilometres or so southwards some 15 to 30 thousand years ago, as indigenous accounts had stated.

#

FELT Space, over most of October, showed Roberta Rich—*I'm Cornered*—and Rhiannon Jones—*Unviewable Acts in Space*. Small, not outrageously ambitious, but doing the job. Rich's themes in some respects dovetailed with those of Nazia Ejaz: *I'm Cornered* consisted of a videoed mock interview—almost an interrogation—of an unseen other, in whose place the viewer stands. The speaker unpacks the extensive number of issues and 'positions' that stem from the colour and race classifications of apartheid. If, white as I might be, I am classified as 'coloured' does that mean I should adopt only 'coloured' culture and history as my own? Does the same apply for a 'white' person? What assumptions about being the norm, a simple free-booting subject, flow from being classified either way? What assumptions do you make about yourself, about an other? Why are these distinctions made, and made real, to what good end? Do not projections placed upon another work a reciprocal, delimiting effect upon the person projecting? Do the projections not divide and render the one invisible to the other? If they remove rights for one do they establish them for another? A transcript of the interview was available.

Rhiannon Jones used the smaller back room at FELT to run three interesting formal experiments with—or formal play with—a few simple, related materials: pins, paperclips, spooled thread. They were witty and good to look at. At the ingenuity level they might remind Adelaide viewers of work by Tim Sterling. A curled and self-communing fat snake of paperclips (curled upon itself as if protectively) was especially intriguing. The clips radiated from some long central line or core, but bulked out from it to give the curled form a great deal of 'body'.

## **TARNANTHI FESTIVAL OF CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ART**

*The Tarnanthi Festival* exhibitions are on at various venues around town. I don't know why anyone would allow themselves to miss it. The Art Gallery of South Australia has handled indigenous art well many times before: director of this festival, Nici Cumpston must surely be one of the more knowledgeable and experienced curators in this field. And it is a major event: how can you count on its being repeated on such a scale at all soon? Everyone should see it.

Much of *Tarnanthi* is beyond my competence to say a great deal about. At a design level almost everything in the AGSA's *Tarnanthi* looks terrific. Where 'design' is the intention and aim these works are all very good. Most of it also has ambitions as 'art'. I realize this distinction is a Western one, and no longer a popular one. In any case the work also seemed strong measured against such criteria. Any artist working in the abstract mode would be crazy not to see this work. We are used to the confidence and forthright handling—'deposition' almost—of colours and the material medium of the paint. This work has it in spades. I'm not always bowled over by such work: it can sometimes strike me as very *merely* decorative and rather 'day-glo beach towel', but the AGSA *Tarnanthi* work is way beyond that. The Spinifex project paintings, for example—done collaboratively—were interesting: it seemed as though they were made by combinations of around half a dozen artists, each working from their spot around the canvas—and yet the works cohere and are made more interesting, probably, by the amount of struggle and adjustment needed to bring them off.

Much work was keyed to the more earthen colours associated with traditional aboriginal art, and it, too, seemed terrific: Nyapanyapa Yunupingu being a case in point: '*Ceremony at Dhaniya*' and the hollowed tree trunk, decorated with a similar interlaced white, '*Larakiti*'. The large '*Yolngk retjangura (People in the jungle)*' is a fabulous pattern, but generated by a process of mapping genealogy. Mavis Ngallametta, Makinti Napanangka were two others whose work I liked a lot. Alair Pambegan's pieces had the kind of firm authority that I associate with Leger. Well, they had something of his 'look'. But bigger, more expansive—rather 'Birth-of-the-Cool', in fact.

The whole top floor of the new wing was devoted to Yvonne Koolmatrie's woven objects. Largely fish traps, but also some large groper-looking fish, and an antique aeroplane and hot-air balloons as well. This work was great. The fish and traps are hung at around head height, some above, some a little lower, so that the viewer feels immersed in the marine world. The textured surface of the woven objects begs the eye to slow down and the slow attention is an intimation of the concentration and connection (between hand and eye, memory and observation?) possessed and exercised by the artist in the making process. I thought this particularly when looking at her woven turtles, platypus and echidna. This slow and careful observation, an intimate familiarity and attention, is unfailingly one of the pleasures her work delivers and why people spend so much time with it. (Koolmatrie says on one of the films shown of her talking, that she is keeping these techniques alive for others to re-possess and take up. The skills had begun to disappear when the Missions removed the need for these items and people began to confine themselves to quickly made small items for the tourist trade.)

I liked Vincent Namatjira's paintings of family and friends: a country-and-western singer with guitar in hand and Hank Williams before him—'*Johnny Pompey playing guitar*'— and, cigarette in hand, Johnny Pompey looking purposeful in profile portrayed next to the artist face on—'*Jimmy Pompey portrait; Vincent Namatjira portrait*'. Douglas Watkin's animated movie about his father and mother courting in the context of the queen's arrival in Cairns long ago. The humour is great and very understated. The queen is kept in correct, small proportion within the narrative, a background circumstance. James Tylor's small daguerreotype series, offering metaphors for the aggressive intrusion of the Europeans into not just aboriginal society but also the biosphere, were affecting and memorable. Some of the Tangentyere artists were especially good. A bank of their pictures done to the same format and high colour range and inspired by 'selfies': portraits of people in and around the town, shopping, standing. Talking etc. Sally M. Mulda showed some great examples, one being 'Inside Piggly Piggly' (the name, I am guessing, of a store), but also Joanne Wheeler '*This is me standing in front of my painting of Hermannsburg*', Rohanda Napanangka's '*Elizabeth and Rhonda shopping*'. Yhonnie Scarce showed a hanging glass cloud of 'acid and irradiated rain', a reference to the Maralinga tests' fallout. It looked elegant and sinister.

Ngarra's work was very interesting and a strangely discrete, individualised body of work, probably something of an anomaly and an enigma. The footy players (Josie Kunothe Petyarre's paintings of the footy field spectacle, for example, and Dinni Kunothe Kemarre's sculptures) and the painted summer skirts—made by the Ngurratjuta Iltja Ntjarra artists in celebration of Albert Namatjira—were wonderful.

The big open space around the stairwell in the gallery is often given over to indigenous work: at the moment it is, of course, and it has a painting '*Notes to Basquiat*' by Gordon Bennett and a fantastically dense work by Trevor Nicholls, both of which I liked. Downstairs, leading into the exhibition—but perhaps from the permanent collection?—were three quasi-street art pieces, good, too, by Reko Rennie, one of which ('*Genesis 1*') had gained by quoting a style Gordon Bennett had himself taken up and made great use of—the sort of dated conventional educational illustrations showing Australian colonial relations with the indigenous people that might once have lived in text books. Maybe derived, in his case, also from Peter Tyndall: the same flat, 'instructional' communication. Tyndall and Bennett would have found its unemphatic clarity amusing to reproduce satirically. (Something like the visual equivalent of British-Australian voice-overs to newsreels and documentaries in the fifties and early sixties.) Bennett used it sometimes 'in quotes', at other times with enraged cool to posit something horrific or unjust. Both. And here it is again: I guess it is a lingua franca. James Dodd, too, works with some of that look and with the street-art colours as well. Reko Rennie's titles—'*Genesis 1, 2 and 3*'—indicate a myth of

foundation or origin, not an origin of the world but of white Australia: the introduction of fencing, property, theft of land etcetera. The middle picture consists of the words tagged : "I Was Always Here". So, an origin myth with a denial written in.

The 'Desert Salon' section had interesting work: Makinti Napanangka's '*Two travelling women at Lupulnga*' was almost ecstatic. Western painting is so drawn to the agonistic, with perhaps some calm and serenity at its other, less visited pole. (Klee, Matisse, Bonnard, Ben Nicholson, the anaesthetized calm of Agnes Martin.) We are marked by this preference for the darker work: Motherwell's '*Elegies*' were always going to be thought more important than Jules Olitski, to say nothing of Pollock's *sturm und drang*. Though in some phases Pollock does attain to a kind of restless euphoria. Napanangka's work seems totally 'in the moment' and untroubled. (Paul Hoban might tap some of the same hedonism, but inflected by a commitment to the mischievously puzzling.) Pepai Jangala Carroll's beautifully coloured works were also striking. Still, I wonder if less is always more: couldn't Carroll's work stand a little more going on, some further tension, another element brought into play? (The urban and 'contemporary' work in ***Tarnanthi*** mostly partakes of the West's preoccupation with tragedy, trouble, injustice: but then, how could this not be so? Within the 'urban-and-contemporary' it is balanced by artists affecting a kind of Pop insouciance, even fecklessness—a strategy, where it is not direct expression. Viz., Kevin Namatjira, the 'selfies' from the Tangentyere artists. In Trevor Nicholls it is almost fatalistic and a kind of sarcasm, but at another level simply a 'democratic' visual language.) Near to '*Two travelling women*' was another work with visual staying power, Lily Nungarrayi Hargraves' '*Turkey dreaming*'.

***Tarnanthi*** is too big for me to deal with here. Mentioning those I liked serves only to remind the reader of what he or she had liked. And making criticisms might be thought impertinent—an outsider's view of another culture—though from some artists' point of view *all* criticism is impertinent I think. So far I have looked only at AGSA and CACSA's exhibitions. Tandanya is another major site and there are other satellite shows. I won't get to them before 'going to press'.