

Imagine...the creativity shaping our culture

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Heide Gallery Venue Heide III Central Galleries
Curator Zara Stanhope, Deputy Director, Senior Curator

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

Imagine... the creativity shaping our culture presents a range of contemporary art practices in Australia today and the culture artists are creating.

Exciting new work by ten artists from across Australia provides insights into a cross-section of art practices and media.

Artists: Chris Barry, Vera Möller, Arlo Mountford, Garry Namponan, Lizzy Newman, Michelle Nikou, David Palliser, Stelarc, Lucia Usmiani and Roderick Yunkaporta.

The artists have been selected for the contribution their practice is, or will be seen to make, to Australian art. The works of *Imagine...* provide access to a wide range and scope of ideas, media and methodologies in contemporary art today. Public programs accompanying the exhibition will offer audiences further interaction with these artists and access to their work and ideas.

Internationally renowned artist **Stelarc** premieres his *Muscle Machine*, the largest walking robot in the country, and two new works that further his questioning of notions of being, and our understanding of the boundaries of the human body and mind. The new projects, *Partial Head* (a face grown with living cells over a part human, part hominid skull shaped frame) and a new robotic work that reacts to the audience, can be seen to engage with current aesthetic, social and scientific issues concerning the physical being and the ramifications of our ability to control consciousness and intelligence.

Chris Barry, a Melbourne photographer, presents images of young people in Alice Springs, Central Australia. Her images rest uneasily between the documentary and the aesthetic, and are potent with the issues that lie at the heart of our struggle to define personal, local and national identity.

Garry Namponan and **Roderick Yunkaporta** are artists from Aurukun, a small remote Indigenous community situated on the north west tip of Cape York Peninsula, embracing the Wik and Kugu communities. Artists of this region, including Namponan and Yunkaporta, are aware of the long local tradition of carving and fibre art, and blend this heritage with contemporary influences and technology.

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Darkrooming, the installation of German born, Melbourne-based artist **Vera Möller**, is a mock natural science laboratory store, overrun with collections of sculptural organisms. An optically dazzling cabinet of 'organic' curiosities, *darkrooming* is the latest development in Möller's ongoing enquiry into the operation of the natural world and its implications for meaning in our contemporary environment.

South Australian **Michelle Nikou**'s intimate objects are modest and uncanny, and contravene the aesthetic conventions of traditional sculpture. Employing and transforming forms close to hand in the domestic realm, her resulting objects have a psychic potency, stimulating the viewer's imagination as to their interior lives. Nikou's new work includes bronze casting and silver jewellery.

The installations of Melbourne artist **Lizzy Newman** address their site and its inhabitants. Newman creates work with simple means; familiar materials and found objects with powerful metaphoric potential. Her work questions the nature of art and asserts the power of creativity to offer meaning and freedom for the individual.

An investigation of the nature of painting today is at the heart of **David Palliser**'s work. His works on paper and paintings are excitingly open-ended. As a practice, Palliser's art functions as a continuous research project, rather than being defined by the production of predetermined images. Colour, mark-making, illusionism and their conjunctions are all aspects of painting explored by this artist and awaiting discovery by the viewer.

Based in Hobart, artist **Lucia Usmiani** uses recycled materials to create two and three dimensional works that bring out the inherent beauty, as well as excess, of consumerism. Usmiani crosses the divide between the realms of art and craft. She undertakes her work as if she is a production line, fastidiously collecting and cleaning objects generally classified as rubbish, which are then fragmented and combined into larger and sensually patterned works. Usmiani's work will extend beyond the galleries with a site-specific installation in Heide's Connie Kimberley Sculpture Park.

Often both macabre and humorous, animated moving image works by Melbourne artist **Arlo Mountford** are perceptive responses to popular culture, the canon of art history, and the 'condition of the individual'. Mountford's work for *Imagine...* employs his characteristic abstracted figures in a narrative that rewrites twentieth-century art history (and Heide's place within it) according to the artist's personal interests.

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Number of works and type

- 44 works or bodies of work
- Includes painting, photography, animated moving image, sculpture, installation, robotics, living tissue and jewellery
- Largest walking robot in Australia (Stelarc, Muscle Machine 2003)
- Arlo Mountford's *The Wanderer Meets The Pioneer* 2006 draws on the history of Heide, John and Sunday Reed and modern artists represented at the Museum

Artist Biography: Chris Barry

Born Melbourne; lives and works in Melbourne

- 2002-06 Doctor of Philosophy (Candidate), Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne
- 1995-97 Master of Fine Art (Research), Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne
- 1989-90 Graduate Diploma in Fine Art, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne
- 1983-85 Diploma of Photography, Photography Studies College, Melbourne

Exhibited in group and solo exhibitions since 1988 primarily in Australia. A larger group of the work in *Imagine* seen at *Encountering Culture: A Dialogue*, Margaret Lawrence Galleries at VCA, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne and The Araluen Centre for Arts and Entertainment, Alice Springs, 2006

Artist Biography: Vera Möller

Born Bremen, Germany 1955; arrived Australia 1986; lives and works in Melbourne

- 2003-06 Doctor of Philosophy, Monash University, Melbourne
- 1995-98 Master of Fine Arts, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne
- 1993-94 Postgraduate Diploma, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne

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- 1990-92 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne
- 1983 Bachelor of Education, University of Munich, Germany
- 1979-83 Microbiology Studies, Munich Technical University, Germany
Theology Studies, University of Munich, Germany
Biology Studies, University of Würzburg and University of Munich, Germany

Performances and exhibitions in Australia and internationally since 1995, including Cicely and Colin Rigg Contemporary Design Award, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award, Werribee Park, Victoria, 2003

Artist Biography: Arlo Mountford

Born United Kingdom 1978; arrived Australia 1983; lives and works in Melbourne

- 2002 Bachelor of Fine Art (Sculpture), Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne
- 1998 Diploma of Fine Art, Western Australian College of Art, Design and Multimedia, Perth

Solo exhibitions at artist run spaces in Melbourne and group exhibitions in Australia since 2001, most recently 21st Century Modern, 2006 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2006

Artist Biography: Gary Namponan

Born Aurukun Mission, Cape York 1960; lives and works in Aurukun and Cape Keerweer

Garry Namponan is a member of the Wik-Alkan and the Wik-Ngathan language groups and his clan is Apelech. His father's country is south of Aurukun in the Cape Keerweer region, and his mother's country is near Aak on the Kirke River estuary. He was taught to carve and paint by his father, Angus Namponan (1930–1994), a well known artist from the region. Garry Namponan also studied art at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory. Significant exhibitions which included his work are

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Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003 and
Native Title Business: Contemporary Indigenous Art, national touring exhibition, 2002-05

Artist Biography: Lizzy Newman

Born Melbourne 1962; lives and works in Melbourne

- 1984 Postgraduate Diploma (Painting), Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne
1983 Bachelor of Fine Art, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne

Exhibited in group and solo exhibitions in Australia since 1985 in commercial, public and university galleries and artist run spaces, most recently *21st Century Modern*, 2006 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2006

Artist Biography: Michelle Nikou

Born Adelaide 1967; lives and works in Adelaide

- 2005 Master of Visual Arts, South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia, Adelaide
1990 Graduate Diploma of Arts (Visual Arts), South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia, Adelaide
1989 Bachelor of Design (Ceramics), South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia, Adelaide

Exhibited in group exhibitions since 1990 and solo exhibitions at Darren Knight Gallery, Melbourne since 1998 and Greenaway Gallery, Adelaide since 1993

Artist Biography: David Palliser

Born Melbourne 1960; lives and works in Melbourne

- 1982 Post Graduate Diploma of Fine Art (Painting), Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne

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1978-80 Bachelor of Fine Art (Painting), Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne

Primarily exhibited in Melbourne, in group exhibitions since 1988 and solo exhibitions at Michael Wardle Gallery and recently Crossley & Scott Gallery

Artist Biography: Stelarc

Born Limassol, Cyprus 1946; arrived Australia 1950; lives and works in Melbourne

2004-06 New Media Arts Fellowship, Australia Council for the Arts
1971 CAD/CAM Course (ANAT), Advanced Technology Education Centre, Regency College, Adelaide
1968 Trained Secondary Teachers Certificate (TSTC), Caulfield Technical Institute, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and University of Melbourne

Stelarc has participated in exhibitions and performances since the late 1970s. His projects have included body suspensions, filming inside the body, *Third Hand projects*, activation of the body through robots and remote interfaces including the internet, motion prostheses and the *Prosthetic Head*, ¼ scale ear and walking robots

Artist Biography: Lucia Usmiani

Born Adelaide 1960; lives and works in Hobart, Tasmania

2006 Current Doctor of Philosophy, Hobart School of Art, University of Tasmania School of Art, Hobart
2001 Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours), University of Tasmania School of Art, Hobart
2000 Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Tasmania School of Art, Hobart

Exhibited in group exhibitions in Hobart and has had a solo exhibition at Inflight Gallery, Hobart in 2005

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Artist Biography: Ron Yunkaporta

Born Aurukun Mission, Cape York 1956; lives and works in Aurukun

Ron Yunkaporta is an Elder and custodian for the Wik-Ngathan language group and is a senior member of the Apelech ceremonial group. His father's country is south of Aurukun near Aak on the Kirke River estuary, and his mother's country is in the Cape Keerweer region. The Yunkaporta family has had a long history of carving ceremonial objects. Ron Yunkaporta has also worked as a senior ranger, travelling throughout the Cape York region, and is now a full-time police officer in the Aurukun community.

Yunkaporta's work was included in 2003 *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003

Significance in Heide's program and program rationale

- Demonstrates emphasis on research, innovative thinking and cutting edge practice in accord with Heide's program rationale
- The accompanying publication with commissioned essays contributes to research and academic and public knowledge in Australian contemporary art, as well providing a document of the exhibition and artists' practices.
- Assists artists in producing and presenting new work
- Introduces Heide audiences to current contemporary art practices and brings a new audience to Heide
- Provides program content for education and public program audiences

Sources of further information

Exhibition catalogue, illustrated and with foreword by Zara Stanhope and essays on each artist, as well as selected biographies.

Arlo Mountford

Unsigned Artists 2003, exh. cat., Niagara Publishing, Melbourne, 2003

Charlotte Day, *A Short Ride in a Fast Machine: Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces 1985 – 2005*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2005

Vikki McInnes, 'Arlo Mountford's Recent Work', *un magazine*, issue 4, 2005, p.5

Vera Möller

Natasha Bullock, 'Artlab', *labland*, exh. cat., Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 2002

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Zara Stanhope, *Good Vibrations: the legacy of Op art in Australia*, exh. cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2002

Garry Namponan

Sarah Stutchbury, 'Garry Namponan', *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, p. 78

Peter Sutton, 'Sacred images and political engagements', *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, pp. 54-59

Lizzy Newman

Lizzy Newman, *Work 2001 – 2005*, exh. cat., self published, 2005

David Pistorius (ed.), *Monochromes*, exh. cat., University Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 2000

David Pistorius (ed.), *Geometric Painting in Australia 1941 – 1997*, exh. cat., University Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 1997

Zara Stanhope, 'SOUL...., an exhibition by Lizzy Newman', *un magazine*, issue 1, 2004, p. 14

Michelle Nikou

Ken Bolton, *Michelle Nikou*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, South Australia, 2005

Deborah Hart, 'Home Sweet Home: an artist-collector's passion', *Home Sweet Home: Works from the Peter Fay collection*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Australia, Thames and Hudson, Canberra, 2004, pp. 5, 16

Michael Newell, 'Michelle Nikou: Two Spoons', *Broadsheet*, vol. 30, no. 1, March 2001, p. 12

David Palliser

Nevill Drury, *Images 2: Contemporary Australian painting*, Craftsman House, Roseville, New South Wales, 1994, pp. 72, 89

Nevill Drury (ed.), *New Art Three*, Craftsman House, Roseville, New South Wales, 1989, pp. 148-151

Stelarc

Marquard Smith (ed.), *Stelarc*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2005

Alternate Interfaces, Stelarc, Faculty of Design, Monash University, 2002

Lucia Usmiani

Daniel Thomas, 'Ten Days on the Island 2005: The exhibition round-up', *Art Monthly*, no. 179, May 2005

Philip Watkins, 'Group Material', *Artlink*, vol. 24, no. 2, June 2004, pp. 84-85

Philip Watkins, 'Pattern as Subject', *Artlink*, vol. 22, no. 2, June 2002, pp. 90-91



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Ron Yunkaporta

Tony Albert, 'Ron Yunkaporta', *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, p. 81

Peter Sutton, 'Sacred images and political engagements', *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, pp. 54-59

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ARTISTS IN DETAIL

Arlo Mountford

Overview

The animated moving image works by Arlo Mountford are often both violent and humorous. They present simple yet insightful responses to popular culture, art history and the role of the artist. Mountford explores the complicated position of the artist in the art industry. Contemporary artists must constantly find new ways of dealing with the burdens of art history and cultural heritage. He or she must also learn to cope with the expectations of peers, not to mention the fears of his or her own failure. Mountford responds to these themes again at Heide in a new animation, *The Wanderer Meets The Pioneer* (2006), which is based on narratives from the Museum's own history.

Mountford presents his own view of Australian art history from a contemporary perspective. In his animations, characters are visually represented as stick figures, reminiscent of those in early interactive computer games. These characters go in search of themselves by embarking on complicated journeys, moving through strange environments that are impossible to escape. They travel in pairs or small groups where members might either support or obstruct each other during their quest. This is Mountford's way of investigating the conjunction of art and life and the similarity between fact and fiction.

Materials and Techniques

Mountford intentionally employs a cartoon-like style of animation, reminiscent of early computer graphics rather than the latest, more realistic, digital imagery. His clichéd stick figures bring to mind the technology of the early to mid 1960s, where a violent blow was often represented by a simple cross above a character's head and a figure placed horizontally stood for a character that had been killed. Contemporary computer game environments, on the other hand, have become more realistic than ever before, with the line between reality and virtual reality increasingly blurred. Mountford argues against this need for realistic detail in order to sustain the viewer's interest or belief. He continues to use simplified imagery in order to convey a compelling personal narrative. Well known artists and extreme personalities, such as Andy Warhol and the English punk rocker Sid Vicious, often feature as characters in his short films.

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Influences

Science fiction literature has made a strong impression on Mountford. The desert island that appears in *The Wanderer Meets The Pioneer*, for example, recalls scenes in *The Terminal Beach* by J.G. Ballard. Ballard's novel is about a man who is grieving the loss of his wife and son and finds himself on an abandoned island where nuclear weapons were once tested. He tries to find his way home, passing through the maze-like rubble of crumbled concrete buildings, but when he starts to see visions of his wife and child, he begins to lose his mind. Such emphasis on the lost and isolated individual, especially in the modern technological age, is also shared by Mountford.

Interpretive framework – Symbolism

In works such as *The Wanderer Meets The Pioneer*, Mountford borrows familiar images with a range of references. The towel the female figure sunbathes upon, for instance, is not only a replica American flag but is also the image the artist Jasper Johns painted for the National Vietnam Moratorium (an organised protest against war in South East Asia). Johns chose to paint a flag poisoned by war and rebellion, with stripes of black and jungle camouflage green and a white dot in the middle representing a bullet hole. Using this image, Mountford pays respect to an earlier artist but at the same time reflects on Australia's current participation in international military conflicts. He uses symbolism to refer to specific moments in art history whilst considering broader questions about truth and deception.



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Discussion Questions

1. Briefly describe the narrative presented in Mountford's animation using the following as a guide:

Name of artwork _____

Beginning

Middle

End

2. Name the characters connected to Heide's past that appear in Mountford's animation.
3. Describe the unique way in which the curator has displayed the work and make suggestions as to why it has been presented in this way.
4. Choose a familiar image from art history employed by Mountford. Why has he chosen to use this image? Is this a form of appropriation? Explain your answer.



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Chris Barry

Overview

During 2005, Chris Barry, an artist of Polish parentage, worked on a body of photographs that evolved from the relationships she established with Aboriginal families in Alice Springs. At Heide, a selection of photographs from her series, *Encountering Culture: A Dialogue* 2006 depicts young indigenous Australians willing to work with Barry and be photographed in a location of their choice. Barry's photographs focus on cultural relationships, identity and sense of selfhood. She explores the relationship between her subjects and their environments, and looks at the different ways in which black and white Australia are represented.

The nature and representation of Australian identity along with its associated politics and issues have been of great concern to Barry in her photographic work since the early 1980s. She reminds us that the idea of a general "Aboriginal" identity does not distinguish between specific language groups, home territories and experiences. Thus, her work focuses on individuals within specific social groups, such as Leroy Hill, Camille Rennie and Jess Farrer, who are all cousins, at the Town Pool, and other young women at Todd Mall who are related through kinship ties or marriage. Against the ordinariness of everyday settings, she depicts lived lives and complex experiences.

Barry is intrigued by the dynamics of social groups and the ways identity can be formed through relationships with others. For example, she is interested in how we read groups of girls as compared to girl gangs, formed at school, where, as noted by Karen Burns, members tend to fit into a hierarchy, obliged to keep set rules or behave in a certain way or risk peer exclusion.¹ As in life, where we may act out our own identities, Barry is interested in the way her subjects present themselves for her camera. As they direct their own performances, these young women and men, also become co-authors of the artwork. This partly 'documentary' almost anthropological approach brings new meaning to art photography.

¹ Karen Burns, 'Towards proximity: Chris Barry's series *Encountering Culture: A Dialogue*', *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.



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Materials and Techniques

Every summer since 1993, Barry has returned to Central Australia to set up a studio for ten weeks from December to March. She describes her physical and emotional experience of travelling:

‘My journeying and photographing of Alice Springs, Central Australia, becomes other to what I or we know. It continues along the historic [path] of the centre/edge experience’.²

During her travels, Barry accumulates volumes of journal entries, transcripts of interviews and visual representations. Collecting and archiving information, items and experiences is extremely important because it allows Barry to make links between objects and events, to form a large web of connections that provides a context for her photographs. It is from massive collections of writing, artefacts and images that the content for *Town Pool* and *Todd Mall* was drawn.

Barry uses a large format camera to photograph her subjects. Such a large physical object has an invasive presence that emphasises the situation and conditions surrounding the event to all those involved. It also reminds us of the ways in which images and identities are produced and circulated in public life. Barry is considering the use of recorded sound to accompany her works in the future.

Influences

Barry is compelled to keep returning to Alice Springs partly because she connects with the tales of displacement, survival, adaptation within an indigenous culture in relation to trauma experienced by her own family. At seventeen, Barry’s father, Piotr Marczak was sent to Germany from Poland during World War II as a forced labourer. Later, both parents arrived in Australia as refugees, officially named ‘displaced persons’. In Australia they experienced many

² Chris Barry, speaking about her exhibition *Out of Place*, at Griffith University Queensland College of Art Gallery at South Bank, April/May 1999.

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difficulties, including learning a new language and employment that involved hard physical labour. Barry speaks about the family's longing for attachment and their subsequent trips back to Poland where they found a place changed by history: 'we could only participate as observers'. In both Australia and Poland, Barry's experiences have been fraught with a sense of wanting to belong.

Interpretive frameworks – Gender/Cultural

Karen Burns compares the representation of young women in Barry's photographs to the images of young women in music video clips:

'In contrast to the familiar raunchy music video poses, I admire the way these images display young women assuming a range of expressions; alternately distracted, focussed, happy, relaxed, glaring, challenging, giggly or uncomfortable. Their changing faces capture the dynamic of personality and emotional life. Bodies touch each other in familiar, comfortable ways and also uneasily, as executed for the camera. I am impressed by the camera's point-of-view in relation to the group of women. Often we stand in the midst of their space, in proximity'.³

Barry's representations of young women resist the pull of 'raunch' culture and provide a counter balance to the familiar images of adolescent femininity that saturate the media. She further empowers her subjects by allowing them to take their own place in front of the camera where they emphasise the intimacy of human relationships and the complexity of being.

³ Karen Burns, 'Towards proximity: Chris Barry's series Encountering Culture: A Dialogue', *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.



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Discussion Questions

1. Barry plans to use recorded sound to accompany her works in the future. What recorded sound would you choose to complement the photographs in the *Imagine* exhibition?
2. In what ways do these photographs explore identity?
3. Are they documentary photographs – similar to those you would see in a National Geographic magazine? Explain your response.
4. Discuss the artist's use of colour in her practice.

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David Palliser

Overview

The paintings of David Palliser suggest the potential of painting and are left excitingly open-ended. Rather than being easily recognisable, each image represents a creative process and thus the artist is exploring the nature of contemporary painting. Palliser often speaks about the relationship between the backgrounds and the 'imagery' in his work. He attempts to resolve the tension that occurs between these two elements by working in the gap that links them. It is in this open space that forms and shapes spring into being on his picture plane.

While Palliser is preoccupied with the problem of finding resolve, his paintings are left in a state of flux or continuation. The formal aspects of painting (colour, line, texture and form) are of primary concern to him. Palliser engages the viewer by animating his compositions with tangled lines and patches of bold colour, and he invites the viewer to find an experience for themselves. Although the viewer may not be really sure what a work is communicating, Palliser certainly engages them in a process of looking.

Materials and Techniques

Pallier's studio consists of a wall layered with drawings and another wall set up for his paintings. He works on one painting at a time, usually taking the elements of a painting from one or several drawings, although some are improvised without any model at all. Palliser says his drawings are more immediate and simpler than his painted works. He describes his use of materials and techniques:

'The paintings. . . start simply from a few marks or washes, but it depends. In some of them I'll put in a wash of 'turpsy' colour to interlock things. Shapes and forms will bleed, lines will intercept. And then that often becomes a ground for working just straight up, making the picture from a raw canvas – a basis to work from. And then I'll start wiping bits back and putting other marks down – and maybe feel frustrated and go for a walk.

I'll go home, come back, and the painting slowly builds, and then I'll put something like one of those forms in somewhere and think, "Oh, that's interesting" and get carried away with

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that, and then probably scrub most of it out. There might be a fragment, an inch and a half square that stays, and it will stay for the whole picture. Then I'll move my attention over to another part and try and make some relationship between the first part and the second part, and then it doesn't work and I'll do something else. The momentum of putting stuff down is often the only way things are ever going to be resolved; to add another element to it rather than to keep chiselling away at one spot. I'll see something, some spatial thing, some quirky shape or something that is alive to me in my head, which is always just eluding me - and I try to chase this particular image, and often it will lead nowhere. But, in fact, the remnants of that stuff all come back and that's kind of. . . the picture. And then it's also the formal considerations. Well actually the whole thing is formal. . . and I also try to work to get a dynamic into the picture.⁴

Influences

Palliser plays the saxophone and listens to a lot of improvised music, finding similarities in sound and style which match his approach to painting:

‘There’s a formal resolve about something that is almost chaotic. . . a sense of progression. . . of things transforming to other things. It’s almost like sums, . . . cells of improvised music joined together. So there is a sense of spontaneity, but also of a formal join.’⁵

The apparently random use of different styles and unexpected choices of imagery carry with them an array of associations. As Peter Westwood notes, much of Palliser’s current use of imagery ‘is developed from an initial interest in Dada and carries with it the same transgressive sense of dislocation embraced by the

⁴ David Palliser interviewed by Peter Westwood at his Flinders Lane studio, Melbourne, 17 November, 2005. Cited in Peter Westwood, ‘The brain hand thing’, *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.

⁵ David Palliser, cited in Gregory P, *David Palliser*, online essay www.kalimangallery.com/web_pages/Frame_total.htm, 2001, *ibid*.

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early avant-garde through their use of collage'. Dada (1916-1920) was a movement that rejected traditional culture and aesthetics and Palliser likewise ignores traditional aesthetics and offers alternatives to what we understand and expect of imagery.

Interpretive framework – *Postmodernism*

'There's a sense of disbelief about what a painting is or what you're actually doing in the studio.'⁶

Palliser pays homage to historic legacies of painting but is deeply involved in the contemporary investigation of the nature of this medium. In working to propose alternatives to what we know about painting, he challenges traditional understandings of art and its significance. His indefinable imagery and appreciation of diverse styles refuses the notion of a single meaning located in an artwork. Instead, Palliser's paintings require the viewer to approach them in a number of ways and to remain open to possibilities of developing multiple meanings, views and visions.

Discussion Questions

1. David Palliser's work is non-representational. What does this mean? What is he painting?
2. Palliser explores the possibilities of painting through his use of formal elements including line, colour, form and movement. Discuss.
3. Choose one of Palliser's paintings to discuss his use of composition and special illusion (creating depth and shifts in perspective within the picture plane).
4. How does the painting process begin for Palliser?

⁶ David Palliser, from archival notes accompanying Palliser's works, compiled by Tom Nicholson for the John McBride Collection, Melbourne, 10 February 1998, *ibid*.



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Lizzy Newman

Overview

‘What makes art?’ Lizzy Newman explores this question by employing ordinary objects and sometimes text in site specific installations. Quite often these items and interiors, such as T-shirts and office spaces, are highly familiar, with ready associations for most viewers. However, there is a tentativeness and uneasiness about her work, with her textiles displayed on the floor or sometimes suspended in mid air. There is always a sense of proposition and doubt. Newman’s work invited viewers to enter into a dialogue with it, and it is only when they form their own responses that the meaning of the work can be completed. For Newman, the viewer is as much the author as the artist, and only via this joint meaning making process can her works be given their significance.

The title of Newman’s new work at Heide, *You’re still making history that no one else knew how to 2006*, refers to the idea of being able to make one’s own meaning in a society where we feel less and less free to do so:

‘we are making a history: that we all have the capacity to write our own history, but we live in times where that is happening less and less. We live in an era without history, where history is wiped out and disavowed.’⁷

Newman first trained as an artist before studying and practising Lacanian psychoanalysis. Much of the way she thinks about art comes from her interest in this psychological theory. However, rather than employing psychoanalysis to help her conceptualise and create a work, she uses this framework of thinking to interpret it afterwards, once the meaning making process is complete.

⁷ Lizzy Newman in an interview with Rob McKenzie, ‘You’re still making history that no-one else knew how to’, *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.

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Materials and Techniques

Newman works both individually and sometimes collaboratively with other artists. She creates paintings and prints, employs an array of found items, and sometimes incorporates home made furniture and handwritten texts. However, it is the fabric pieces that feature consistently in Newman's work: from large areas of carpet to medium size wall hangings that are sometimes hanging from the ceiling, to smaller fashion garments. Newman compares the use of fabrics to the more traditional practice of painting:

'Yes, they are soft – that is an essential quality about them – they hang and droop, and are warm and light to touch. I guess you could say that they are feminised versions of hard painting.'⁸

Newman is often attracted to fabric that is inexpensive. She explains how it refers to the feelings and moods evoked by her previous paintings, and the effect it has on the viewer:

'and yet by virtue of its colour and mottli-ness, it becomes a very beautiful, moody sort of place. Whenever I find the fabric that I want to use, it is always a surprise to me – to come across something with 'soul' in a sea of awful mass-produced, unnecessary material. . . These fabric works refer very directly to my past paintings – paintings that were very expressive of a certain feeling or mood. They are new versions of those paintings. And yes, they are sympathetic – that's a good word - they create a sort of mournful empty space, but a space that holds you. I think the ones with stitching and cuts move people in ways that are hard to put into words. For me, the experience they produce is one that cannot be spoken about: there is both pain and comfort in them.'⁹

While objects chosen by Newman demonstrate such a strong interest provoking emotions, she is also very sensitive to the use of colour. However she doesn't think of them as signifying anything in particular. . . 'they're more on the side of pure enjoyment. . .'¹⁰

⁸ Lizzy Newman in an interview with Rob McKenzie, 'You're still making history that no-one else knew how to', *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

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Influences

Newman describes her work in fabric and reveals its influences:

‘To me they are these sombre, minimal, monoliths that refer to the history of modern art, to certain precursors that I love. They are historical works in that they owe a lot to what comes before them – modernist painting, of course, but also Robert Morris, Matta Clark – process art and practices from the 1970s.’¹¹

Robert Morris, the American minimalist, is well known for his multipart geometric sculptures. He has written many theories on minimal and conceptual art. Gordon Matta Clark, also American, is most famous for his site specific installations. These include *Building Cuts* (1974) which featured a house sliced in half vertically - the radical distortion of the existing structure which subsequently altered viewers’ perceptions of the building and surrounds

Interpretive framework – *Psychoanalytical*

Newman explains the relevance of psychoanalysis to her work:

‘It’s true that I am interested in psychoanalytic ideas and involved in the practice of psychoanalysis, but I don’t translate psychoanalytic ideas into art. I *can interpret* the work in the light of psychoanalytic ideas, but only afterwards, in retrospect. I come to the work much as anyone else would, and then I can say a few things about it, but other responses would be just as interesting or productive. And in fact, that is what I am waiting for... for someone else to say something back, for someone else to respond. Art is a dialogue in this way. It’s a call to an Other that requires a response. What I can say about it is only one response among many – as many as there are viewers. I don’t claim to know the secrets to my work – it’s still a mystery to me too.’¹²

¹¹ Lizzy Newman in an interview with Rob McKenzie, ‘You’re still making history that no-one else knew how to’, *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.

¹² *ibid.*



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Discussion Questions

1. What makes art - art? How can this question be applied to the work of Lizzy Newman?
2. Why do you think Newman employs the kinds of materials and techniques that she does in her practice?
3. Lizzy Newman's work in the exhibition is titled *You're still making history that no-one else knew how to?* Why? Can you think of another suitable title for this work? Explain your answer.
4. Write a definition of Minimalism. How can this term be related to Newman's installation in the gallery?

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Lucia Usmiani

Overview

Lucia Usmiani works with the remains of goods that surround us every day, reforming discarded material into two and three dimensional works. Materials such as Coke cans and plastic bottles are woven by Usmiani into 'paintings' and installations. At Heide, Usmiani has placed these manmade objects with the natural world, by creating a sculptural installation, *Clatter* 2006. These ordinary, everyday containers are affected by the wind (creating sound) and other natural forces in Heide's park, transforming them into a thing of visual and aural beauty.

The ideas for *Clatter* came from an observation Usmiani made one day whilst walking. Upon hearing a sound similar to bamboo chimes, she looked up to find a small building site where bottles had been placed over the ends of protruding iron rods, presumably for safety reasons. A clattering sound was generated by bottles vibrating against the rods in the breeze, and as Usmiani walked the perimeter of the site she felt soothed and inspired.

Usmiani first created *Clatter* on a vacant block of land in the Tasmanian north-western coastal town, Wynyard, in 2005. Here, the sculpture became part of the landscape of the main street and viewers experienced it as part of their everyday routine, such as going to the supermarket. At Heide, the experience for viewers is slightly different, as they come expecting to find artworks and are prepared to engage with unfamiliar things. In both environments, just as on the building site, the visual and aural elements of *Clatter* allow us to reflect on the cycles of production and consumption and surplus, and on the themes of ordinariness, beauty and danger.

Materials and Techniques

Usmiani uses mass produced and consumed objects that are easily accumulated and available in large quantities. For the past five years, she has collected materials scavenged from recycling bins, handling and utilising them in innovative ways:

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‘Discovering what can be done with unfamiliar matter is a gradual process that begins at the moment of selection. Technical processes have to be invented along the way as there is no pre-existing body of craft knowledge to apply to the materials I employ. Usually I am attracted to only a small part of the object and, as a result, I produce a lot of off-cuts which themselves also become interesting objects. I am constantly learning about what can be done with different materials and the choices sometimes seem endless. I have by no means exhausted the elements I’ve worked with but I have come to the realisation that finality is not my objective. Leaving open the potential of these objects ensures they are always fresh to me, retaining the allure of possibility.’¹³

In the process of creating her ‘paintings’ and installations, new meaning is often brought to Usmiani’s collections of selected objects. Working with her bottles for *Clatter*, for example, she found that, ‘...spending a lot of time with one material causes its meaning to change in the same way that the meaning of a word alters when you repeat it out aloud several times. After a certain point the word becomes merely sound.’¹⁴

Influences

Usmiani cites two artists who have directly influenced her artistic practice. The first is Tom Friedman, an American artist who makes something out of nothing. ‘The objects he employs to make his artworks, such as soap, pubic hair, an eraser, a picture in a magazine, a pencil or a sharpener, are mundane and have little or no value’.¹⁵ But Friedman employs these everyday objects to create artworks that demand attention. For example, *Untitled* 1990 is a pencil shaving - its simplicity and elegance is revealed when presented in an unbroken form.

The second is Fiona Hall, an Australian artist who is also dedicated to working with singular materials. She uses refined technical skill and attention to detail to transform symbols of daily life, including Coca cola cans, Tupperware and sardine tins, into broader concerns about global issues, such as the effects of trade and consumerism, and environmental pollution.

¹³ Lucia Usmiani in an interview with Bryony Nainby 2005, cited in *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

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Interpretive framework - Cultural

Usmiani's fascination with the everyday and overlooked aspects of our lives suggests a desire to elevate marginalised aspects of our culture or life through art:

'I feel that these elements are natural expressions of my character rather than the result of a conscious intention. For me these overlooked and forgotten things seem to represent the ordinariness of our everyday lives, which I find very significant. Giving visibility or meaning to the marginalized aspects of our culture has the ability to democratize art and provides an opportunity to make it more familiar, hopefully allowing everyone to engage with art.'¹⁶

Discussion Questions

1. Like Lucia Usmiani, many artists use found objects and recycled materials in their art practice. Name four other artists who have a similar approach to art making and give an example of their work.
2. Lucia Usmiani is represented in the exhibition *Imagine* through artworks displayed both inside and outside the gallery, *Black death* 2005, *Fountain* 2002 and *Clatter* 2006. Choose one of the following words as a starting point for discussion about her work: sound, detritus, repetition, pattern, consumerism or craft.
3. What is the role of a curator? Who curated this exhibition? How does Usmiani's work reflect the title of the exhibition *Imagine*?
4. Following discussions between the curator and artist, *Clatter* 2006 has been installed into a particular environment within Heide's grounds. How does this bring meaning to the work?

¹⁶ Lucia Usmiani in an interview with Bryony Nainby 2005, cited in *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.

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Michelle Nikou

Overview

Michelle Nikou experiments with the possibilities of form and in her practice she turns found objects into artworks that are both humble and uncanny. Small in scale with a handmade quality, they incorporate the type of household goods you might easily overlook: spoons, toilet rolls, bath plugs, curtain rings, tissue boxes, and also common grocery items including carrots and potatoes. These are things we might touch every day with an intimacy of which we are mostly unaware. Through their transformation using a variety of materials and techniques, Nikou shows us how sensual ordinary things can be.

Nikou's works possess a fairytale quality. In 1994, Nikou named an exhibition, *Fania*, after her grandmother who migrated from Macedonia to Australia and became obsessed with making dresses over and over from the same dress pattern. After asking the family to take her to fabric shops, she would cut and sew dresses out of inappropriate and randomly patterned cheap cotton fabrics. She eventually made around one hundred dresses, a repetition reminiscent of Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty who endlessly cleaned and spun.

Nikou's art shows a deep concern with language and often incorporates text. One of Nikou's projects involved the removal, stamping and replacing of toilet paper in public toilets. Visitors to the ladies' toilets around Adelaide at the time might have torn off a length of paper and looked down at it to read something like 'that's what me and the others think' or 'make me' or 'do you remember this – do you remember that'. These projects emphasise Nikou's desire to situate art in everyday life.

Materials and Techniques

Nikou's concern with the realities of domesticity and the obsessive completion of household tasks such as cleaning, cooking and sewing is echoed in her choice of materials and techniques. The kitchen has provided both a studio space and resources for Nikou on a number of occasions, but she uses a wide range of materials to complete her quirky objects. Some are shaped and sewn using textiles, such as tapestry and felt made from clothes dryer lint. Others are fashioned as ceramics and concrete works, and a number are cast in metals that

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include bronze, stainless steel and aluminium. Stephanie Radok goes on to describe Nikou's technique:

'Combining opposites, soft with hard, food with lead, ordinary objects with venerable sculptural techniques, Nikou is as much an object-maker as a sculptor... Parts of the works are finely and carefully made, (the wax that becomes the wedding rings is smoothed till it looks like tempered metal), while in other sections a lumpy texture including fingerprints emphasises their slow formation by hand. Many resemble the sort of enigmatic and awkward object that might be found on a shelf at the back of a dusty shop, some 'thing'... handmade by an amateur art/craft person whose clumsiness and rawness are equalled by their zeal and obsession.'¹⁷

Influences

Whilst studying at the South Australian School of Art, Nikou had two influential mentors: Liz Williams and Gerry Wedd. Williams had a very pure approach to her ceramics but has increasingly experimented with other influences, such as classical Chinese ceramics, following overseas travels and experiences. Wedd is most widely known for his work with the surf wear company Mambo. His designs for textiles, ceramics, posters, T-shirts and jewellery are often humorous but also often contain more serious commentary on the condition of contemporary society.

Surrealist art has also had an enormous influence upon Nikou's artistic practice. Chance, spontaneity, dream, compulsion, found objects, collage, humour and surprise, as well as the situation of art in everyday life are all principles and strategies of surrealism.

¹⁷ Stephanie Radok, 'Do you remember this — Do you remember that', *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.

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Interpretive framework – Gender

The feminine themes of domesticity and suburban life dominate Nikou's work. Her work, *Untitled (love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement)* 2002, for example, readily lends itself to interpretation in terms of these gendered themes. Comprising a grey tapestry toilet seat cover and two tapestry covered toilet roll holders with stamped paper, its title refers to the poem *Crazy Jane talks to the Bishop* written by W.B. Yeats in 1883:

'A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.'

Radok explains how Nikou's tapestry, with its handmade quality and dullness of colour, echoes Yeat's sentiments and the contemporary experience of domestic and suburban life:

'Somehow the greyness and muffling quality of all these works returns me to Nikou's evocation of soap operas. The works do not attempt to cheer, brighten or ameliorate the day and the shining hour like handicrafts are supposed to do (think of the charity shops and stalls and their millions of bright aprons, plastic-bag holders, tissue box covers and knitted grimacing bears and dolls – testimony to the hours – loving, wasted, frustrated – spent upon them by women with busy hands). Instead they emphasise numbness, dullness; the potential nihilism and *anomie* of suburbia.'¹⁸

¹⁸ Stephanie Radok, 'Do you remember this — Do you remember that', *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.



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Discussion Questions

1. What do you consider to be the main themes explored by Michelle Nikou?
2. Using the artwork on display, discuss how Nikou's work responds to the following two influences, design and surrealism.
3. Write down an example of Nikou's use of text featured in the exhibition. What meaning is she trying to communicate through this statement?
4. Write a short poem beginning with a line of text appropriated from Nikou's work.



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Gary Nampoan and Ron Yunkaporta

Overview

Gary Namponan and Ron Yunkaporta live in a remote indigenous community located in the northwest tip of the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland.

Gary Namponan works in a diverse array of media that includes carving, sculpture, printmaking, painting and illustration. His carvings of birds are especially well known: the sea eagle, respected for its beauty and strength in Namponan's community of Aurukun, and the broлга, his maternal grandmother's totem. The freshwater shark, night owl and kangaroo also feature as subjects for Namponan's carvings, and are often painted with horizontal stripes and patterns of white, black, yellow and red ochre.

Ron Yunkaporta is the only member of the Aurukun Apelech clan who is able to make Thuuth thaa' muth (law poles). He grew up knowing that one day this would be his responsibility and he watched them being made as his people sang songs. Law poles are traditionally used during mortuary ceremonies and as bora (sacred objects), must be sung in when placed on display. The *Apelech Law Poles Set* (2005) carries the Apelech design, characterised by a red background expressing the reflection of the setting sun on water, and white dotting which represents clear salt water sparkling on the beaches of the West Cape.

The Aurukun community embraces the Wik peoples of western Cape York Peninsula in Queensland who became widely known during the 1990s for their historic native title claim. The Wik are also renowned for a distinctive approach to sculpture, which has developed out of both traditional local practices and contemporary influences and techniques.

Materials and Techniques

The work of Aurukun artists is frequently carved from milkwood, the soft white wood of a native tree. It is abundant, light and the traditional material of choice for ceremonial objects. Temporary sculptures are left to decompose in the bush following the completion of the ceremony.

Using steel tools such as an axe or a machete, a basic form can be knocked out of a milkwood block before it is refined with chisels and sandpaper. Research by

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Peter Sutton has indicated that the use of steel tools by Aurukun carvers appeared as early as the late nineteenth century.¹⁹ He quotes Frederick McCarthy who was writing at that time:

‘I was informed by one of the oldest men in the village that these figures have been carved in wood only since the Aborigines were able to obtain old horseshoes from the cattle stations, and steel axes from the missions (since about 1894), and that prior to the use of metal tools the images were modelled in clay (which was painted when dry) at the auwa totem centres.’²⁰

In his final stages of production, Namponan applies acrylic paints and natural pigments, including yellow and red ochres, to create surface details. For the *Apelech Law Poles Set* (2005) at Heide, Yukaporta has chosen to complete his work using synthetic polymer paint together with ibis feathers and bush string.

Influences

The work of both Namponan and Yukaporta clearly stems from the traditional ceremonial practices of the Aurukun community. For Namponan, this is obvious in both his choice of subjects that include his maternal grandmother’s totem and in his use of traditional materials such as milkwood and natural pigments. Namponan’s father and mentor, Angus, was also an artist who is held in high regard for his bark paintings. Yukaporta, on the other hand, still carves sacred objects as an Elder in the Apelech community. His position and set of responsibilities as senior custodian thus directly informs his artistic practice.

Artists such as Namponan who was born at the Aurukun Presbyterian Mission in 1960 also inherited the Western-style carpentry and woodworking skills that were used there in the mission sawmill. The men who worked there used steel tools and applied the Western techniques of sawing, nailing and morticing to their pre-existing sculptural tradition. This historical development has resulted in ceremonial sculptures particular to Aurukun that are unusually figurative and characterised by strong brush colours.

Links have also been made between the ceremonial traditions of the east coast and northern tip of the Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait. Whilst Wik

¹⁹ Peter Sutton, ‘Sacred Images and Political Engagements – a brief history of Wik sculpture’, *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.

²⁰ Frederick McCarthy in Peter Sutton, *ibid*.

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sculptures have not played a direct role in dance performances in the Aurukun community, Sutton notes that ‘wooden drums, ritual grass skirts worn by men, and elaborate masks, including full body masks, reflect an ancient Malenesian influence from the Torres Strait’.²¹ The indirect influence of Torres Strait ritual upon the work of Namponan and Yunkaporta is possible.

Interpretive framework – *Historical*

From the 1920s through the 1960s, the Aurukun Mission brought in people from the surrounding areas and caused those who lived there to become relatively isolated from their neighbours. Furthermore, as Peter Sutton points out, at Aurukun Mission only ‘certain forms of traditional Wik life were encouraged. . . including those ceremonial forms deemed acceptable to William McKenzie, the all powerful Presbyterian Superintendent’.²² The historical circumstances leading to conditions of isolation and restriction, along with the imposition and management of foreign influences, have contributed greatly to the development of such a localised and distinctive sculptural tradition.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the distinctive artistic style of artists from the Aurukun community and the incorporation of western techniques.
2. How does this style differ from indigenous artistic practice in the Central Desert region of Australia and in the Northern Territory?
3. What is ‘clan law’ and how does it relate to the works in the *Imagine* exhibition by Namponan and Yunkaporta?
4. Describe the process used to construct a law pole. What was the original purpose of these sculptures and what is the reason for making them today?

²¹ Peter Sutton, ‘Sacred Images and Political Engagements – a brief history of Wik sculpture’, *Imagine*, exh., cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2006, unpaginated.

²² *ibid.*

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Stelarc

Overview

Stelarc is known for projects that explore and extend understandings of the body through the application of technologies. In the past, he has extended his body during performances using prosthetics, robotics, biomedical tools, video and the Internet. From 1976, for example, he attached a *Third Hand* that featured grasp, pinch and wrist-rotation functions with a tactile feedback system for a sense of touch. This robotic hand responded via cables to movements made by Stelarc's abdominal and leg muscles and was also once controlled by the hands of students who were hooked up to the cables instead. By 1992, he was using a computer generated *Virtual Arm* controlled by DataGloves programmed with gesture recognition commands to give the operator the sensation of having an extra, or phantom, limb. Such physical and technical enhancements have challenged the way viewers think about physical and mental awareness, the limitations of the human body and the relationship between technology and the body.

Stelarc's works at Heide continue to explore ideas about human identity and agency in our present and future worlds. *Muscle Machine* 2003 is a six legged, 5m diameter robot with wing-like limbs driven by Stelarc's movements. This work fuses the body and technology into a hybrid human-machine system. Like Stelarc's previous work with robotics, *Muscle Machine* maintains the view of the body as obsolete and supports the notion of the evolution of humanity through technical innovation. *Partial Head Project* 2005-06, a new project, has been grown from living cells formed over a hybrid human/hominid (ape) skull structure, prompts thought on a range of current social, scientific and ethical issues. Preceded by *Prosthetic Head* which was an interactive digital self portrait that conversed with the public and in doing so, enlarged its database, *Partial Head Project*, Stelarc's 'living portrait', continues to confront viewers, forcing them to consider the status of 'human' in 'being' today.

Materials and Techniques

Like *Extra Ear: 1/4 Scale* 2003, which was grown from human and animal cells, *Partial Head* seems to warn us of the more grotesque potentials of biomedicine. As Julie Clark found, however, Stelarc prefers to focus on the aesthetic rather than the controversial aspects of his work, 'What's fascinating to me is how the

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folds or clumps of tissue might grow and alter the surface form of the facial fragments. . .'²³

Stelarc has also used other biomedical procedures during his collaboration with Nina Sellars, a prosector who creates and prepares human dissections for the Anatomy and Human Biology Department at the University of Western Australia. Together, they perform the work, *Blender 2005*, which according to Stelarc comprises 'a series of sculptural installations exploring body surfaces, skins, structures and circulatory systems. Organs are exhibited without bodies and cavities are displayed without organs.'²⁴ This performance involved the literal removal of subcutaneous fat, nerves, connective tissue and blood from Stelarc and Sellars' bodies and blending it repeatedly, giving the biomaterial a 'new life'. Using liposuction to draw the body waste into a separate chamber where viewers see it being mixed and revitalised, Stelarc describes *Blender* as 'a machine installation containing a liquid body'.²⁵

Influences

Stelarc was part of the cyberpunk movement which took off during the 1980s within the literary genre of science fiction. Cyberpunk literature is characterised by countercultural heroes trapped in a dehumanised, hi-tech future. While Stelarc is embarrassed to say he has not read any science fiction since his twenties, he still claims to 'get suckered' into seeing sci-fi movies:

'sometimes admiring the special effects and always bemoaning the script! Gee, if I think back to some interesting sci-fi movies I'd have to say that *2001*, the original *Solaris* and *Bladerunner* have been the ones that stand out.'²⁶

There are also several writers who have influenced Stelarc's artistic practice:

'I guess I've read art, media theory, philosophy and cognitive science most, beginning with John Cage (for his anecdotal and Zen-like insights on music and mushrooms) and Marshall McLuhan (for his poetic probes on technology). Of the media theorists, I admire Paul

²³ Stelarc. 'Face-Off', Interview conducted by Julie Clarke for *Meanjin: New Writing in Australia, Portraits of the Artist*, Ian Britain (ed.), Vol. 64, No. 1 & 2, 2005, p. 167.

²⁴ Stelarc, *Teknikunst 2005*, Melbourne, 2005, <http://www.teknikunst.com>, program, p. 4.

²⁵ Stelarc, in conversation with Julie Clarke, 28 January 2006.

²⁶ Stelarc, 'Face-Off', op.cit., p. 165.

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Virilio (especially his book, *Speed and Politics*) and Jean Baudrillard (*Simulations*) . . . And not to forget Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaux*'.²⁷

Interpretive framework – Cultural

To Stelarc, the body is an architecture that has evolved and continues to evolve with its awareness of the world:

'To alter its architecture is to adjust its awareness. The body has always been a prosthetic body, one augmented by its instruments and machines. There has always been a danger of the body behaving involuntarily and of being conditioned automatically. A Zombie is a body that performs involuntarily, that does not have a mind of its own. A Cyborg is a human-machine system. There has always been a fear of the involuntary and the automated. Of the Zombie and the Cyborg: we fear what we have always been and what we have already become'.²⁸

Discussion Questions

1. What response did you get from interacting with the robot *Walking Head* 2006?
2. How have the limitations of the human body been extended by Stelarc? Give specific examples from the *Imagine* exhibition.
3. Is Stelarc's *Partial Head Project* 2005-06 a scientific experiment or an artwork? Give reasons for your answer
4. In what ways do Stelarc's artworks in *Imagine* relate to performance art?

²⁷ See the full list of writers influencing Stelarc's work in 'Face off', Interview conducted by Julie Clarke for *Meanjin: New Writing in Australia, Portraits of the Artist*, Ian Britain (ed.), Vol. 64, No. 1 & 2, 2005, p. 166.

²⁸ Stelarc, 'From Zombies to Cyborg Bodies: Extra Ear, Exoskeleton and Avatars' in Linda Candy & Ernest Edmonds (eds), *Explorations in Art and Technology*, Springer, London, 2002.

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Vera Möller

Overview

Vera Möller's artistic practice is concerned with the biology, ecology and the consequences of human intervention in the natural world. A particular interest in artificial or 'designed' nature has formed the basis for her inventive installations, featuring numerous paintings and collections of outlandish sculptured objects. Möller's masses of tiny creatures have grown from the close studies of nature she herself made as a former biology student. Their impossibility as true representations of nature, however, is clear. Möller's 'fantasy specimens' are complicated and weird, bedazzling with their brightly coloured stripes, spots and camouflage. Such alterations or extensions of nature confuse the boundary between the real and the imagined. In *darkrooming* 2005, viewers encounter a mock natural science laboratory store overrun by assemblages of fluorescent organisms, where nature and culture coincide with curious and surprising results.

A key focus of Möller's research is the relationship between art and life. If art is an artificial replication and extension of life, she looks to the ways in which nature's motifs and patterns have been adapted in popular culture. Various ways of employing the tiger or zebra stripe throughout history, in Western fashion, architecture and street signage illustrate this process. In medieval times, for example, traditional associations of the stripe with the danger, hyperactivity, wildness or madness of striped animals were assigned to the costume of the criminal, musician, prostitute or member of a dubious profession. Today, it could be said that certain social groups, such as rival football teams, continue to use the stripe for the purposes of identification, segregation and to warn about imminent danger. It is this binding of art and life in our past, present and future that is of greatest interest to Möller.

Materials and Techniques

Möller constantly experiments with different media, but often paints in oils on canvas and uses basic craft, fashion and various household products to realise her quirky still life inventions. With a preference for the artificial rather than the natural (which parallels her conceptual objectives), her selection of materials includes air-drying clay, aluminium, plastic buttons, latex gloves and nylon pantyhose. Fluorescent paints in green, pink, blue and yellow appear alongside combinations of black, white and red and monochromes. Applied in stripes,

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spots, zig zag, camouflage and washes, Möller completes her overall effect of post-surrealist absurdity.

Close examinations of nature and thorough research programs have played key roles in Möller's artistic practice. Before creating *Dizzyland* (2004), a work based on studies of the life forms in the Great Barrier Reef, she outlined her methodology and intentions:

'To extend the pool of existing references I employ in the studio. . . I intend to source, select and research relevant visual and literary material that will assist me in forming clearer definitions of these subject matters... in relation to notions of altered, improved or designed nature'.²⁹

Often taking the form of biological drawings, collages, paintings, photographs or preliminary sculptural objects, Möller's research and preparation enable her to both pay attention to specific details and to further explore her concerns.

Influences

As a microbiology student at university in Germany, Möller became extremely familiar with scientific processes and issues, particularly to those that concerned the natural environment. Today, she is influenced by the idea of the environment as laboratory. For example, the Great Barrier Reef for her:

"can be perhaps understood as a kind of out-of-doors laboratory of immense proportions. A site where ecological environmental, scientific, political, economic, social, ethical and philosophical issues are exquisitely intertwined. It is a natural environment where cause and effect can be observed in real time, so to speak."³⁰

Möller's installations have also been previously linked to the op art of Bridget Riley. Riley, an English abstract painter, has been known since the mid-1960s for her unique, optically vibrant paintings. At first in black and white, then later in colour, these abstract works consist of blocks that vary slightly in size, shape and position within the overall pattern to cause a disorientating physical affect on the eye.

²⁹ Vera Möller, artists' notes from presentation at QAG, March 2004.

³⁰ *ibid.*



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Interpretive framework – Cultural

For Möller, the stripe,

‘has this strange progression from the bad stripe (say, wild animals), but then it leads to this strange phenomenon when you look at council records of medieval cities [where] it is specified that if you are a prostitute or a musician or someone of dubious profession you are supposed to wear an item of striped clothing’.³¹

Furthermore, Moller finds it interesting that we can actually distinguish between bad stripes, as discussed above, and good stripes worn that are worn light-heartedly:

‘You can find a photograph of my aunts and uncles on German beaches in striped shirts, when at the same time in concentration camps you have Jews and homosexuals who have to wear a striped uniform. The pattern is no different, but you make a distinction that one is a good stripe and one is a bad stripe’.³²

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss how art and science collide in *darkrooming* 2005.
2. How does Möller’s work reflect the title of the exhibition *Imagine*
3. Explain how this work can be discussed in terms of the natural environment?
4. Use your imagination - invent a character profile for a person who has collected this strange array of objects and consider why they may have collected them.

³ Ashley Crawford, ‘Science and Art caught in an otherworldly embrace,’ *The Age*, 26 March 2003, p. 6.

³² Möller, interview with Megan Backhouse, ‘Artist earns her stripes’, *The Age*, 28 May 2005.