

12s SPECTRUM ARTS

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GIVE ME BIG, BAD ANIMALS

Whatever happened to the feisty, shocking, challenging and nothing-sacred concept that was once the Perspecta we knew and loved so well.



BRUCE JAMES

PERSPECTA 99 LIVING HERE NOW: ART & POLITICS

Various city venues Until September 26

ARTHA Kit wanted an old-fashioned house with an old-fashioned fence and an old-fashioned millionaire. I want an old-fashioned Perspecta. I want it housed in a single institution, overseen by a non-institutional eye. I don't want it to come within cooee of a committee, a consortium or whatever life form next emerges from the curatorial Petri dish.

I want a Perspecta that makes me care, rather than a Perspecta that only makes me care if I've got enough cash bar to get to it.

I want it to sprawl in many directions, yet balk at megalomania. I want it out there, but not propped. I want it to explode in my face, while sneaking under my defences. I want it high, wide and handsome, with a serving of ugly on the side. I want it tough as old boots and tender as infatuation. I want it to grab me by the scruff of the neck, give me a shake, and rock me to sleep like a cobyaby. I want to be astonished by arties I've never heard of, check-by-jowl with geniuses I know on a first-name basis. I want to look in the glass of art and see if the face with the twisted sneer belongs to my people, and to myself. Then I want to discover, as do we all, if I've got the guts to love it. I want the impossible, in other words, come back Bernie Murphy, all is forgiven.

Murphy curated the first Perspecta in 1961. It was a masterstroke whose effects have echoed like a gumbal down the decades ever since. A starting pistol, anyway. It seemed to signal issues only now unfolding in their full dimension and repression in Australian culture — race, reconciliation and nation not least among them. Murphy even had the wit to forecast, all those years ago, the advent of

multimedia artforms through the exploratory videos of Peter Callas, whose latest work, *Last In Translation*, screens from today in the foyer of The Studio, Sydney Opera House. Murphy's canny checklist was peppered with era-defining statements by Howard Arkley, Peter Booth, Bill Henson, Rosalie Gascoigne and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjari. The latter's *Wapungating*, 1976, a pioneering Papunya Tula composition executed with Tim Leura Tjapaltjari, endures as a landmark of our art. For many viewers, it was the first time they had been confronted by the modernity, legitimacy and unassailable of Western Desert dot painting.

Since then, Perspecta has careened along a critical scale of good, bad and indifferent, though not reliably in that order. Capitalising on the kids of the Murphy model without living up to its promise, the show that set out to report on the state of contemporary art across the country has become a hit-or-miss guessing game to passing moments and particular movements, to fads and fashionable theses. It has become fragmentary, a condition I refuse to accept as the necessary manner of mirroring the modern world.

This is not to wallow in nostalgia, hankering after monolithic, muscological enterprises for their own sake and my own comfort. This is to give credit where it's due, and to comment on what I gauge as a

lost opportunity to get people to see, understand and accept the new, or the puzzling, in art. The primary shows of Perspecta 99 are midway through, including those at the Art Gallery of NSW, the MCA, the Australian Centre for Photography, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, the Museum of Sydney, S.H. Ervin Gallery, the Performance Space, Artspace, Casula Powerhouse and Gallery 4A. If you think more than 250 punters will visit them all, you're stark raving mad or you have a genuine estimation of Sydney's gallery-goers (than I do). The Australian Network for Art & Technology and ABC Radio's *The Listening Room* have kicked off parallel broadcasts and on-line programs as well.

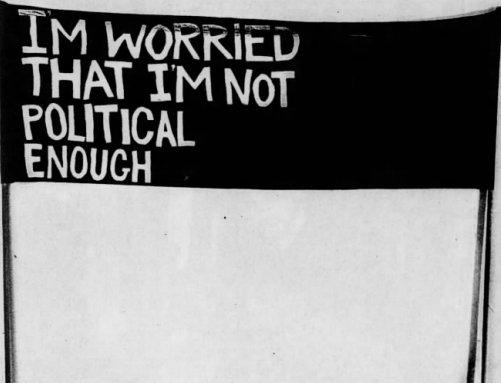
The catalogue's out, the party's over and the symposium's been and gone. So far, so hunky dory.

Why, then, do I feel that not so much as a placard has passed my line of sight, not even Raquel Ormella's impressively acerbic ones at the AGNSW? Where's my sense of social rage, or just grumpiness? If *Living Here Now: Art & Politics* is Perspecta's radicalising theme, how come, on the day that it opened, I woke to the same hyperventilating headlines about the Very Fat Pool at Homebush that I'd read the day before, and the day before that? Nothing changes. Or it changes the same.

To be alive here and now, at least in Sydney in August and September, is to know more about the size of a 16-year-old swimmer's feet, and the antics of a southern right whale, than about art and politics.

It is contemporary art so inspired as to inspire only human-interest stories about artists and their photogenic offspring — in this case the gifted Kate Beynon as a geek girl Madonna — and not about the complex, conflicted, conscience-provoking, sanity-threatening, shin-bruising, poli-

tical business of trying to make the stuff at the art end of a millennium? Doesn't anyone understand the threat to public security posed by Aleks Danuk's *Ladle and Ladle-Low at Home*, 1998, at the AGNSW, in the sedulous materials of wood, aluminium, fluorescent lights, liming solution and synthetic rag? Where's the panicky response to Justine Williams's bingo photographs at the ACP, with nitrous-oxide sensors testing molotov cocktails made from Diet Coke cans? Where's the agitation on *The Panel* over Adam Cullen's nine-minute video of a jerky playground horse-ride, appropriately titled *Inappropriate Elation* at the MCA? Where's the anxiety-ridden call for a Queensland parliamentary inquiry into Simryn Gill's attempt to dress banana trees and sugar cane plantations in human clothing at the MOST? In short, where's Pauline Pantadown when her country and this best-consumed, before-Christmas exhibition of contemporary art — really needs her?



Actually, that's not a rhetorical question. Ms Pantadown, the creation of artist, art-performer and art lecturer COFA, Simon Hunt, has been busy preparing, and delivering, one of the most incisive, media-savvy and subtly radical presentations I've had the luck to experience. I almost passed up Hunt's paper at the Perspecta symposium at COFA because the last thing I needed to encounter right then was another drag, queen. How wrong, how prejudicially, stupidly wrong, that was.

Hunt proved himself a powerful and prescient master of his medium, taking his audience step by court-shod step through the perils, pitfalls and pleasures of his sampler-sized post-lecture on Pauline. In a series of slides and videos we saw La Hanson, her posse of none-too-prepossessing minders, straight out of *Austin Powers*, as they barnstormed the shopping malls of the so-called Australian heartland. (I would have thought it obvious that to have a heartland, a nation needs, first, to have a heart.) Hunt conveyed the seriousness of his artistic project by making it plain that Pantadown is the vehicle for politi-

cal ideas, not a blowy bar act at the Albany Hotel. He left his listeners convinced that not only can art be political, it must be.

Perspecta 99 boasts precious few moments when you actually believe that. It strikes me as a set of more-or-less well-curated, cool-tempered shows, but not as the passionate and dangerous spectacle it should have been. Fire in the belly is not a figure of speech, apparently, to pass the lips of the assembly of 14 curators who constructed the event this time round. And what can you expect, anyway, from a creature born of a process of polite consensus? The days when intelligent adults sat around contemplating the word "workshopping" have gone the way of vinyl records. At least with the latter you can boil them up and recycle them as interesting abstractions. All you can do with a bad idea is make a dunce hat, and wear it.

To be fair, Nicholas Thomas threatens to go interestingly feral at Artspace with a gambit called *The Politics of Everyday Fear* at the *Order of Things* or *You Wanna Get Out of Here, You Talk To Me* or *The Desires of Disappearance*. The hipster-punk worries me, but at least it's a bit holistic.

Mike Parr's *Water From The Mouth*, an Artspace performance billed as a "24-hour continuous duration extreme containment", was not part of Perspecta, though surely it

could have been. He's nothing, if not political. As with Pantadown, the strongest pieces in Perspecta have to do with race and reconciliation. Forty minutes of Destiny Deacon's and Michael Riley's video mockumentary, *I Don't Want To Be A Bludge*, is not nearly long enough. There are puddles of pee in front of this exhibit at the AGNSW. Charting the course of a motor-mouthed Koort who dreams of getting off the dole and onto an Aboriginal artist's grant, the work rubs raw against everyone's sensibilities — white, black and bureaucratic. The disabled that may or may not be her reality, the woman in Fabry's narratives in perpetual transit between one minor inconvenience and another, one destination, one job, one lover, one rendezvous, one disappointment. Some large thing, among all these small things, will happen to her. It's her dear hope and sweet nightmare. Whether it happens in a back street of old Amsterdam, in a motel room in Dubbo, or in a gallery of experimental art or in the cigarette-smoky recesses of her own imagination, is not actually the point.

Just more. Just be. Then photograph it as it unfolds — your epiphany. Cross's *Foxglove* is the most unsettling, indeed horrific, perjury I've ever witnessed. This is not because it involves inflicted violence, endured pain or the mistreatment of animals — it does nothing so banal to the sensibi-

Raquel Ormella's *I'm worried that I'm not political enough, 1998*, at the Art Gallery of NSW.

ties of the viewer — but because everything about it operates upon one's perceptions to create curiosity, and reward curiosity with fear, or at least a sense of insouciance. To explain this work further would be to rob it of an essential component of surprise. So well-made is it, so well-structured, so well-acted I suppose, that I'm still in doubt as to what I saw — though I know, intellectually, exactly what I saw. And what I heard. I have a searing feeling it'll abide with me forever. Art can do no more.

That so few people will see this Melbourne artist's work, through the inopportune decentering of Perspecta, is a bloody, crying shame. The prize for the worst exhibit in Perspecta goes to Emil Gohl's sack of bamboo steamers on a yam cha trolley at the MOS. He gets worst title award, too, for calling it *Multiple Stories*. Gimnickey like this is best left to the bright young things at London's Goldsmith's College, a campus which, on the basis of this effort, appears to have ruined Gohl's promise, temporarily I trust.

(This is a revised and expanded version of a commentary broadcast on ABC Radio National's *Art Today* on August 26.)