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AUSTRALIA REPORT

IDENTITY AND LOCALE: FOUR AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS

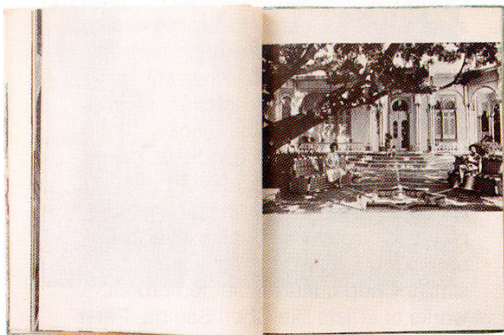
A selection of recent solo shows touches on aboriginality, geographical isolation and framing a relationship with Western art.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

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LOOKING DOWN FROM a plane above the Australian interior, one sees vast expanses of red earth barely scratched here and there by roads. It could be a Martian landscape, devoid or nearly devoid of water and vegetation, which might explain why the English and other European settlers opted to colonize the coasts. These days, however things are not so comfortable along the coasts, either. During my recent three week visit to four coastal Australian capitals, everyone seemed to be talking about current eco-disasters: floods north of Brisbane had plunged entire communities under water, while the so-called 1,000-year drought in the Southeast was blamed for bushfires in Victoria that killed over 200 people and at least a million animals.

There was plenty of time to contemplate such matters in the 30 hours it took to get from New York to Perth, my first destination, and in the five hours' travel between Perth and Brisbane, on the opposite coast. The enormous distances involved in getting to and through the country help explain the Australian art world's persistent sense of isolation.



Gill: *32 Volumes*, 2006, from the World Life Library series, book and gesso, 8 by 3 inches closed. Photos this page courtesy Breenspace, Sydney, and Tracy Williams, Ltd., New York.

Recurring international events like to Sydney biennial and Brisbane's Asia-Pacific Triennial notwithstanding, Australian contemporary art remains shaped by an outsider identity. Artists turn inward, reworking broader esthetic developments to uniquely Australian ends.

Of course, geographical distance does not ensure immunity from global economic contagions, or from the kind of cultural conflicts that plague other multiethnic, postcolonial nations. On the financial front, Australia has been made vulnerable by its dependence on China. Politically, art worlders are heralding a

change comparable to that which recently swept the United States. The 2007 replacement of the conservative Prime Minister John Howard by the opposite Liberal Party's Kevin Rudd promises a new approach to many of the country's intransigent conflicts. This was most dramatically indicated by Rudd's now famous "Sorry" speech a year ago. Breaking from his predecessor, who opposed such an action, Rudd apologized for Australia on a combo lecture tour/art exploration trip, I saw many fascinating shows that raised issues of outsidership, aboriginality and the complexity of Australian identity along with themes having to do with the continent's landscape. I'll focus here on four solo shows, all of which touch on these subjects in one way or another.

SYDNEY: SIMRYN GILL

During my visit to Sydney, the capital of New South Wales and the most populous and multicultural city in Australia, an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art underscored Australia's growing ties with Asia, as well as the fact that a sense of inbetweenness is not exclusive to the nation's aboriginal residents. The subject of "Simryn Gill: Gathering" exemplifies the modern diaspora. Of Indian parentage, Gill was raised in Singapore and Malaysia, and now lives in both Australia and Malaysia. Curated by Russell Storer, the exhibition focused on Gill's impulse to collect and archive objects and images in works that explore the indeterminacy of contemporary identity.



Woman wearing necklace, 2008, from Gill's series "Pearls," 1999-ongoing, glue, linen and pages from Charles M. Schulz's *You Need Help, Charlie Brown*. Private Collection.

A sly humor underlies many of these works, as Gill's careful cataloguing of objects and approximations of museological display veer away from knowledge toward uncertainty. *Garland* (2006), for instance, is a collection of flotsam and jetsam salvaged from the beach in Port Dickson, Malaysia, where Gill sometimes lives. Bits of plastic, wood, shell, metal and ceramic, from mainly unidentifiable sources, are arrayed on the floor as if swept onto a beach. Detached from their various origins, they are as orphaned as immigrants wrenched from their homes.

A number of works comprise pointedly inconclusive archives of photographs. *May* 2006 involves rows of unremarkable images of the streets, houses and sidewalks of Gill's Sydney suburb, all shot with rolls of film nearing their expiration date (as alluded to by the date in the title). *Looking for Marcel* (2005)—the title alludes to Marcel Broodthaers, another collector of odd seemingly insignificant objects—consists of four large color views of Port Dickson that bring out the peculiar traces of British rule in the Asian city. In one, the residue of a typically English looking breakfast is seen on a table in an outdoor setting with palm trees.

Books are another recurring element, though Gill cuts up, dismantles and otherwise refashions them so as to completely cancel out their informational content. An untitled

work of 2006 consists of 123 old and perhaps out-of-print books, some placed on a shelf where their titles form a concrete poem touching on colonialism, once new technologies and other themes of obsolescence. Others are left open, revealing gaps where selected words have been cut from their pages. These excised bits have been classified by word, bagged and placed in boxes. The quasi-scientific care with which these operations have been carried out adds to their absurdity. Another work, *32 Volumes* (2006), eliminates words altogether. Gill has whited-out the texts of the entire multivolume World Life Library series of the mid-1960s, so that only the photographic illustrations of exotic sites and people remain. Books are most thoroughly transformed in “Pearls,” begun in 1999, an ongoing project for which individuals donate a favorite book. These are returned in the form of paper-bead necklaces created from the pages of each. No longer readable, the books have become another kind of precious object for their owners, their original content now residing only in memory.

With piles of found objects, stacks of photographs, shelves of book works and a reading room stocked with pamphlets and books whose connections to the art were not entirely clear, the show flouted the standard conditions of exhibition display. In stead, the eclecticism suggested a working laboratory, with various ideas laid out for consideration.

PERTH: GORDON BENNETT

BRISBANE: GORDON HOOKEY

MELBOURNE: ROSALIE GASCOIGNE