

Indians & cowboys: now and here

Here in Australia, there's a chicken tikka masala package with an advertising slogan on it that reads "Made by Indians, not cowboys".* This slogan operates, in some ways like the work of the six artists in this exhibition- Shez Darwood, Fiona Foley, Jitish Kallat, Michael Parekowhai, Gigi Scaria and Ronnie van Hout- using humour, reversal and creative reinterpretation as strategies. The theme "Indians & Cowboys" reflects these strategies, aimed at turning around the easy dualism of the 'cowboy and indian', that came to be known as the opposition of good guys and bad guys, us and them. Surely, now, this is an important task.

The slyly humorous approach used by artists can be brought to bear upon the serious issues of cultural politics, nationality, or personal identity. In divergent geographical locations - Queensland, Mumbai, London, Auckland, New Delhi and Melbourne- these artists are making work that play with cultural stereotypes and labels in ways that undermine easy notions of cultural purity or simplicity. The work in this exhibition range from conceptual strategies to ceramics, from video installation to DIY craft, from taxidermised rabbits to a painting. Similarities are in approach, or attitude. Whether the tone of the work ranges from derisory to deflecting, the results are effective in their (re)positioning of viewer's responses. Some are less irreverent, and bring a cool analysis to bear upon situations in which they find themselves.

There's another aspect of that advertisement that interests me: indian = authentic. Now this is surely a change after several centuries in which Europeans applied this concept in a rather indiscriminate way. Hellenistic antiquity used the term 'indies' to cover all lands east of the Indus River, and centuries later at the time of the imposition of the name "India" on the subcontinent by the British, it was a name as alien to its inhabitants as it was imprecise to its instigators. Today, it is used to differentiate the peoples of the Indian subcontinent: from their former compatriots, the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis; to refer to the first peoples of the Americas (based on the blunder of European explorers, who thought they'd reached the East); and even at times to mean indigenous or native, and hence the worldwide distribution of the term. This usage can be confusing for Indian nationals, and also in the West too: how many children here learn to say, "the Indians from India, not the Indians from America"? "The Indian" now has a wide field in which to operate; like a shapechanger or chameleon, he or she making simultaneous appearances around the world in a variety of guises. Interestingly, the related term 'Indies' is a name that now crosses over with youthful and independent.

These features were usually considered characteristics of the cowboy; a lone figure, working hard and fast and perhaps cutting a few corners to get the job done. Bending the rules, this character was generally thought of as good, even if a little rough around the edges. The cowboy also metamorphosed out of his rustic setting in the twentieth century, becoming an icon of masculinity, both straight and gay. Marlboro made him a pin-up and Andy Warhol made him lonesome; 60's counterculture brought back the cowgirl (resurfacing in the 1990's animated film 'Toy Story 2' as feisty and fit). If this kind of cowboy or cowgirl is already a mythic creature- this doesn't include children who still

look after bullocks around the world today- perhaps some of his reputed characteristics are ripe for reuse. Maybe there are still things that could be improved by ridden roughshod over, deflected, or having some corners cut off them. This is where it's time to meet the artists and their work.

Riding roughshod over a politically correct approach to the topic of identity politics is Fiona Foley's seeming appropriation of multiple indigenous guises. In her recent Florida series of photographs, also known as 'Wild times call', 2002, she can be seen dressed in native American clothing, posing pertly- and pertinently- for the white gaze. In the work made for this exhibition, 'Indian Heads' (2003), she has cut the outline of head in profile from tourist postcards, a head that with its extended ponytail is recognisable as the image of the American Indian. Yet the touristy postcard shows a beautiful landscape in Australia: "Indian Heads", a part of Fraser Island, off the eastern coast of North Queensland. Foley, a descendant of the original Badtjala people of Fraser Island, says this name was given to a point on the island by Cook as he sailed by and saw some natives there. Aboriginals have therefore in some ways been used in the same way as Indians: generic 'others'. The empty cutout- removed from the paradisaical landscape- represent figures would indeed have to be "braves". Foley reminds us that the absence of some people is now a part of the landscape, and that the picture cannot be complete without them. Foley's other work in the exhibition, 'Too a black cock' of 1993, uses postage stamps mounted on black paper to make letters, each letter of each word of the title. The stamps, designed by the artist for Australia Post, have images of the rare black cockatoo on them. Making an anagram of the letters in the words black cockatoo into a human reference, reminds us that the more than one native animal is under threat. And mentioning the black cock- this is surely another part of the story; if the cowboy is allowed his sexuality, then Foley won't let us gloss over the native having his, or hers, too.

Other Indians may have lonesome moments too. Indian-born, London based artist Shez Darwood, who with his friend- dressed respectively in the guise of Krishna and Shiva- seem to have little luck attracting flocks of dancing girls as they go walkabout in semi-urban England. From pubs to eateries, these gods and here-not-very-monstrous icons set about living an everyday kind of life amongst the glories of western civilisation, its quotidian rituals, buildings and foodstuffs. Krishna always has his playful aspects, but here we might be seeing him in another mode: in the most disarming way possible, he is in warrior-avenger guise. The semi-nude blue dude is determined to be present, be accepted, and be seen. This reading could be supported earlier works. Darwood loves the art of Indian movie posters and makes work using this form, painted by real poster artists at his behest. "Ethnic Self-Publicist" (1998) shows a young man toting a machine gun surrounded by characters from almost any movie genre you might like: two henchmen, moustachios bristling, and two buxom ladies, cleavage heaving, to either side. All four sidekicks look off camera in different directions, to unseen threats, only the youthful self-publicist looks right at us. This urban warrior is mad as hell and isn't going to take it anymore (why is that so unacceptable unless he's white?), whatever 'it' is. At least, Darwood is being militant about being seen, and in London, surely that's a tough call.

That young star of his own movie doesn't have a moustache, and this might signal his youth, or perhaps his western-ness. What is going on with men and moustaches? Currently in the West, the moustache is not a norm in male fashion. The goatee and any attendant fuzz is popular amongst a younger demographic, but the handlebar, the full Mr. Mario brother, is distinctly retro, appearing mostly as part of a gay subculture tool-kit. Does this affect a western view of world politics- do we take people seriously if they have to-us-out-of-date body hair? And the reverse- do our leaders appear to everyone else as immature, fatherless figures? Gigi Scaria's 2001 "Moustache Series" brings us up close to this issue. A group of eight works modelled in white plaster, each square block shows a much larger than lifesize set of men's lips, sporting variations on moustache styles. Some lips are full and pouty, a foresty growth above, others are thin-lipped and relatively hairless. Some moustaches are manicured, others freestyle. Overall, the appearance is one not of endless variations in fashion but endless variations in attitude- there are men out there to match their moustaches. There's the youthful joy of trying out a man's role in these works, but with the added knowledge of them being somehow museum pieces, manifest by their white, 'neoclassical' look. Scaria's other work made last year at the College of Fine Arts is a large ceramic installation titled simply "V". "V" is a wall work of a giant hand, made from individually cut ceramic brickettes, its fingers arranged in a victory sign. In the centre of the hand is a hollow 'window', and in this space we can see an image of a gun, its source a nearby projector. The scale of this image, in contrast to the huge hand, renders it toy-like. The victory sign, even combined with the gun, remain ambiguous. Their respective scales render both images congratulatory and challenging, dangerous and ridiculous at the same time. It has a cartoonish air, and yet the brickwork gives it solemnity. Given that the victory sign is also a peace sign, and bears a familial relationship to the sign for 'please leave' (politely put), perhaps this "V" is more Pynchonesque than the gun might let it first appear.

Clearly unhopeful is the podiatric protagonist of Ronnie van Hout's 1996 work "I remember when rock was young". In this work, set on a low plinth, a cast of a male foot is attached with thin wire to a largish, dark blobby rock. This rock appears very similar to the foot, having the same texture, as if made from skin, or being some body part left around and gone a bit rotten: gangrene definitely comes to mind. The foot is not young and is definitely no classical ideal, having shoe-shaped toes and somewhat gnarly toenails. One imagines that the body to which this foot belongs is one with much life experience, and not all of them pampered or perfect. But the full body isn't there to tell us, just the foot. The foot has its own ball on a chain, attached and hindering, like a penance to be dragged along. There's a lot of baggage to this rock, and it isn't one that would allow much rolling. The "Rock" is indeed like a crocodile, lying there waiting to finish foot off. Like characters in a Beckett play, van Hout has put this odd couple out there, eternally hampering each other, no change in sight. In "I guess, I lose", made in response to the exhibition concept, van Hout has modeled his own head as if he were black. This head lies sideways on a small rock and the text 'I guess, I lose' appears in a speech bubble, hung in the vicinity of the work but detached from it. We can tell the head is an individual portrait, and the artist becomes prime suspect especially given the context of his recent work. A fellow Melbourne artist seeing the work in van Hout's studio suggested it was an Indian spin-bowler from the seventies.** But why is the so-very-

white-looking van Hout doing a black-and-white minstrel show? There's a kind of cultural identity politics at play here, perhaps one that doesn't like cultural identity politics very much. But we have been pre-empted in any attempt to adopt a critical posture as the speech bubble disallows it, unless you want to kick a man when he's down. It's a peculiar strategy of resistance, covert and overt at the same time, a moebius strip of identification and rejection. The work directly confronts issues at the core of 'cowboys and indians', as well as "Indians & Cowboys".

Michael Parekowhai has long worked with 'cowboys and indians' themes, including images of Tonto and the Lone Ranger in the recent photographic series 'True Action Adventures of the Twentieth Century'. For this exhibition however we have chosen work that elaborates on our themes of anti-categorization and mixture. In a photographic series from 2001, a series of toy silver badges are set against a plain hot red background and photographed; the badge is cropped close in the image so the scale of these once tiny things is radically altered (the prints are either 600mm or 1000mm square). With words stamped into them such as "Sheriff", "Marshall" or "Special Agent" one wonders the size of the creature that might now wear them. The titles of the works complicate matters; one Sheriff is titled "Omega Centauri" for example- names given to stars of the celestial kind, Cygnus X, Antares, Arcturus, and more. These have become very long distance relationships. The little toys are so close, yet so far; there seems to be an incredible urgency in their message. The gleaming silveriness of the badges, the red backgrounds and black frames- echoing the so-called traditional colours of Maori art- underline this dynamic urgency at the same time that they appear bright and fun. In a new work made for the exhibition, "Clayton Moore and Harold Smith", Parekowhai has revisited the world of taxidermised bunnies (other works include 2001's "Roebuck Jones and the Cuniculus Kid"). Their little vests and leathery chaps invite us to coo at their cuteness, but set up in a showdown, these two examples of a pale imported species seem about to wipe each other out. Moore and Smith- the sadly unmemorable names of the two lead actors playing Tonto and the Lone Ranger- use the gallery space as their high noon, stalking each other, forever frozen in the moment of fearful encounter. We the audience could get caught in their crossfire.

There is also a kind of showdown in the work of Jitish Kallat, but it is as much to do with formal qualities as social commentary. Kallat, who specialises in large-scale paintings- perhaps a cowboy genre in itself- uses this format in conjunction with images based on hugely enlarged photocopies. The once small, containable, understandable image has now gone completely inflatable. This seems to suit Kallat's frequent themes of social issues. The heroic scale itself becomes a critical mirror, a forum in which to discuss these concerns, local or universal. Yet the degenerated Rorschach-like effects of the photocopy keep the gritty detail just out of our reach. Like the gaps in the image in Antonioni's "Blow-Up", Kallat's images keep us anxious as to the nature of what is really happening. In the large work "Quarantine Day", made for *Indians & Cowboys*, Kallat has depicted a grouping of huge, disturbing faces that clamour for our attention. One is has her head back and is screaming, and the others appear desperate and destitute. The sense of an original source image being enlarged contributes to the feel of an artist needing to inform us of matters otherwise left hidden. Yet it is quite uncertain exactly who or what is being

quarantined here: is this a question of disease, or of custom/s? The images are degenerated, appearing solarised, or radiated, and the painting itself therefore has a visual urgency that would not be possible if rendered more three-dimensionally. This method of working also allows Kallat to overlay and link images in a way that reinforces ideas about contamination, or interdependency, depending on the interpretation. A strange electrode device, attached to the head of the screaming woman, appears virus-like over the top of the image. The gothic lettering style of the title, all in caps, has a dictatorial air. Painted in the lower left of the work it suggests the official line, the label, the interpretative hinge- is also alienating.

In this short essay, I've not addressed issues of class or caste, preferring to let the viewer draw their own conclusions. And I have, until now, avoided the complaint that one cannot say the work of contemporary artists from non-western countries uses similar strategies as western artists, as they never went through the same sets of conditions that produced these effects in the first place. Apart from the linear, evolutionary idea of art this implies, it needs to be said that humour, or using tricks, is a human response, not just an artistic one, and many artists have used tricks or jokes in their work, whether a Uccello or a Duchamp. We- co-curator Aaron Seeto and I- believe that it is important to combine work from different cultures especially not on the basis of traditional oppositions: indigenous/international or craft/art. Our indians are cowboys too, and vice versa; indigenous and international, crafty and arty, and much more besides. Surely that's just what's needed right now.

Ruth Watson, March 17, 2003.

* Slogan is registered as a trademark of Crafty Chef.

** Callum Morton was that fast bowler.