

Richard Grayson - *A Diary, A History, A Walk Up The Hill*; EAF September 12 – October 12, 2002

by Ken Bolton

The return of the former director to the EAF (also the director of Sydney's most recent Biennale) was a characteristically casual yet canny set, a trio of video installations. These were variations on the idea of narrative. Taking them in the order of their naming—which was also the sequence the viewer met in the gallery space—one met first the spinning of a narrative of association, anomie and sustained reflexive thinking: a brain left in New York, to look at the blank wall, the mysterious corner of the studio, never examined close up, and the thoughts these give rise to—and thence to voyage out: a journal of typical New York activity, gallery trips, the capsule biographies of people he meets etc.

Endlessly proliferating, in principle, and its principle is its point—a story with the sound of its own making. Voice over does the telling. A video of still details, stared at sightlessly and forgotten, anchors or tethers the voice—or fails to do so. It was an interesting work.

The ingenious second stage of the exhibition, 'A History', has no voice over. And so the visual is all. Well, not all, but it *is* riveting. Grayson takes the books left by others in the Australia Council's New York Studio, together with those brought by him, and lines them up on the floor, standing, in a sequence that attempts to run connections between them (based on titles, association, contrast, 'connection' of any kind). The camera moves inches above the floor towards each lurid, evocative, romantic, problematic or studious title and image until—bump!—the book is knocked down.

Automatically the camera focus homes in on the next book a foot or so away. And, inexorably, moves toward it. As a history or document it is amusingly suggestive. Whose books are they? What do they indicate? About whom? (What were the readers expecting?)

What kind of self-improvement, knowledge or entertainment did they expect? What did they find? Did they read them, finally? Why are they abandoned?) Is it a *fictional* mind they portray or a *collective* mind, the 'art' world's? The film is oddly monumental and mock-sombre, sort of noir-ish—and stirring.

Thirdly, 'A Walk Up The Hill' uses hand-held camera on a walk through Australian bush. A kind of narrative in itself—counterposed with the puffing Grayson narrator, rabbiting on, effortfully yet garrulously, and delivering another narrative—of the classical, ancient, Mediterranean—a description of imagined utopias.

Of course these narrated commentaries were extensions—projections, idealizations—of known, actual landscapes. Do they fit Australia (itself at various times an imagined antipodean utopia)?

All in all these were three easy pieces—three narratives and three 'worlds': the first, New York, is colloquial, discursive; the second made of the (melo)drama of monumentally projected book covers—and their conceptual baggage; the third, a divided one of Australian bush and interposed commentary, is offered slightly more (or slightly more openly) as a proposition: around 'Australia', 'antipodes', 'Old World', the pastoral. But all three act out category, make the viewer naturally employ them, the third more sharply.