

Our Lucky Country (difference)

HAZELHURST + MOP PROJECTS

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Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre
9 December 2006 – 4 February 2007

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View of the gardens and cottage
at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery &
Arts Centre

Suffering your own image

George + Ron Adams, MOP Projects

Watching the news last night, oh boy... it was actually a special on the ABC about 50 years of reporting the news. Sad, but again it confirmed that dates and names change with time, but very little else does. Seeing that we've never quite learned from history, this project takes a look at things from an individual's perspective – through the eyes of personal difference.

The unrest that occurred in Cronulla, Maroubra and other parts of Sydney in December 2005 sparked in many people the need to consider some kind of response. Many of the issues raised were seen as black & white, both racially and culturally motivated – them against us, from all sides. However, a broader and more distilled view of those events realised quite quickly the bigger picture of 'difference' and of the need for more understanding, tolerance and respect to be generated within and between different individuals and communities.

Suffering your own image is a condition dealt with from birth, some of us have red hair or a big nose, some are tall, some short, fat or thin, it goes on and on... it always has. Through fashion and non-fashion we are dictated to as being not thin enough or never the right height, let alone having curly hair when we need it straight...

What now? To fit in, image can be taken to the extreme – tattooing, body piercing, cross dressing, or whatever... but no, again variations and hybrids of this kind seem to cause even more public outcry of ridiculous proportions. Oh what to do???

By employing humour and participation as key motivators, and in partnership with Hazelhurst, over the next 12 months MOP Projects will present two exhibitions that 'bookend' an extensive and innovative artist-in-residence programme. The project addresses issues of 'self' and cultural difference as perceived through the work of 17 selected artists. Throughout 2007 the planned residency programme will challenge these artists, and those with whom they interact either socially or artistically, to participate in the production of new work. By placing the artists in unfamiliar and different contexts it is intended that this process will impact on and add value to community, individual or group perceptions of 'difference'. Artwork made as a result of the residencies will form the basis around which the second exhibition, scheduled for December 2007, will be curated.

Of course the likelihood that this project will correct such ingrained and worldly issues is small. But there is clearly an opportunity to present a program of exhibitions and artist driven activities that will challenge and promote a greater understanding of cultural difference to a wide audience.

Our Lucky Country (difference)

Daniel Mudie Cunningham

As preparation for this essay I interviewed all the artists in *Our Lucky Country (difference)* to research their approach to making work for this landmark exhibition. When drafting questions, I deliberately posed a broad 'wild card' question, the kind that may be asked in a vox pop segment of a cheesy travelogue: *Is our country lucky?* Generally the responses were positive, with most agreeing we are lucky.

Sun, surf, sex, sand. Yes, we live in a lucky country.

But despite the good, most artists also presented the flip side: the current political regime, the threat of terrorism, the plight of the indigenous, widespread racism, homophobia, and among other things, insubstantial support for culture and the arts. Only a few artists critiqued the concept of luck. 'It is a pity we focus on luck instead of talent,' said Anna Peters. 'If you're just being lucky, it's a fragile state because one day you might not be lucky.'

Luck is so deeply and ideologically embedded in understandings of Australian life, and certainly functions as the founding principle of Donald Horne's classic study of Australian life in the 1960s, *The Lucky Country* (from which this show borrows its title). A teetering state of affairs, luck is dependent on chance and fate, is temporal and promiscuous – it comes and it goes and is rarely faithful.

For me, luck was part and parcel of being born in Australia. My family moved from Melbourne to Sydney in the early 1980s, landing in the southern Sydney suburb of Hurstville. It was there I attended an evangelical church at Sutherland and frequented Cronulla Beach many summer weekends (if it was raining I'd often watch a battered VHS copy of *Puberty Blues* instead). During this time I was frequently reminded by family, school and church how lucky we are. *How lucky I am.*

Thinking back, it's so clear now that this conception of luck was coloured white and straight, despite the ethos of multiculturalism becoming contained in a vocabulary of rampant political correctness. I remember when part of Hurstville was being developed into rows of high rise apartments, my younger brother who was barely ten-years-old, told me cynically that 'the Asians were moving in'. Had he worked that out himself or heard it from the grownups? The latter seemed most likely. But then again, when you're a white Christian working class family with Irish convict origins, it's entirely acceptable to couch everything in fairly racist terms when your whiteness signifies instant unmarked privilege. *We're the lucky ones...*

Being asked to write for this project is both exciting and daunting. Thinking of my relationship to the Sutherland Shire stirs up a whole host of memories, which unsurprisingly highlight how I grew up identifying difference and otherness as whatever didn't subscribe to a hegemonic conception of privileged Christian heterosexual whiteness (however much it was kept warm for me by a blanket of sexual denial). Even if we were proudly working class, lacking conspicuous economic privilege, we could still pledge allegiance to a heroic 'battler' mentality and be assured some nationalistic sameness. If the 'battler' image was painted with an undercoat of 'mateship' and sealed with 'luck', all ideological bases could be covered and it would make for a pretty picture. Privilege, thus, cuts through class divides as long as deeply entrenched Aussie values take centre stage. Difference is granted, as long as it can be negotiated as a surface effect, merely skin deep, with cultural origins being roadblocked at every turn.

Our Lucky Country (difference) examines the complex issues of difference and how it manifests in Australia's richly multicultural society. Showcasing artists from backgrounds of cultural difference, curators George and Ron Adams, asked them to examine and respond, in their idiosyncratic way, to the issues highlighted by the Cronulla race riots. The curators insist that a serious intellectual engagement with cultural difference, in all its multifarious forms, can be negotiated through play. Humour is often the best medicine when making sense of social unrest.

Any exhibition about cultural difference will prompt an engagement with the origins of place, space and race. *Of the Earth* (2006) by **Elizabeth Day** and **Margaret Day**, is a series of grass sculptures spelling out the place names from which artists in the show originate. Linking places as diverse and distant as Saigon and Manila with Melbourne and Canley Vale, Day literalises the roots and soil of earthbound origins as the links we have as individuals, families and communities to the land. A collaboration between daughter and mother, the grass is a cultural garnish for a phantom family tree converging diversity and interconnectedness.

Nana Ohnesorge's *Coming to Australia* (2006) negotiates the tenuous relationship the artist has to her German origins. A stag emerges through a dark backdrop framed by Australian flora and fauna painted in our national colours. Ohnesorge's painting encapsulates the hybrid identities migrants negotiate in the process of oscillating between having an awkward relationship with their country of origin and upholding naively utopian views of Australia as a 'lucky country'.

Born in London but raised in Australia, **Huseyin Sami** has also made work engaging with cultural origins and the effects of migration. While traveling through London, Cyprus and Turkey in 2006, Sami met some family members for the first time. The new connections forged with family are documented in his photographic series, *I am but I'm not* (2006) in order to understand his own divergent cultural identity and gain a sense of belonging. In a broader sense, Sami is addressing the culturally constituted forces that define an individual's association with their own heritage.

The migration experience entails the transportation of literal, cultural and psychological baggage. If unattended that same baggage has another meaning. **Adam Norton** cleverly unites the loaded connotations of baggage in his installation *Autonomous Rescue Craft (ARC Mark I-III)* (2006). Three canoes are constructed out of secondhand suitcases and configured, Norton says, like a 'sad huddled family'. Evoking the experience of the refugee, Norton's fragile escape craft seems unlikely to succeed. Reminding viewers that white settlers probably arrived at Australia over 200 years ago with suitcases, Norton eloquently reveals the turbulent consequences that 'throwing off baggage' can have for refugees.

Sarah Goffman's installation also incorporates baggage: the disposable plastic kind. Like a makeshift quilt of brands and logos displayed proudly at a country fair, Goffman has constructed a large drop-sheet entirely from plastic shopping bags and suspended from the ceiling. A cardboard cut-out Police car is parked nearby accompanied by a Police radio reporting crime as it unfolds. Closer inspection reveals it's actually a 'Polite' car, humorously implying the race-based intimidation often exercised by institutionally ordained authority figures. Despite its functional inertia, the car is also environmentally polite contrasting the problem of the plastic bag. Goffman also incorporates a socially *impolite* 'bearded lady' self-portrait to celebrate her difference as a white woman made visible by facial hair. 'Being white the Police don't randomly pull you over,' says Goffman. 'And fat women are paradoxically more invisible than most.'

Invisibility is also important to **Nuha Saad's** work. *Soft Landing* (2006) consists of column structures made from pressed metal with upholstered padded interiors. Safety booths for those whose racial difference singles them out, the booths are decoratively painted in light pastel colours and ensure a measure of invisibility and retreat from a hostile, threatening or discriminatory gaze. Like public change rooms, the booths have short doors which expose an occupant's feet, evoking beach environments like Cronulla where the politics of place have become racially specific.

Like Saad, **Ruark Lewis** has made work which responds directly to the Cronulla area. Lewis, who grew up in the Sutherland Shire, has devised politically charged work that critiques the narrow-minded nationalistic ideologies of territorialism that spark events like the Cronulla race riots. *Euphemisms for a Riotous Suburb* (2006) is a list of one-liners devised by citizens of the area in response to the riots, giving the community agency and a voice of their own. *Banalities for the Barricade* (2005) is a performative work utilising language and movement techniques and documented on video during the installation of the work. Playing with issues of entitlement, Lewis's third language construction is called "I sympathise fundamentally with those Australians who are insulted when told we have a racist and bigoted past... FCUK YOU". By cross-referencing the creole in fashion and US political sloganeering, Lewis appeals to a kind of double writing which preys on the idea of misinformation.

Newell Harry also responds directly to the Cronulla race riots through issues of entitlement and by engaging with word play. *The Natives are Restless* (2006) is a white titular neon sign which aims to invert the derogatory colonial meaning of the phrase by placing the burden of being an uncivilised 'native' on those with a tribalist mentality. The sign also suggests the politics of white 'native entitlement' – sentiments that blatantly ignore how Australia has been built on invasion. If being 'native' also means 'to be of the soil or land', then 'native entitlement' doesn't belong to the whites who desperately lay such claims.

Liam Benson and **Manizé Abedin** also challenge conceptions of the 'native' in their photographic self portrait *Try Hard Indian* (2006). Costumed in cultural signifiers of Indian culture and Native American 'Indian' culture, Benson and Abedin critique the blurring of cultural specificity when it is commodified. Dress ups for Benson are always a camp affair, evidenced by the allusions to the disco cloning of the Native American 'Indian' by the Village People in the late 1970s. For Abedin, who originates from Bangladesh, the images reference the way she is often mistaken as Indian or Aboriginal – in both images she dons traditional dress from both cultures. Simulating glamour portrait photography popular in shopping centre photo studios, Benson and Abedin revel in the performed signs of cultural difference, only to reveal their ideological artifice.

Performative identity play is also important for **George Tillianakis**. *Always A Blank Fucking Canvas & The Ghetto Jesus Of Blacktown* (2006) depicts the artist wearing a dress, a blackened mouth and asleep in a public suburban environment. Inspired by the quote, 'We have eyes but we not see', spoken by the Kabbalah figure, King David, Tillianakis stirs up our self-destructive vulnerabilities by suggesting how we are often blind to our surroundings and incapable of speaking the truth.

In *Picnic at Wolf Creek* (2006), the mystery of what happened to the girls who disappeared at Hanging Rock in 1902 is finally revealed. According to pop culture remix pirates **Soda_Jerk**, they were all slaughtered by *Wolf Creek's* psycho bushman, despite a heroic rescue mission by Mad Max. Sampling clips from different periods of Australian film to create new narrative space, Soda_Jerk paradoxically emphasise the self-reflexivity of collage over the often more immersive cinematic language of narrative montage. Cinematic representations of Australianness become, for Soda_Jerk, remixable readymades that, through recombination, generate new meanings and associations. When collapsed, seemingly disparate sources of popular culture reveal for Soda_Jerk points of cultural and representational continuity.

Forging pop culture interconnectedness through quotation, Soda_Jerk illustrate how no more than six degrees of separation divide images, let alone the individuals who create them. Referencing this popular idea and also drawing on collage techniques, **Mimi Tong's** *Six Degrees of Separation* (2006) is a series of photographic collage and ink drawings depicting undulating urban landscapes. Localising the dizzying stimuli of cities within architecture rather than the passing bustle of crowds, Tong creates a dynamic tension between spatial connectedness and alienation – a familiar trope of life in large multicultural cities that simultaneously erase and embrace difference.

The impact of space and place in constituting the traits of difference is also important for **Michelle Hanlin**. Painted in a style that merges kitsch, fantasy and naïve stylings, *Run to the Hills* (2006) and *Run for your Life* (2006) depict blonde and brunette hair severed from the head and engaged in a battle for world domination. Both paintings present alternate outcomes, with the blonde running for the hills in one and the brunette making her escape in the other. If you listen closely, an unobtrusive reference to Iron Maiden's metal classic *Run to the hills, run for your life* can be heard. Hanlin uses hair-colour prejudice as a metaphor for the absurdity of more serious forms of discrimination.

Perhaps Hanlin will one day collaborate with **Ron Adams** in ensuring redheads can also wage their unsung battle. As a child, Adams' first encounter with discrimination was witnessing his grandmother being rudely called 'copper top' for having red hair. Such experiences inform Adams' text painting *Truth is Stranger than Fiction* (2006). Referencing the title of Robert Wyatt's 1975 album *Ruth is Stranger than Richard* and drawing on a stylised Constructivist aesthetic, Adams reclaims the torments that arise when suffering your image due to physical difference. If Adams and Hanlin don't wage war on hair-colour-phobics, they'll always have music to paint.

No stranger to painting text, **Maria Cruz** presents two works that reflect her interest in the politics and poetics of money. *The Letter* (2006) is a large text painting asking the citizens of Sutherland shire if they will lend her one dollar so she can make art from the impressions of the coins received. Promising to return the dollar upon completion of the task, Cruz's painting suggests how our common interest in money unites and divides us. A second painting, *Propaganda* (2005) depicts coins falling from the sky like a religious painting or a painting with a 'message'. Preoccupation with luck, lotteries, instant wealth and accumulation, suggested by pennies plummeting from heaven, is a happy distraction imaged as propaganda.

Much of the work in *Our Lucky Country (difference)* humorously engages with serious social and cultural issues. But no where is this humour more deadpan than in the work of **Anna Peters**. Simply rendered cartoon characters act as speech ballooned conduits for the artist's idiosyncratic interpretation of aspects of society. One example of Peters' social concerns is when a serious subject is given light treatment. So the depiction of the cartoon as being frivolously serious and seriously frivolous is one of the best ways to comprehend difference, especially when the social and cultural realities on which such distinctions rest are too painful. It's certainly very Australian to not say what you mean and mean what you say. And if the artists brought together for this show are anything to go by, then having the last laugh can be cathartic and contagious.

Daniel Mudie Cunningham is an independent writer and curator based in Sydney and the Blue Mountains.



Nuha Saad

Born in Sydney
Lives in Sydney

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2006: *Patterned Space*, Esa Jaske Gallery, Sydney
2005: *Intersecting Geometries*, Artspace, Sydney (collaboration with Mimi Tong)
2004: *Lines of Incidence*, MOP Gallery, Sydney

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2006: *Hardware*, UTS Gallery, University of Technology, Sydney
2006: *Lucky 7*, James Dorahy Project Space, Sydney
2005: *Room 35 Turns 8*, Gitte Weise Gallery, Sydney

PUBLICATIONS

2006: Tracey Clement, 'Art', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 2.
2006: 'Hardware', Sydney Magazine, *Sydney Morning Herald*, October Issue, p. 116.
2006: Mark Titmarsh, 'Shapes of inhabitation: Painting in the expanded field', *Art Monthly*, May, pp. 27-32.

FOLLOWING PAGES

Modelscape

2006

Acrylic on wood, 180 x 240 x 13 cm

Sketch for a new city

2006

Acrylic on wood. Four pieces: 12 x 73 x 3 cm each piece

Landscapes of Gallantry 2

2006

Acrylic on wood. Three pieces: overall dimensions 40 x 110 x 40 cm





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Norton, Nana Ohnesorge, Anna Peters, Nuha
Saad, Huseyin Sami, Soda_Jerk, George
Tillianakis, Mimi Tong

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Ruark Lewis is represented by Charles
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All images courtesy of the artists.

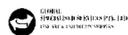
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