

Not just simple nostalgia

JOAN KERR


Artists have become increasingly interested in the past. Not only are they appropriating a vast range of historical images, but they are interrogating official archives, museums and historic houses along with their contents and settings. (The exhibition *Artist in the house* at Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney this year, is an example). Artists have re-arranged the traditional meanings of these institutions as well as, occasionally, the furniture. And the range of historical references they are using is so impossibly wide that few of us art historians can hope to keep up with, let alone rival the charms of their beguiling new critiques. Since most university art history departments are currently sick, dying or dead, it is hardly surprising that artist-historians from former art schools are rushing in to fill, or at least decorate, the gap.

The commissioning of eight artists to comment on Canberra's national collections (and their institutions) was the inspired idea of former Canberra Contemporary Art Space Director, Trevor Smith, who was assisted by Neil Roberts and Naomi Horridge. The results can be seen at various locations around the national capital, and are linked by an excellent and elaborate catalogue and lots of talk. The tone of the event - archival investigation as a point of critical departure or parody, often with a sting in the tail - was set at the official opening in Kings Hall, Old Parliament House, when David Watt's

ACME gang of living suburban sculptures upstaged the official party. Having had considerable experience of obtrusive clowns, Senator Alston smoothly and stylishly relinquished the floor to the rival attractions. They included Australia's national washing-up champion, polishing her hundred-thousandth plate with gloomy panache; a boot-cleaner who sat in front of Mackennal's statue of King George V, refusing to polish more than the toe of any client's right shoe because that alone gleamed brightly on the royal bronze; and other heroes hitherto unrepresented in the Historic Memorials Collection.

A fuss-pot in a dressing-gown obsessively absorbed in meaningless paperwork on an apparently official desk was an appropriate prelude to Fiona Hall's dazzlingly demented desk at Canberra School of Art Gallery. This filigreed extravaganza, suggesting the leaking plumbing of imperialism, was inspired by the table on which Queen Victoria signed the Australian Federation documents in 1901, now in the Parliament House art collection. As we might expect from Fiona Hall, *Incontinent* was utterly seductive but by no means soothing.

David Watt's official contribution, *Inhabiting the archive*, was made up of large painted replicas of wartime Dream Homes, such as 'Hardie Fibrolite home design no. 204', incongruously added to the facade of

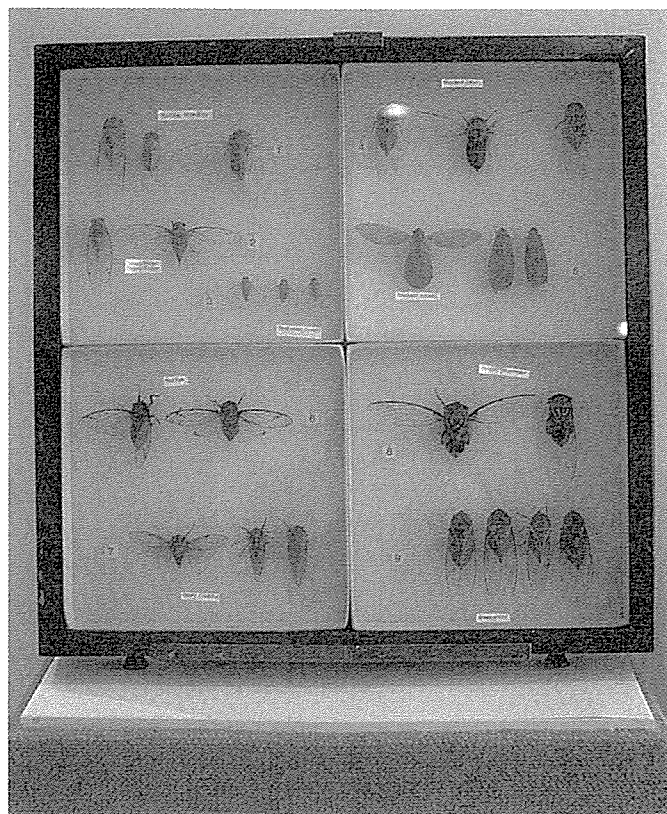
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MASKED DEVIL

BLUE MOON

SANDGRINDER

GOLDEN EMPEROR



Robert MacPherson, two details from Green singer: 58 frog poems for JSN 1987-1997, installation at CSIRO, Canberra.

the National Library, along with hundreds of pictures of shoes, taken from trade catalogues in the library's ephemera collection, pasted to the stair risers at the Library's entrance. Together they added a pathetic everyday palimpsest to Walter Bunning's grandiose neoclassical temple, although perhaps no suburban pin will ever be large or pointed enough to puncture that over-inflated dirigible.

Susan Norrie's *Loophole*, at the host organisation, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, coolly evoked the terrifying endlessness of all public archives. It consisted of a black-and-white film, showing the seemingly endless storage racks at the National Film and Sound Archive, beside a monumentally enlarged, beautifully reworked example of a graffiti, which presumably keeps the staff from fossilising into the sort of bureaucrat exemplified in another film, on show nearby, which is ludicrously Kafkaesque. The installation was completed by Norrie's blandly glowing

photograph of one of the building's air-conditioning vents with a wire coat-hanger hooked into it - an intervention which again promised a tiny loophole of sanity in an overwhelmingly depersonalised world.

Annie Brennan's *Is it real?* audio guide, at the Australian War Memorial, solved the problem of virtually infinite data by confining itself to the museum's three World War I galleries. Its flaws were those of all audio guides: malfunctioning equipment which is not user-friendly even when working perfectly and is therefore ignored by most visitors, and an over-long commentary which could never encompass everyone's interests. This one rather lost me towards the end (too much from a Russian who literally became White), but the rest was a fascinating compendium of splendidly selected, pertinent research. I particularly liked the tale about the sole surviving mud-covered uniform (dirt is exceptionally difficult to conserve). Quotes from diaries and letters beautifully illuminated the selected objects,

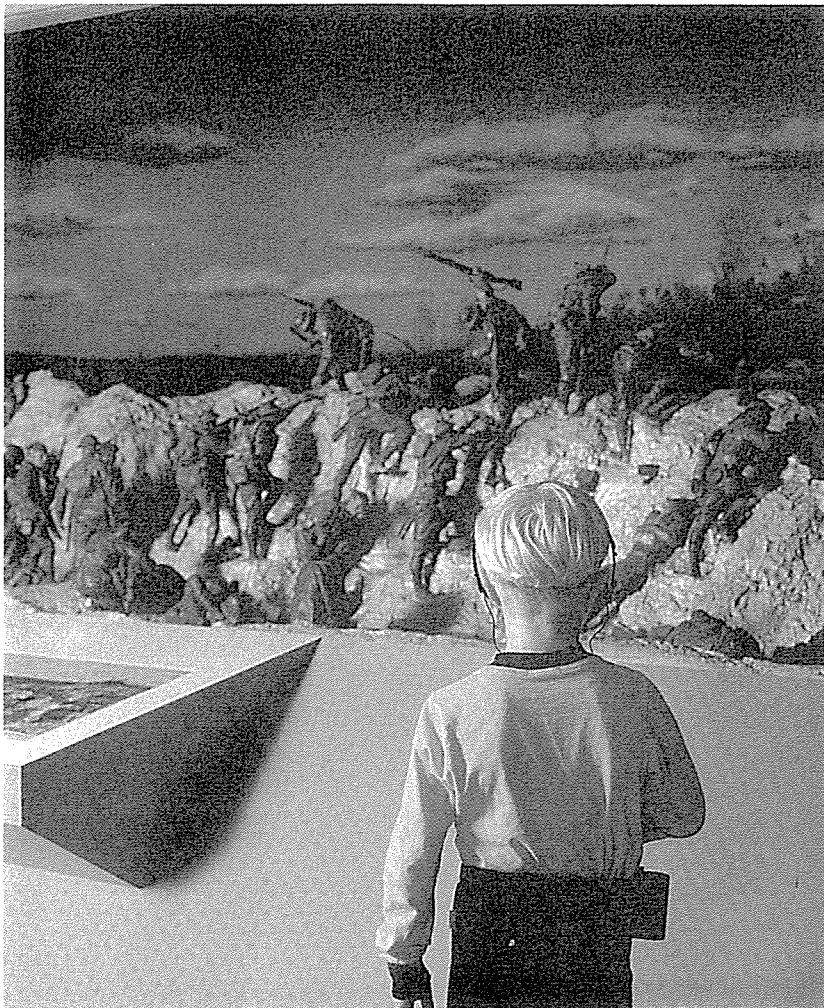
particularly the dioramas, and Brennan's extensive use of primary material was cleverly counterpointed by a comparable emphasis on the museological history and theory that underpins any display. Indeed, the history component of the audio could hardly have been bettered. The 'art' aspects, on the other hand, seemed surprisingly confused and unresolved, even if this was partly the fault of a technology still in its infancy.

Martyn Jolly's *Nineteen sixty-three; news and information*, at Old Parliament House, presented us with rooms of enlarged details of photographs from the Australian News and Information Bureau, taken in 1963, and now in the Australian Archives. Under this artist's close and unrelenting gaze, beer guts, bare feet, hands and knees, along with details of clothing and landscapes created a surreal, hallucinatory, often silly and sometimes funny reinterpretation of events considered newsworthy during that particular year, one that didn't, apparently,

ART CAN DAMAGE YOUR BRAIN

Artists Health Warning

A message from Stephen Spurrier



A visitor to the Australian War Memorial listens to Anne Brennan's audio guide, Is it real?

swing so much as loosely dangle.

Barbara Campbell's performance, *Fresh glories*, which took place on the verandah of the National Portrait Gallery (complementing an excellent show of nobodies in Australian art curated by that ubiquitous polymath Robin Wallace-Crabbe) was, to quote a colleague, 'magical'. In eight tableaux, Campbell paid homage to Trukanini by planting lipstick kisses on white dinner-plates, and created a collection of insubstantial, somewhat sinister silhouettes of politicians, drilled onto transparent roundels coloured with black jelly-beans and spit. Those unable to attend a performance could still see the results: a highly ambiguous commentary on the powerful and powerless commemorated in

our National Portrait Gallery. Lipstick smears and partly-chewed jellybeans have surely never been employed in art with such devastating wit.

Replacing the infinite names of God with the finite and bizarre names of Australian cicadas - and with 'frog', which belongs to no cicada I've ever encountered - Robert MacPherson's *Green singer: 58 frog poems of J S N (John Shaw Neilson) 1987-1997*, installed at the CSIRO's Division of Entomology, paralleled the life-cycle of these insects with that of humans who spend much of their time underground (represented by a dramatic wall of safety signs for miners). Unfortunately, the work was more successful in the conception than the realisation, due to pathetic institutional support. Only two

mediocre cases of cicadas accompanied McPherson's wall installation, which in any case was inappropriately located in the confined reception area. One yearned to see it beside the CSIRO's extensive entomological collection, which is kept deep within the building and rarely seen by the public.

Showing Gordon Bennett's colourful video installation in an old wood-panelled, book-lined room in Old Parliament House made it unobtrusive too, especially as it was flanked by TV screens showing early black-and-white views of Canberra. In fact, several interstate visitors chasing the show around Canberra missed it completely. Those on general tours of the building, however, could not escape it, and they were clearly the targeted audience for this vivid, pointed commentary on the absence of indigenous people's history in the Parliamentary Archives.

It is obviously far more important that the general, non-art-loving public be painlessly and entertainingly exposed to our national archive of racism by encountering Bennett's work during a tour of Old Parliament House than that I should discover Canberra's entomological collection by looking for art in a place I would otherwise never visit. Nevertheless, the fact that the view was potentially expanded on both sides was another justification of the project. I'll happily swear to inspect all the CSIRO's cicadas next open-day if Senator Alston promises to help eradicate the whitewashed history that is conserved by far too many of our official institutions. As defined by these artists, *Archives and the everyday* nowhere implied simple nostalgia.

Archives and the everyday was at various locations around Canberra from 25 September until 19 October (Susan Norrie's installation at Canberra Contemporary Art Space closed on 26 October).

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