

CHINATOWN SOUVENIRS (ON NOT KNOWING)



MANDY RIDLEY

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### INTRODUCTION/ ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The objects that prompted this work were purchased in Chinatown during a visit to Sydney in October 1997. I returned with small souvenirs carefully tucked into my luggage, destined to join other handcrafted objects amassed over the years. These items which caught my eye were those that had been manufactured in their thousands in workshops, factories or even homes in China. Small cloth slippers for a child, decorated to portray lively tigers, an embroidered tablemat appliqued with colourful blooms, all skillfully produced and showing the maker's mark, the stitch.

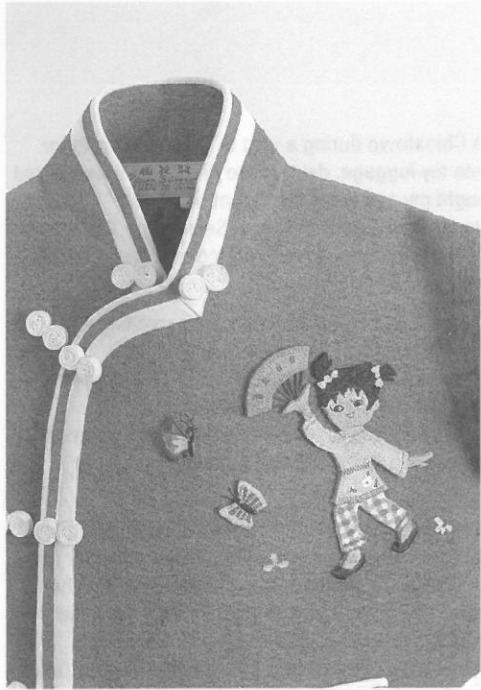
The premise for this show revolves around an intimate experience of not knowing, of marvelling at craftsmanship without meeting the makers, and admiring the lusciousness of the work without understanding the circumstances of its production. It is an experience that is validated and enhanced by the contribution of each subsequent viewer, taking note of the work of others. In addition to encountering, engaging with and respecting difference, it is possible to discover a familiar resonance. 'Taking note' becomes something of a meditation on our place in the world and a realisation of our connection to others.

As an artist I have attempted to gain a greater understanding of this 'not knowing' by engaging with an act of making that is attentive to the original item and its processes of construction. When possible the assembling processes in both the articles are the same; layers are stitched, decoration applied. Where there is a significant difference is in the idea of the painted object. In my work there is very little 'found' colour. With the exception of occasional metallic or fur surfaces, almost all the 'skin' of the work is applied acrylic paint. For example, the patterned brocade is carefully painted, the coloured threads used for embroidery or to form a bundle are plain white cotton threads that has been individually dipped in a variety of paint pots.

Chinatown souvenirs (on not knowing) has gained further depth by including five writers who have also engaged with difference in this process. The writers were invited to respond to an allocated artwork, by translating their experience of the object into a piece of text. The commissioned essays were meant to allow the authors as much freedom to pursue their creative spirit as I had enjoyed in my recreation of the original souvenirs. The resulting texts demonstrate a range of responses that are unified by the personal investment, consideration and skill of each of the writers. Please enjoy them and feel free to engage intimately yourself in this ongoing process of reflection and recognition.

#### List of writers & essays

		Page no.
Christine Morrow	Bedtime story	3
Paul Bai	Do the shoes fit?	4
Linda Carroli	Ten Red Lanterns	5
Michael Eather	Mandy's Doiley	7
David Broker	Off The Tracks, Tales of Exotica Misunderstood	9



**Pyjamas 2000**  
Acrylic paint on carpet tiles and cotton threads and fabric  
125 x 80 cm

## BEDTIME STORY

Christine Morrow

### The Tailor and the Tale

Put on your pyjamas, lie back, and I'll tell you a story. The story I'll tell you is about a magic carpet, about the night, about stories, and about the exotic East, both near and far.

Let us begin with a child called Aladdin. He is Chinese although this story I'm telling you is thought to be Persian. I only know he is Chinese because it says so in the story. You wouldn't think so otherwise because his name, Aladdin, comes from the Arabic Ala-al-din meaning nobility of faith and the faith in question is Islam. This boy, so the story goes, is the son of a poor tailor. He exasperates his father because he will not learn his father's trade or any other. He plays in the streets with the other boys instead of learning how to sew. Eventually, Aladdin's idleness and dissolution makes his father die of grief. Yet it matters naught that Aladdin never learned to sew because he has nonetheless a beautifully crafted pair of pyjamas, an exquisite pair of pyjamas in

the Chinese style.

Or perhaps it does matter. For in stories, irregularities never go unnoticed, nor deficiencies unpunished. It can be no accident that cloth, with its ability to reveal and conceal, is the thing that almost brings about the boy's undoing. Aladdin spies on the Sultan's daughter, Badr-al-Budur, and in the briefest moment when she lifts the veil from her face, he falls in love. Some time after this, Aladdin narrowly escapes being murdered when the brother of an African dervish comes to him disguised as the holy woman Fatimah, having donned her rags and concealing a dagger beneath them. A scrap of cloth is all that stands between Aladdin and desire, between Aladdin and death.

### A Fabrication

The collective noun for tailors is a 'disguising'. A group of them together may be referred to as 'a disguising of tailors'. This word expresses the idea that a tailor's craft is to mask the body and even make it appear other than what it is- to give the illusion of height, to conceal a goitre, to minimise girth. In an act of consummate disguise, Mandy Ridley has woven a pair of pyjamas out of little more than a scrap of carpet. Ridley has laid her pattern over the carpet and it can never be seen in the same way again. Although we know the carpet is there, it can only be perceived through the image of the pyjamas, asserting itself in a little flatness here, a little stiffness there.

Having been invited to write about these pyjamas, I will lay my own pattern over them. Like a tailor, my job is to fit and flatter. To fit, because you must accept my text as appropriate to the work of art it addresses. To flatter, because a catalogue essay should strive to enrich or enhance an exhibition. Soon, if my story is working, you will only be able to see these pyjamas through this new pattern, the one I am weaving here on this page.

The writer Jorge Luis Borges tells us that of all the stories in *The Thousand and One Nights*, there is only one in the first French translation (by Antoine Galland) for which there exists no original Arabic or Persian text; one which is suspected of being counterfeit<sup>1</sup>. It is the most famous story in the collection, the story of Aladdin. Galland, it is believed, has fabricated this story himself and concealed it among the many stories that make up his translation of the anthology. As the most well-known and perhaps well-loved tale in the

book, it has become the master story in the collection, the one against which all the others may be considered and compared. What can it mean for this story to be counterfeit when the stories that make up the anthology come from many different countries, have multiple, anonymous authors and have been reworked and embellished each time they have been translated between Urdu, Persian and Arabic before being compiled into an anthology in Cairo to say nothing of future translations into French, English and so on? The fabrication and concealment of this story among the others merely shows that none have any origin or authenticity to speak of.

Aladdin himself comes to stand for a certain ambiguity of origin. What more fitting garment for Aladdin than this pair of pyjamas which display a Chinese motif and which fasten according to the Chinese convention of scrolled braid closures since the word pyjama and the garment it describes are not Chinese but Persian? In the Persian language, pae means leg and jamah means garment. Together they designate a pair of loose gathered trousers worn in both Persia and India. Only through its incorporation into European dress does pyjama take the plural form, acquire a jacket, and come to designate a suit for sleeping in. Only by being transported from East to West do pyjamas enter the domain of the night.

Carpet is often prefaced by one of two words in English, Persian or magic the latter from Magi, the three Persian priests of Zoroaster who followed a star to Bethlehem. The boy Aladdin shows himself no stranger to the magic qualities of Persian carpet: when he installs his bride Badr-al-Budur in the palace he builds next to that of the Sultan, he lays a carpet of rich brocade between the two buildings so that when the princess walks between her father's palace and her husband's, her feet may never have to touch the ground.

### Life Jacket

Deception, you must keep in mind, is the very thing which sets the stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* in train. For in the first and last story, the one that contains and accounts for all others in the book, the Sultan Schahriar is deceived by his first wife. In order that no woman should ever again deceive him, he decrees that he will take a new bride each night and have her killed the following morning. Scheherazade conspires to end this by marrying the Sultan and telling him a

story on their wedding night. This story remains unfinished by morning and the Sultan puts a stay to her execution, as he is curious to hear the ending. By timing her stories so that one follows the other and the latest remains incomplete by morning, Scheherazade is able to delay her execution for the thousand and one nights of the book's title. In this time, the Sultan grows to love her and they conceive a son.

What is most provocative about Scheherazade's stories is that many of them describe characters who themselves use stories for the diversion and distraction of others, often so as to avoid death. Several of these tales tell of how a character narrowly escapes a summary execution. In speaking of such things, it appears Scheherazade can forestall her own death only by foretelling it. All that lies between Scheherazade and desire, between Scheherazade and death, is a story. The tale of Aladdin makes Scheherazade's strategy and its outcome clear: when the African dervish, pretending to be Aladdin's uncle, leads the boy to the outskirts of the city - to where there is an underground cave which hides a magic lamp - he tells Aladdin stories to distract him on the long journey. On hearing of the death of Aladdin's father, the dervish says to the boy, "He that leaves an heir does not die"<sup>2</sup> in a prognosis which Scheherazade surely intends for the Sultan Schahriar, to whom she is telling this tale.

### The tale of three Calenders

Among the many stories that make up *The Thousand and One Nights* are the tales of three Calenders. A Calender with an upper case 'C' is a type of mendicant dervish. A calender with a small 'c' is a machine in which a piece of cloth is compressed between two or more rollers such that it comes out smooth and flat. Finally, a calendar with an 'a' is a device for unfurling eternity. As is *The Thousand and One Nights*. For compressed into this text are a finite number of stories evolved over a set number of nights a thousand and one but which in their richness and plenitude stand for an infinity. A portion of a life lived within a finite timeframe seems an infinite process. There is an Arabic saying that nobody can ever read *The Thousand and One Nights* to the end<sup>3</sup>. To read it to the end would be to preempt the day and the hour of one's death. Only through the passage of an eternity can this grand narrative unfold.

My tale is unraveling now, it must come to an end. Through the movement of the calender's two rollers this pair of pyjamas has emerged. Like the wringer on an old fashioned washing machine, the rollers have compressed the cloth and wrung it dry. The pyjamas have a resultant stiffness and flatness that make them seem as if, in laundering, they have taken up too much starch. Laundering, just as we have seen with tailoring, may refer to a process in which something is given respectability through a disguising.

I see you are already asleep. Perhaps I will continue this tale another night, perhaps not. I gather my thoughts to see what remains at the end of all this story telling. I find all that is left is a pair of pyjamas, a pair of pyjamas that have been put through the wringer.

#### Reference

1. Borges, J.L. 1984. *Seven Nights*. London: Faber and Faber p 55.
2. Dawood (ed. And trans.) 1957. *Aladdin and Other Tales from The Thousand and One Nights*. London: Penguin p 127.
- 3 .Borges, J.L. op.cit. p 50



**Slippers 1998**  
Acrylic paint on carpet tiles and cotton, found materials  
30 x 30 cm each pair

#### DO THE SHOES FIT?

Paul Bai

As a child, I rejected the shoes my grandmother made for me. She was a 60 year old farmwoman, who lived in the countryside all her life. Being a city boy I thought it was very uncool to wear a pair of such unfashionable shoes among my friends at kindergarten. As a grandson, I did not appreciate my grandmother's labour of love. It was a big issue in a Chinese family, where loyalty and respect to your elders is always of utmost importance. Reluctantly, I had to wear those too big and not well shaped cotton shoes during her stay in the city. To me it was a punishment, my own feelings and aesthetic were totally oppressed and deprived by the family politics.

Twenty years later, when my parents visited me in Australia, they brought two pairs of sport shoes for me among other presents. Again I did not appreciate the shoes, but by this time I had learned not to protest straight away. My parents did not have any knowledge of fashion products and definitely not with these white leather shoes with geometric patterns. To them the shoes were fashionable items suited to modern living overseas. They did not know that the shoes were cheap imitations made by some Chinese shoe manufacturing company, that only looked like the original product. To this extent, the product does not merely serve the purpose of being footwear, but more as an image for the consumer to buy.

In Chinese tradition, women make shoes for a son's long journey, for an enlisted husband, or for a new born baby. To date, we still can see some handmade cotton shoes being worn in China. Older Chinese wear them for comfort and some young people wear them with a patriotic attitude or as a "Post-modern" cultural statement. The cotton shoes also have been appreciated by Western tourists. They call them "Kung fu" shoes as they were initially promoted by Bruce Lee's movies to the West. The shoes become a cultural image, the signifier for semiotic reading.

In China, a family meal in Macdonald's restaurant could cost 20 percent of an ordinary Chinese family's monthly income. Is a Big Mac better than a famous Chinese provincial dish? No, but the image is good, it's First World Living. And so, Coca-Cola is better than milk for children to drink. Anything from overseas (preferably the first world countries) is better than the local product. The

influx of foreign commodities in reformed China has created a misinterpretation for Chinese in the understanding of the West. The knowledge of Western culture for most Chinese people is from the mass media which is sponsored by the advertisements of Western goods. To have a Western brand product symbolises first world living, not just a better quality product. This notion has been effectively conveyed to China, the largest consumption market in the world, a civilisation that has a 5000-year history.

A pair of Nike sport shoes developed in the U.S.A represents the high-tech science of a modern civilisation. From the constant improvement of the structural design to the choice of colours and the heroic stories carried by monumental mass media promotion, Nike has certainly dominated the world sport shoes market. The projection of success in both athletic and social competitions is the marketing tactic of the manufacturer. "Just do it" as the slogan of the Nike sports culture, has widely spread in both Eastern and Western cultures.

During my visit in China in 1997, I discovered many Chinese owned companies and products carrying a semi-foreign title (written in Chinese). They have no meaning in Chinese or in any other United Nation's used language, but the brand sounded like it was a foreign word or translated from English or French which produced the illusion of a foreign brand. I guess the Chinese manufacturers want people to perceive the product as good as anything you will get from West.

Vice-versa, in Australia, What happens after the East met the West? We have the taste of exotic Asian cooking in our restaurants. We have "East meets West" cuisine like Beijing Duck pizza (or Thai Chicken Pizza with a Japanese looking dancing girl in the television ad), or a new drinking venue called "Zen Bar"(what is Zen?). The stereotyped Asian cultural images become the symbol of the cultural communication with Asia. We start consuming a "new found" culture as a trendy item even though we only know a very small portion of it. Due to the colonial cultural tradition in Australia, Asian culture is still seen as merely entertainment. As the patron we decide what we like to see or to know about other cultures. Within the limits of being decorative, the Asian culture becomes a fashion accessory that could only make the social lounge room look

interesting and little "exotic". As the subtitle of this exhibition "on not knowing", leads us to think - what do we know beyond what we see and consume?

In the era of Nike and designer label Italian shoes as the signifiers of comfort and taste in footwear, how do we contextualise the Chinese peasant women's handmade shoes? There is a high volume of labour involved in the craft process, even when made in a factory production line. We can see in the exotic and cute features of the shoes, the naive artistic imagination of Chinese peasant women, and the long tradition from which it comes. Unavoidably this particular example of visual language has ended up as a cheap commodity from China (just like the others) in the context of a first world country's retail outlet.

Each culture has different shoe fashion in their tradition, the Romans had their leather sandals, Japanese are famous for the wooden thongs, Australians have the Blundstone boot, of course the cotton Kung fu shoes are from China. These shoes have become part of the character of the culture they come from. In contrast to the globalised corporate products, these pretty hand made works do not have much practical use. However they represent a civilisation which has it's own unique voice, one with an appreciation of the beauty in life, of the environment it has grown from and whose culture continues.

#### TEN RED LANTERNS

Linda Carroli

Using a mortar and pestle, the Hare pounds the elixir of immortality from the bark of the magical cinnamon tree. The great archer, Yi had been entrusted with the elixir and was as furious as a dragon when he found that his wife, Chang'e had consumed it. He was so angry that she fled to ask the Hare, who dwells on the moon, for refuge. Even though Yi and Chang'e made their peace with the Hare's assistance, Chang'e remained on the moon. So, Yi built her a palace and he visited Chang'e twice every month. During those visits, they sipped tea, ate plum blossom and shared all the stories of the world. Glancing through a palace window, Yi saw in the distance ten red lanterns burning as if the dragon's panting breath, for the dragon's breath turns to fire when it touches air.

"Do you remember?" Yi asked, for the lanterns



**Dragon 2000**  
Acrylic paint on carpet tile and cotton thread, found materials  
200 x 60 cm approx

also burned like the ten suns of long ago. Lit by ten fervid suns, the sky was once bursting with light and flame. "There were once ten suns which threatened to burn the earth to cinder."

Chang'e smiled because she knew this story well. She also watched the ten red lanterns as their flames reached into the sky like the dragon's flexing tail. The lanterns glowed through the moon's silver-rimmed darkness. As her long fingers stroked the shimmering cord of her gown, she paused to drink silently from a translucent teacup, then replied: "Beloved Yi, I have no recollection of this story."

Yi was surprised, and more than a little disappointed, because this story was his, about how he had saved the earth. Drawing his breath, he began.

*In the time of Yao's reign, there were ten suns which took turns to light the world. Each morning, after bathing, all the suns, except one, would climb the great mulberry tree to rest in the*

*branches. The one who did not rest rose to the top of the tree where a chariot drawn by dragons waited. The sun and the chariot would be drawn across the sky by the dragons to a tree in the west. So the suns continued to take turns until one day there was a dispute about Yao's successor. You see his reign was about to end. On that day, the rebellious and wilful suns all rose into the sky at the same time. Had it not been for an archer who expertly shot nine of the suns out of the sky, leaving just the one who still warms and lights us today, then the earth would have been scorched to a cinder.*

Still stroking the cord of her robe, reclined in silk cushions, she faced him, laughing and asked, "What became of this brave and skilful archer?"

"Now I know you are toying with me. The great archer, Yi, lived well and lived long. He was rewarded with a palace on the sun where he lives except for the times when he visits his beautiful wife, the moon goddess, Chang'e on the moon."

They both laughed and in the distance, the red lanterns flushed like the strike of the dragon's claws scratching at the night. It prompted Yi to say absently, "The dragon loves the moon."

"And the water. I know of a dragon who loves water," Chang'e replied. As she continued, her soft voice became tense and dramatic. "He is the Red Dragon of the South, Qiantang, whose temper erupted into a deluge. The flood was so devastating that the supreme ruler of Heaven had Qiantang chained to a pillar in the dungeon of his own brother's underwater palace for 2000 years."

"Then it is a good thing that the Red Dragon loves water," Yi laughed. His laugh simmered like the flames of the ten red lanterns, as if the dragon had shed its glistening skin and the scales had changed into red dragonflies which hovered and hummed in the dark, as hypnotic as Chang'e's story.

*But the dragon loved his brother's daughter more than water. Humbled as he was, having been chained to a pillar for 2000 years, he was still wild and angry. He could not bear the news that his niece, a beautiful princess, had married a tyrant who had not only cut her off from her family but made her work as a slave. One day by the River Qing, she asked a young student passing by to follow her instructions to deliver a message to her father. The boy did as he was asked and was lead*

*to an underwater palace, standing before a handsome and proudly dressed man. He was not a stupid boy and had guessed that he was in the court of a dragon king. While this made him nervous, it did not make him forgetful and he delivered the girl's message to her father. The king read the letter aloud. When he learned of the cruel fate that had befallen his beloved daughter, there was such fury and grief throughout the court. When the news reached the Red Dragon of the South, he was moved to such rage that he snapped the pillar to which he was shackled. Qiantang raged through the palace like a thunderstorm, crimson fire streaming from his eyes and the broken pillar trailing behind him. In an instant, he had returned with the princess.*

"Surely, it was not as simple as that?" Yi asked.

"You know the dragon's heart too well."

*In his anger, the dragon had eaten the princess' husband and raised a flood which killed 60,000 people. The dragon never means to cause such harm. He is just impetuous. He was so remorseful that he immediately flew to Heaven to explain what had happened to the supreme lord so as to be punished. So impressed was the supreme lord that he forgave the Red Dragon and decided to restore him as Dragon Lord of the South. The lucky dragon returned to his own palace which was piled with gems, pearls and all his other precious things.*

"Of course, the pearl is his greatest treasure," Chang'e said as she lifted her hand towards Yi as if lovingly cupped around an oyster shell, offering it to him.

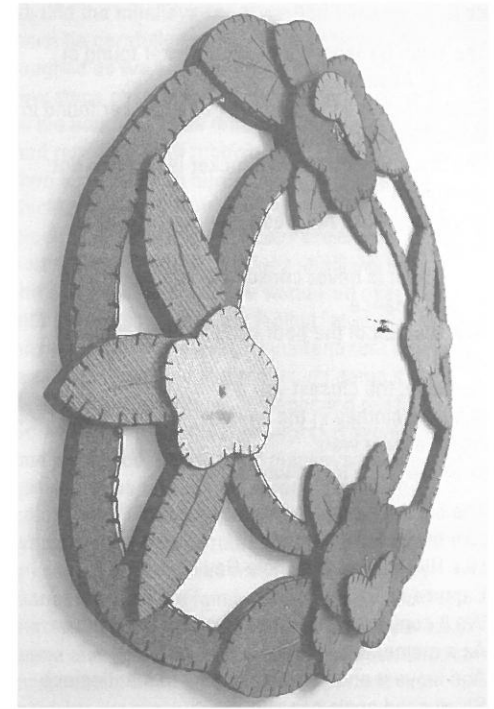
"Pearls are said to be droplets that fall like rain from the moon into the sea," Yi said. "Perhaps they are gifts from the moon goddess."

"But it is not the pearls. It is the moon that the dragon loves. Some dragons have tried to steal the moon from the sky, but it is always just out of reach. Each night the dragon chases the moon across the heavens. He tries but never succeeds in catching it."

With the ten red lanterns still glinting like the dragon's piercing eyes in the distance, Yi and Chang'e continued to eat plum blossom, sip tea and tell stories until it was time for him to return to his palace on the sun.

## Reference

Year of the Dragon: An Ancient Journal of Oriental Wisdom, Random House, London, 1999



**Doiley 1998**  
Acrylic paint on carpet tiles and cotton threads and fabric, MDF board  
110 x 114 cm

## MANDY'S DOILEY

Michael Eather

Everybody wants a box of chocolates and a long stemmed rose,  
And everybody knows.  
Pixelated dots are just blossoms on the face of the planet.  
Intoxicated blossoms are just pixies in the face of Dorothy  
When I look into your eyes I can see where the vase goes.  
When I think about the vase I can see where the arrows go  
Hours of flowers/miles of aisles  
To dainty rooms or better still,  
Earth.

(I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose

garden.  
I promised you ... Flowers  
For Algernon  
But, there's a rat in my kitchen what I'm a gonna do?)

The Bush Banana is a popular tucker found in Central Australia  
Central Australia is a popular bush tucker found in West Coast America

The blossom of that bush tucker is found in dot painting in South East Asia  
South East Asia has been found in Northern Tasmania  
The flower is never consumed, only admired  
As sustenance  
And the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat.

Because, the closest you get  
Is all the clothes in the world,  
As far as you want  
Is all the farce in the world.

The big dot blows up in your face  
Like the specific ocean  
Like Hiroshima from Enola Gay  
Capture it!

We'll copy that later, and tell our grandchildren  
As a memento.  
And leave it on the nicotine stained mantelpiece  
So all good souls can see it  
And I'll know my song well before I can spell it  
And it's a hard  
Vase  
That's gonna fall.

In a recent survey, twenty nine percent of people interviewed complained that Aboriginal people were getting too much.  
Nineteen percent remain unconvinced.  
The rest were Aboriginal and had difficulty understanding the question.

Certificates of authenticity were handed out with movie vouchers that were immediately validated.

Most say that Java Man came in from the North and populated the country.  
Others say we came from underground.  
Those people have been around for a long time.  
Like flowers in the sand.  
Since the year dot.

Some say people grow from the centre out  
They say people grow  
But all they do is cut you down  
If you get too big for your boomerang.

So the best way to display your culture  
Is be a little bit cultured.  
Paint flowers. Paint bush tucker.  
Family Jewels  
No-one cuts you down when you've been painting flowers.  
They just dismiss you.  
How many people steal flowers and expect someone else to borrow the vase?  
Meanwhile ...  
Decent people  
Can't afford to paint flowers  
Especially if you've got nowhere to put them.  
Where do you put the vase?  
Dignity. I suppose.  
Just South of Dignity.

What started out as a cottage industry  
Finished up as an export encouragement  
What emerged as a cultural imperative  
Resolved itself as a bygone conclusion  
Let Saigons be Saigons.  
What goes around  
Comes in kit form and  
Is heading to East Timor

When you can make something  
Make sense  
With so little persuasion  
(A sales pitch in the key of citrus)  
You need nothing else to distract the consumer  
Just the vertigo

We're all going down  
Down, down deeper and down  
Loads, of raw linen  
And finer still  
To little flowers  
To the pixies  
To Dorothy  
And out.



*Paper cuts 2000*  
Acrylic paint on carpet tiles  
45 x 35 cm approx each design

### OFF THE TRACKS

Tales of exotica; misunderstood  
David Broker

#### Georgetown, Malaysia

There was a small fruit shop at the entrance to the botanical gardens. Here, tourists and locals would buy last minute supplies for picnics in the lush tropical setting that provided an escape from the bustling city. People were attracted to the gardens by their tranquillity, and their monkeys. For the unsuspecting visitor there was nothing to suggest that tranquillity and monkeys were in any way incompatible. The young man at the fruit stall, part vendor, part entertainer, recounted that not so long ago the Council had decided that the monkeys must go. Groups of them sat on the "Funicular Rail Ride" tracks while the packed vehicle hung precariously to the side of Penang Hill. As the ride was funicular the monkeys were able stop two cars at once. They ate and chattered until such time as they were inclined to move. This could take ages. The people of Georgetown however were outraged by the idea

of a monkey massacre and so the monkeys were saved. For the time being. As we bought some bananas for our quiet afternoon in the park the young man warned that under no circumstances should the monkeys know we had bananas. They must be carefully concealed at all times. We laughed as we entered the gardens and only a few steps past the gates there they were, sitting in the bountiful trees drinking Coke from cans they had retrieved from rubbish bins. Every now and then an empty can hurtled from behind a leafy thicket. It was the categorical duty of guests to clean up after these querulous creatures. As the setting sun began to cast long shadows through the early evening haze we wandered ever deeper into the manicured jungle feeling "at one" with the environment. Our feeling of contentment however was short lived and in the ensuing panic it is difficult to remember what happened next. Somewhere in the order of events it seems that one (or maybe more) of the monkeys had caught a glimpse of banana. Word spread through the colony with extraordinary speed and without warning we were surrounded by a gang of grimacing simians who hissed in a menacing manner. An affable family group naively assumed that we had the ability to commune with the local fauna and joined us in the corral of terror. Children cried, adults became curiously silent and the monkeys were ready to rumble. There was only one way out, to hand over the bananas and run.

#### Adelaide, South Australia.

Francesca, Josephine, Julianne and Virginia had decided form a small collective of cyber feminists. Their name would be VNS Matrix short for Venus Matrix. The launch of VNS Matrix was a modest affair with only two invited guests, myself and Medusa, a snake of the Python family. Medusa was named after a hideous Gorgon sister who became the scourge of ancient mythology until Perseus removed her head with his sword. Her daring coiffure consisted of a nest of vipers and she had the gift of turning the men who gazed upon her to stone. As if to avenge Eve, women were spared this indignity. The launch took place on a queen size bed with iron embellishments. Everyone was appropriately dressed for the occasion in a variety of formal apparel from pink flowing gown to hip-hop street wear and bondage gear. Medusa had recently lost her skin and sported a shiny new set of scales. On this day she was Pythia or the pythoness, the Delphic oracle,

Apollo's high priestess who answered the questions of pilgrims with annoyingly cryptic replies. It was hot. One of those legendary Adelaide days when the blood boils and grisly crimes are committed. It was on a day like this in fact that the Beaumont children went missing. The streets were emptied of everyone except fools and miscreants as the withering air blasted off the Simpson Desert. While humanity suffered, Medusa luxuriated. Alice, who had the good fortune to be appointed handmaiden for the day, served economical pink champagne while Medusa coiled elegantly around the bedposts, periodically ingratiating herself upon the nearest human form. Her powerful grip alluded to hunger. Medusa liked to squeeze the life from her hapless prey before swallowing it whole. She survived on a diet of ornamental mice supplied by the local pet store and people would come from all over the neighbourhood to watch this invariably entertaining, yet disturbing spectacle. Following several bottles of the reasonably priced pink champagne the launch became a bacchanal. A Dionysian picnic on silk sheets. In response, Medusa became increasingly agitated, the barometer erupted and the manifesto was read. "...VNS Matrix terminators of the moral code, mercenaries of slime, go down on the altar of abjection ..." As sweltering afternoon became breathless evening the crescendo of cacophonous laughter turned to hysteria. Medusa had vanished.

#### **Raffles Hotel, Singapore.**

No trip to Singapore would be complete without a visit to Raffles Hotel where one can spend more on the cocktails than the room. Named after Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles of the East India Company this hotel is the epitome of colonial luxury and grandeur. Like the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong, Raffles' many guests are said to have included royalty, celebrities and writers such as Noel Coward and Somerset Maugham whose hijinx occupy the memory banks of many hotels throughout Asia. The day of our arrival at Raffles it appeared that something was seriously amiss. Its ornate entrance was choked by a variety of creeping tropical plants and the once great hotel looked like an abandoned fun park. A seedy string of discoloured party lights, which had braved many a monsoon, welcomed no one. Were it not for the enormous bust of Sir Thomas and the fading Raffles signage there was little to suggest

that this was indeed a legendary hotel in the grand tradition. Undaunted, we determined that it was our obligation to visit Raffles notwithstanding the necessity of trespass, something of which I imagine is rarely done in Singapore. And so we entered the decaying corridors of the British Empire, past the facade of peeling white paint and into the reception area which now told only of former glory. As our explorations took us deeper into the antiquated hotel disappointment became awe in the wake of realisation that faded beauty is by nature of its nostalgic romance, even more beautiful. We were the mad dogs and Englishmen and Noel Coward's words reverberated louder in the silence of abandonment. It was here that wealthy merchants and officials of the Empire sought to escape the equatorial heat in rooms without windows where shutters opened on to the once cultivated but still luxuriant gardens. Ghostly images of men in white tropical suits and solar topi issued from every musty corner. Soon we chanced upon a bar, perhaps the birth place of the Singapore Sling, a shrine dedicated to the ultimate tropical cocktail of gin, cherry brandy, Cointreau, Benedictine, Angostura bitters and fruit juice. The celebrated bentwood and rattan chairs were covered by white sheets. Raffles was in the process of a major makeover designed to return the hotel to its former glory. Once a sprawling colonial bungalow by the sea, Raffles is now surrounded by skyscrapers built on reclaimed land. Space is tight in Singapore. A muffled thud near the entrance introduced a well-dressed gentleman who walked deliberately in our direction. Contrition cooled the humid atmosphere until it became clear that our mild mannered interloper had forgiven our trespass and began to talk enthusiastically about the hotel and its history, of which he was justifiably proud. This was an opportunity to emphasise that in a State where heritage is low on the list of priorities Raffles has survived. He told us of a day that has become part of the Raffles' mythology, when guests enjoying the drowsy ambience of the noonday sun were plunged into a scenario best described as the stuff of nightmares. A tiger had entered the bar.

Postscript: These stories are based on, but not necessarily, fact.

#### **ARTIST BIOGRAPHY**

Mandy Ridley

Born 1961, Richmond, Victoria: lives and works in Brisbane

#### **Selected Solo Exhibitions**

- 2001-2000 *Chinatown souvenirs (on not knowing)*  
Gallery 4A, Sydney  
Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Toowoomba  
The IMA, Brisbane
- 2000 *on not knowing Patterned works 1996-2000*  
Palace Gallery, Brisbane  
*From the folk art collection*  
Ivory St. Window, Craft Queensland, Brisbane
- 1996 *The Garden of Abundant Harvest*  
The Microspace, Metro Arts Centre, Brisbane

#### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

- 2000 *Rom - antics*  
Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville
- 1999 *The City of Hobart Art Prize*, Carnegie Gallery, Hobart  
*At Home with the Other*, SOApBOx, Brisbane  
*Emblematic* Smith + Stoneley on Stratton, Brisbane  
1998 *Surface* Smith + Stoneley on Stratton, Brisbane  
*Décor* Smith + Stoneley on Stratton, Brisbane  
*Member's Show* Gallery 4A, Sydney
- 1997 *Gold, Frankincense & Myrrh*, Smith + Stoneley on Stratton, Brisbane  
*Bildermacht* SOApBOx gallery, Brisbane  
*Parlour* Metro Arts Centre, Brisbane  
*Couch 2* The Microspace, Metro Arts Centre, Brisbane  
1996 *Couch 1* Whitebox Gallery, Brisbane  
*The First Toowoomba Biennial Acquisitive Award & Exhibition*,  
Toowoomba Regional Gallery,  
*Das Objekt* Whitebox Gallery, Brisbane  
*Cue* Touring: Adelaide Fringe Festival, Adelaide,  
The IMA, Brisbane & Kick Arts, Cairns
- 1995 *Compact* University of Western Sydney Nepean, Sydney  
*Eight Days +*, Metro Arts Centre, Brisbane
- 1994 *Incidental Transference* QUT Graduate Show, Brisbane

#### **Collections**

Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane  
Griffith University, Brisbane

#### **Publications/ interviews**

*Art to Lunch*, 4ZZZ, Interview with David Broker  
February 2000 Brisbane  
Sean Kelly "Essentialism gets up"  
*Broadsheet* Autumn 2000 vol 29 no 1 p.17.  
Victoria Boulter "parlour: belinda giddins, mandy ridley, sandra selig  
curators: kim davies & linda carrolli"  
*Eyeline Summer* 1997/1998 p. 45.  
David Broker "Belinda Giddins, Mandy Ridley & Sandra Selig: Parlour"  
*Artlink* Vol 17 No.4 p. 86.

## WRITERS

Christine Morrow was born in Paisley, Scotland. She is an artist and writer who lives in Brisbane.

Paul Bai was born in Tianjin PR China, he is an artist who lives and works in Brisbane.

Linda Carroli is a writer, artist and curator. She writes as a journalist, essayist and critical writer and has been widely published. She has also produced several literary hypertexts both collaboratively and independently.

Michael Eather was born in Launceston Tasmania. He is Director of Fire-Works Gallery-Aboriginal Art and other Burning Issues, and is a founding member of Campfire Group. Michael has been a practicing artist since 1986.

David Broker is a Brisbane based writer and curator, Deputy Director of the Institute of Modern Art and producer and co-presenter of 4ZZZ's art show, Art to Lunch.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mandy Ridley gratefully acknowledges the following individuals and organisations who contributed to this publication.

Writers: Paul Bai, David Broker, Linda Carroli, Michael Eather and Christine Morrow. Galleries: Gallery 4A, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Institute Of Modern Art. Sponsors: Arts Queensland, Continental Carpets. Thanks also to Sally Baker, Simon & Kerryn Barnes, Peter Bellas, Phillipa Carr, Kim Davies, Franz Ehmann, Richard Hanson, Kerry Holland, Jenny Long, Jeanette Mitchell, Debbie Mourtzios, Queensland Artworkers Alliance, John and Margaret Ridley, Meredith Thomas, Kerry Zerner. Special thanks to the blokes, Peter, Alex, David & Nicholas.

**This project was substantially supported by Arts Queensland.**

Artist and Editor : Mandy Ridley  
Catalogue Design : Dan Baebler  
Photography : Rod Buchholz

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ISBN: 0 646 40005 3

Exhibition dates:

Gallery 4A, Sydney  
August 2 - 26, 2000

Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Toowoomba  
January 9 - February 11, 2001

IMA, Brisbane  
March, 2001



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Government  
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Artists Association inc



Toowoomba Regional *ART* Gallery