

**STILL  
DIFFERENT**

# *Our Lucky Country*

OUR LUCKY COUNTRY  
(STILL DIFFERENT)

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HAZELHURST + MOP PROJECTS



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by Lisa Andrew

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Views from around the Sutherland  
Shire in 2007, including Australia Day  
at Cronulla Beach (opposite).

PHOTOS: ANNA PETERS

## FOREWORD

In presenting this second and final instalment of the *Our Lucky Country* series of exhibitions I specifically want to use this opportunity to thank Ron & George Adams, and the artists involved, for their enthusiasm and commitment to the project.

In December 2005 we were presented with an opportunity to further connect Hazelhurst's contemporary visual arts agenda with an already robust community profile. The events that occurred at Cronulla and in other parts of Sydney, at that time, sparked in many people the need to consider some kind of response.

They also provided the catalyst for these exhibitions. Around this time Ron, George and I had been discussing ideas about ways that MOP and Hazelhurst could work together, connecting their artist-run-initiative (ARI) energy with our audience demographic. Lightning happened and *Our Lucky Country* was born, both as a means of exploring how artists could contribute to community wide debate, and as a way of creating (and better understanding) mutually beneficial relationships between ARIs, artists and public galleries. In agreeing to fund the project, Arts NSW and the Australia Council were supportive of our approach, not only as an opportunity to stimulate debate about art and artists but also, to highlight the benefits greater tolerance of difference and diversity could deliver.

Throughout 2007 the artists connected with the community to produce new work and their ways of working are reflected in the encounters described. For some, the experience challenged perceptions polarised by the events of 2005. Others have chosen to reflect on a broader jostling and argument about the state of our multicultural society today.

This project would not have been possible without assistance from the Visual Arts & Crafts Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments and the ongoing support of Sutherland Shire Council.

### **Michael Rolfe**

*Director, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last eighteen months MOP Projects and Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre have collaborated on the *Our Lucky Country* project, a series of two exhibitions sparked by the now infamous 'Cronulla riots'. This second exhibition in the series, (*still different*) sees a group of 16 artists commissioned to make new work that articulates an understanding of cultural difference in the community, and in particular the Sutherland Shire. Throughout 2007 these artists engaged in a residency program at the cottage on the grounds of Hazelhurst, where they considered, developed and/or produced new work.

As the curators of this project, we were not interested in demonstrating a political agenda or presenting overt social commentary about the Cronulla riots. We don't think that any art show is ever going to change the fact that humans are incredibly competitive and territorial and that sometimes tensions flare as a result. The following pages document the extraordinary process undertaken to achieve the ambitious goals set out. We've been fortunate to have a crew of intuitive writers, individually invited by the artists, to respond to the work produced. To further supplement the catalogue we commissioned Lisa Andrew to produce an experimental documentary showing the artists at work in the Sutherland Shire. Lisa has edited her footage with contextual material filmed or photographed by the artists themselves.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre for making this project run as smoothly as it has. In giving MOP Projects the opportunity to lead the curatorial development of *Our Lucky Country*, Hazelhurst clearly acknowledges the energy and creative resource provided by artist-run-initiatives. This mutually beneficial partnership has grown Hazelhurst's audience profile and allowed MOP to provide its artists with opportunities beyond MOP's usual resources. We would also like to thank Arts NSW, the Australia Council and the Sutherland Shire Council for providing the funds that has made this very successful project possible.

### **George + Ron Adams**

*Founding Directors, MOP Projects*

# How am I different?

DANIEL MUDIE CUNNINGHAM

Being involved with an exhibition about difference obviously forces you to examine and question your own difference. *How am I different?* You can answer that question in two ways. On the one hand, the question prompts you to explore and define what sets you apart from someone else; the oversimplified idea that what you *are* is what you're *not*. Or in another context, the question suggests change: *How am I different? How have I changed?*

Postmodern identity politics of the 1980s and 90s were predicated on the idea that subjectivities are constantly in flux, fluid and evolving, as opposed to essential, inherent, innate. Today it almost seems like a cliché to declare identity as a shifting ground upon which a multitude of identifications circulate. Maybe that's because clichés refer to 'truths' firmed over a period of time; when something is established as truth, it loses its ability to embrace change. It stays in flux forever; always changing and unchanged. It has become a convenient 'truth' to perceive identity as fluid because we're granted licence to resist engaging with it at length or in depth. Just because postmodernism privileged surface over depth, should we continue understanding identity through an infantilised attention span? You could never begin to answer that question. I've taken to ticking the box that says, "All of the above".

Several exhibitions I've curated in Sydney since the mid 1990s have played with identity politics, specifically examining the historically and culturally constituted emergence of queerness within visual representational systems. To spend so much time

tracing the development of a particular field is to find yourself constantly re-negotiating your relationship to it. And like any long-term relationship with a theoretical construct, you inevitably become ambivalent about what you were originally on about. Sometimes you get jaded by the sound of your own voice and realise it's time to change your tune. *How am I different?*

2007 has been all about change for me: I spent the last decade lecturing and researching within a university system that has been so dumbed down that you were forced to adopt change by either stripping back the scholarly rigour once expected of such a profession, or abandoning it once and for all. That environment was undergoing constant restructuring, constant change (for the worse) that you would find yourself fighting to resist change, even if it had been change for the better rather than flux as bad imitation Fluxus.

Despite my better judgement, a major change I experienced was succumbing to a conservative institutional gaze, despite having taught identity politics, gender and representation from the start. When I was a tertiary student in the early 1990s, it was no big deal to be confronted with difficult or explicit images. I recall being introduced to Robert Mapplethorpe's 1970s *Portfolio X* in a first year art history lecture. As shocked as I was, it would've been unheard of to show that shock. We were all too cool for (art) school! I recall only one Christian student making a complaint but nobody, including the faculty staff, took it seriously.

In recent times I'd become too nervous to show students contested images of any kind, for fear of reprisal. Even though I had been teaching such images for years, it seemed that the presence of cultural difference (often demarcated along the lines of religion) required a policing of content that could be deemed offensive. It seems like those good old 'culture wars' never go away. A student once used an admittedly lame advert featuring gay men kissing to illustrate a tutorial presentation and some students responded with homophobic taunts. This was in 2005 – lightyears away from the halcyon days of 1970s gay liberation. It was at this point and partly because of my own ineffectual way of dealing with it, that I was prompted against my better judgement to internalise the same kind of conservatism gripping the student body. It becomes apparent in retrospect that this conservatism had already seized the tertiary sector long before students caught on. What else could you expect amid a political regime that held higher education (and the independent thought expected from such institutions) in low regard. Maintaining difference and progressive change, then, can be impossible in environments where the freedom to express such independence is quashed.

I've anecdotally outlined recent experiences of difference and change primarily to imply my growing ambivalence with these ideas. The greatest tension with the concept of difference is that it's predicated on a supposed individuality that can be impossible to maintain. The thing with difference is that it catches on like wild

fire; before you know it, everyone is 'different together'. Difference inevitably becomes a case of sameness. In Marxist terms, this is akin to the idea of 'pseudoindividuality', which refers to how mass culture creates a false sense of individuality through persuasive means. This is especially prevalent in images (such as advertising) where the subject is addressed as an individual but is, in fact, 'singled out' to conform to a mass ideal. Being different then, is like being set apart from everyone else because you have an iPod.

\* \* \*

*Our Lucky Country* brings together a group of artists and asks them to explore ideas of difference through a residency program book-ended by two exhibitions. The first exhibition in December 2006 was subtitled (*difference*) and the second taking place exactly a year later is subtitled, (*still different*). Curated by Ron and George Adams, directors of the Sydney artist-run-initiative MOP Projects, *Our Lucky Country* was initially conceived as a response to the 'riots' that occurred at Cronulla in December 2005. As it developed, the project's focus was broadened out to reflect the idiosyncratic types of responses that only artists could be expected to deliver. It's not that it became convenient to shift the focus away from the Cronulla riots – it just became unrealistic to expect all of the artists would focus on this particular moment in time.

Using humour and participation as key motivators for thinking through the issues of identity, trust, culture and community, *Our*

*Lucky Country* aimed from the outset to explore how artists can contribute to community wide debate; how new audiences for contemporary art can be developed; how new ways of working can be developed for artists; how community and cultural difference can be linked; how mutually beneficial relationship models between artist-run-initiatives, artists and public galleries can be implemented; and how community wide partnerships already established at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre could be further developed. Through the residency program, artists have had the opportunity to connect with the community of the Sutherland Shire to facilitate the production of new work.

Ron and George Adams asked me to be involved in the *Our Lucky Country* project from the start. As cultural, political and visual aspects of difference have been recurring concerns in my curatorial and research work, it seemed like a perfect fit: difference is what I 'do'. Amid the duration of the project I was appointed Exhibition Coordinator at Hazelhurst only a few months after Ron and George had invited me to be a co-director at MOP Projects. These significant changes to my own direction allowed a much closer working relationship to this important project and also compelled me to examine the way I comprehend difference and change.

One of the most innovative aspects of *Our Lucky Country* is the opportunity it affords for creative collaboration and partnership between a regional gallery and an artist-run-initiative. The curatorial premise was predicated on including artists who had

already demonstrated a strong working relationship with MOP Projects, since its inception in 2003. Not all of the artists selected had a notable reputation or track record for making work about 'difference' per se, but it was beside the point as the project was born out of an established community of artists and friends working together to form a collective response through their individual contributions. That aside, exhibitions exploring difference inevitably require an engagement with the politics of representational inclusiveness. While the artists selected represent a broad cross-section in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age and so on, it is unlikely that an exhibition purporting to be about difference could ever adequately tick every box. For that reason, omissions are evident and it's always a shame that these exclusions come to light. But it makes me wonder whether it is better to be criticised for being exclusive or being tokenistic. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. For a project that promotes active community engagement, perhaps the best way to negotiate these tensions is to draw upon the resources within your already existing community formations.

Ultimately what counts are the artworks produced, and it is through these works that we can see the rich diversity of aesthetic and conceptual approaches comprising *Our Lucky Country*. I must admit, the subtitle of the second exhibition, 'still different', didn't sit comfortably with me initially as it seemed a contradiction in terms. To be *still* is to be unchanged; to be *different* is to have changed or moved on. To be *still different* runs the risk of presenting difference

as an essentialist conception, resistant to being constructed over time. The curators' intentions with the phrase (*still different*), is more matter of fact really: to suggest that a year may have passed, but that this group of artists are *still* grappling with conceptual concerns that reflect their diverse and idiosyncratic comprehension of difference. Assessing the development of the work being produced now in relation to the first exhibition, it is apparent that what makes social, cultural and personal difference a complex state of affairs is the contested ground on which it moves.

Emerging as it did from the contested ground of Cronulla, as represented by the riots in December 2005, *Our Lucky Country* shows how difference is not just how you define identity. Difference also relates to how you approach a project brief. Not everyone is going to respond in the same way, despite pressures from some for an antagonistic approach. The success of *Our Lucky Country* is that it shows how different levels of political engagement can be deployed. Politics inspire everything from passionate debate to ruthless didacticism. The most effective representation of political engagement in visual culture is often that which engages humour. While this was always part of the original brief, it is a strategy that has not sat well with every artist involved. And that is fine – some of us aren't comfortable using humour to tackle issues born from trauma and violence. Certainly it's a fine line to tread, but artists are expected to have a finely-tuned sense of irony and satire. As much as it's a cliché to say it, laughter is sometimes the best medicine.

What strikes me as odd, however, is that some criticisms directed at the project have been specific to the very presence of humour in a context where laughter is apparently taboo – as if the greatest Australian cop-out is to trivialise everything as a joke. Humour isn't always that dumb. When used smartly, humour can convey an idea with greater power than the standard punchline structure of a joke normally allows. History is studded with politically engaged rebels – take Lenny Bruce for instance – who knew the power of humour to undermine the status quo. A whole history of oppositional visual culture is predicated on the use of subversive humour as a means of undermining dominant ideological forces. The legacy of US artist collectives like Guerrilla Girls, ACT UP and Gran Fury have had a legacy that is all the more enduring because their messages are often conveyed through a sharply satirical lens.

The perception that humour cannot be used to convey ideas about difference is naïve. Not all of the artists involved in the project have used humour to convey their ideas and that is their prerogative. But it doesn't surprise me that the one work that upset one particular punter last year was also the most unassuming and potentially the wittiest. In her series of cartoon-like works, Anna Peters depicts conversational exchanges between figures that are hilarious because of the way politically correct mores are challenged through language puns. The first three comments in Hazelhurst's guest book for *Our Lucky Country (difference)* indeed demonstrate their potential for graphic agitation:



- I find the Anna Peters Cronulla/Muslim cartoons highly offensive! There was never trouble at Cronulla until last year. The residents have had enough!!
- Anna Peters is a lovely young woman. I find her work very insightful and well thought out, the people of Cronulla cannot get enough! Perhaps this is the problem.
- Why the hostility (above)?? Ever heard of satire? The power of art! Good one Anna Peters! Interesting work all around.

What these comments highlight is how provocative and contested a project like *Our Lucky Country* is going to be, even if it has the best intentions. From my experience of the project, greater tensions occurred beyond those documented in the guest book. To promote community engagement, as this project has, a vibrant artistic community is required in the first instance. This community – artists drawn from an artist-run-initiative – demonstrate how the individuals comprising a collective can successfully respond to a brief with outcomes reflecting the diversity of its participants. Though tensions always exist when negotiating events not easily understood – the riots for instance – the formations that animate community in the first place should be strong enough to weather them.

above  
Anna Peters  
Fashion Parade, 2006  
pen on paper, 21 x 30 cm

RACE RIOTS THE SECOND WAVE

WAR OF WORDS

Angry ride into dawn

There is no place in our free, democratic and civil society for racist and mob violence ... We must look to the root causes of this social disharmony, seek authentic information about them, and deal with those matters.



Damien Murphy

BARRY HUMPHRIES once defined being Australian as hating people from anywhere else. It is perhaps a good starting point for what happened at Cronulla on Sunday.

Sydney has long been Australia's most divided city.

Those who live in the eastern suburbs rarely venture beyond the CBD. If they can help it. Those from the northern beaches think they have found nirvana, the North Shore knows it has, and the western suburbs take pride in their mostly hard-earned existence.

Most Sydneysiders would not live anywhere else, unless a Lotto win imp...

onerous lations also do play up "At Howard grati...

tion, ethnic terror li of Macq for Rese

PETER JENSEN  
Sydney's Anglican archbishop

We were beating each other with sticks 2 million years ago, people. It's time to evolve.

GUS  
SMH website reader

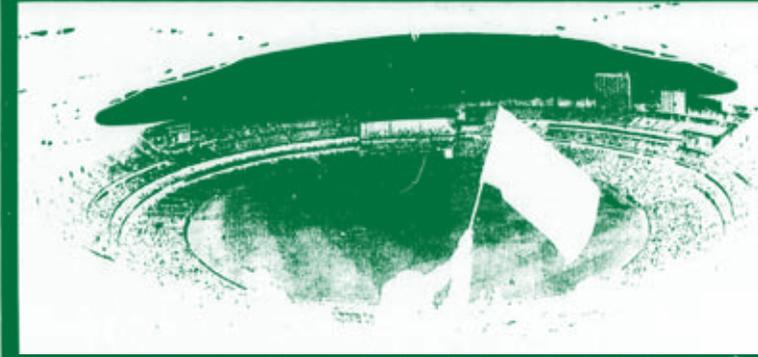
The people who sent out the text messages should be ashamed of themselves to see what they caused.

KEVIN SCHREIBER  
Mayor of Sutherland Shire

We will never be able to forget this because it is so sickening. It makes me want to retch. It makes me embarrassed and ashamed to live in the Shire.

JEN ADAM  
Resident of Woolloomooloo

These days it's harder to be different



HSU-MING TEO

In less than a week it will be the anniversary of last year's Cronulla riots, which broke out on December 11. The infamous SMS which preceded the riots read as follows: "Come to Cronulla this weekend to take revenge. This Sunday every Aussie in the Shire get down to North Cronulla to support Leb and wog bashing day."

Signs aired on that day such as "We grow here, you flow here", or "Banan pride", and the prominent display of the Australian flag, made it clear who was and was not considered an Australian.

Being Australian is more than formal citizenship. It is a feeling. It is a way of life.

But Australia was different. Because of our appreciation for diversity we could broker cultural difference to our immediate geographical region. It was an innately arrogant assumption, but a happily optimistic one.

All this has changed. Australia may be a multicultural nation, but it is not a multicultural society.

Yet nothing has arisen to replace the ideal of multiculturalism as a way of making Australians from different cultural backgrounds feel at home, to make them feel Australian. Unlike a national identity has become narrow and regressively defined.

Editor's note  
We received more than 600 emails on the Cronulla riot yesterday. Of these, 30 per cent expressed shame and disgust at the behaviour of the locals, 23 per cent felt the political climate played a role, 10 per cent saw the violence as evidence of deep-seated racism or the failure of multiculturalism, 5 per cent criticised the illegal bashing gangs, 4 per cent believed the mobs were partly to blame, 3 per cent saw fault on both sides and 20 per cent addressed general issues or could not be otherwise classified.

DISCRIMINATION

Treat us like dogs and we'll bite back

Young Lebanese Australians now feel they are second-class citizens, writes Roland Haddad.



# Kultur Shock

UROS CVORO

It is appropriately inappropriate that the second anniversary of the events at Sydney's Cronulla beach follows closely on the heels of the 2007 APEC meeting in Sydney. If the heightened security measures and suspension of basic civil liberties during this event minimised the risk of protests, the opening of the second installment of *Our Lucky Country* brings their proximity into sharp relief. For while it is possible and necessary to observe the events at Cronulla in purely local terms, it is also paramount to contextualise them politically, socially and culturally as completely integrated elements of Australia taking its part in the developed capitalist order. In the context of global power plays, inequality, economic uncertainty and neo-liberal democracy, cultural enmities are the future. Yet, such global perspective on economic integration and cultural exclusion would miss what is truly at stake in projects such as *Our Lucky Country*: a grassroots, community-based attempt at opening some of the inherent prejudices to dialogue.

In this context, and in attempting to address the ongoing burning questions that underpin understandings of cultural difference in Australia, my starting point will necessarily be autobiographical. I migrated to Australia in 1995 as a refugee from civil war in ex-Yugoslavia. Having settled in the area of Hurstville, I was exposed to both the infantile garden-variety high school playground racism – because I spoke with a funny accent, and had an even funnier name – and the prejudice-infused understanding of Australia imparted by relatives and friends who had moved here

earlier. The former soon waned as a result of my loss of an Eastern European accent, much to the displeasure of my university friends who felt that I 'Anglo-Saxonised' myself too much (even though the name remained a standard stumbling block). The latter remained in my private life through contact with people of 'my' background, who clung onto imagined notions of identity and ethnicity as a way to deal with their migrant experience. Thus, my understanding of Australia became poised between striving for cosmopolitanism and acceptance, and my background which taught me that different people cannot live together for long.

Two anecdotes illustrate this typically awkward and often humorous split, inherent to the experience of being a migrant. The first concerns the proverbial child-parent power struggle implicit in the process of growing up and made even more complex when command of another language (or lack thereof) is at stake. On this occasion, my friend's father returned home from shopping visibly upset and loudly complaining about the stupidity of "all English people". This phrase was his description of everyone who was not a first generation migrant, and often included everyone who was not from ex-Yugoslavia. After some time he explained that he went to buy a strainer. Having forgotten the English word for strainer, he tried describing the item by repeatedly shouting "Water Go! Macaroni Stay!" He was angry because the staff did not understand him.

The second incident happened years later when a friend from university publicly congratulated me on my familiarity with art

history, especially since so many of ex-Yugoslavia's museums and cultural treasures were destroyed in a bombing raid by Polish air forces during the Second World War. In both cases, good intentions overlapped with the kind of ignorance or misunderstanding that is typical of attempts to comprehend cultural difference. Like in the case of my uncle who went to purchase a train ticket, and when asked, "Single?" – referring to the ticket of course – proudly and defiantly placed his right hand on his chest and exclaimed, "No! Married!"

Thus, when the ugly violence at Cronulla erupted, my own response – written in an article for *Broadsheet* – became as much an attempt to deal with the images of intolerance that brought me to Australia in the first place, as it was about formulating my own understanding of cultural difference in Australia in the face of such developments.<sup>1</sup> Here I will revisit some of the themes of that article as a way of pointing out the tensions inherent to cultural difference in Australia, and carving out space for projects such as *Our Lucky Country*. Revisiting some of the inherent tensions of cultural difference at this time sheds light on the antagonisms that continue to underpin debates around multiculturalism as a model for Australian national identity.<sup>2</sup>

The main reason for the ongoing spectre of cultural difference in Australia is its inability to maintain a balance between social cohesion and difference.<sup>3</sup> Or, to put this differently, it's about the inability of Australia to accommodate difference based on race in

the present model of nationhood. The issue of difference based on a construct of race thoroughly underscored all the debates considering multiculturalism since the seventies. This continues to be the case and recurs in more recent debates that have revolved around an Australian republic and citizenship. The question of citizenship that has become more prominent in recent years marks a departure from multiculturalism. For, in citizenship as a model for 'being Australian', a sense of belonging is defined less through embracing cultural difference than adherence to/respect for Australia as supra-national institution defined by law. In other words, with citizenship, cultural difference is defined top-down, respecting diversity while emphasising commitment to social cohesion based on laws that override 'older' allegiances. Citizenship is increasingly defined through what may be called 'pedagogical' democracy: where the right to be Australian is earned and proven by learning abstract notions informing liberal democracy, such as political institutions, history and economy. The push for citizenship tests is clear evidence that being Australian today is a question of learning how to participate in a community. The question that remains is the relevance of the knowledge thus gained to interaction at an everyday level.

Yet, recent public debates concerning asylum seekers, gang rapes and terrorism demonstrate that multicultural notions of compatibility and incompatibility between cultures have not lost currency, but have merely shifted rhetoric. It would appear that

for the ‘normal’ functioning of multiculturalism – and any other plural model for national identity – there will always be limits to the toleration of *difference*. And within this model, certain notions of *difference* test the limits of this tolerance. Australian history is rife with examples of how changing constructs of excess of difference have informed the public debate: the threat of Asian ‘invasion’, the threat of Aboriginal resistance and most recently the fear of violent Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

Even though Australia officially purports to account for all ethnic groups under the auspices of a generalised culture, the position of all three groups has been articulated as a ‘problem’ of incorporating a (threatening) difference. The popular spectrum of national identity debates in Australia often uses the notion of culture to shift away from confronting racial politics. In part, this is because in an Australian context, racial politics means facing the legacy and policies that have sustained colonial (and more recent) violence and these confrontations force us to reconsider the success of tolerance. Cultural diversity in Australia is a mode of producing a social order that serves to narrativise an ideology of a diverse and tolerant Australia, concealing the racism embedded in the experience of Australia as a nation. This racism is most clearly evident in the antagonism between the position of ‘multicultural’ Australians and Indigenous Australians. Yet, as Ghassan Hage demonstrates, this antagonism can be easily extended to include a variety of inter-cultural relations between Anglo-Irish and ‘ethnic’

Australians, Asian and non-Asian Australians, Christian and Islamic Australians.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most prominent (and politically loaded) meanings of ‘culture’ in Australia today relies on the assumed opposition between a presumably secular (and neutral) majority against Islam as the universal symbol of religious fundamentalism. A majority of the media discussions that followed events at Cronulla centred on the question of how and whether Muslim ‘difference’ can and should be included in ‘neutral’ Australia. The conflation of Islam with religion in general performs a twofold function. On the one hand, it draws attention away from the ever-increasing role that other religious beliefs play in contemporary politics, as shown by both John Howard and Kevin Rudd’s recent appeals to ‘the Christian demographic’. The ‘religion card’ in both instances was never questioned on the grounds of its political neutrality, because it was abstracted under the appeals to general pseudo-Enlightenment ideals. On the other hand, the general conflation of Islam with religion has led to fundamentalism as a primarily Islamic trait. This is evident in the way both Muslim men and women are singled out as a *threat* to tolerance. Muslim masculinity is identified with public violence and terrorism, while conversely, the custom of wearing a hijab has associated Muslim women with the more ‘silent’ threat of terrorism and patriarchal servitude. The image of a veiled Muslim woman forms an ambiguous convergence of sexuality, danger and oppression that is frequently identified as starkly opposed to

'Australian values'. While there have been no documented incidents in Australia that involve the hijab in any way, its very sight is deemed as threatening in the public sphere. It is certainly possible to read this perceived threat as a manifestation of contemporary western orientalism, where what is concealed out of sight becomes sexualised to the point of being unbearable.

Even though the double standards evident in the treatment of Muslims in Australia is exemplary of the failure of accepting cultural difference, it should be highlighted that this is by no means a singular or one-way process. In other words, the process by which the 'other' is produced in the Australian cultural landscape is a much more complex cultural dynamic. Otherness is a condition that sees the politically and culturally subordinate internalise and reproduce the stereotypical conceptions held by the dominant culture. Otherness becomes a condition by which the dominated are considered as absolutely and irreversibly different, located outside accepted norms and outside the possibility of historical change. Yet, the notion of otherness is a thoroughly historical construct. This is evident both in its constantly shifting field of representation (who is the 'other'?), and desire implicit in producing otherness (what is the 'other'?). This suggests that the racism couched in the process of 'othering' is not endemic to one (dominant) group but is in turn reproduced and channeled even by the subordinate groups.

Thus, in terms of the contemporary political landscape in Australia, we may ask where does the 'other' start? Invariably, the

answer will depend on who you ask.<sup>6</sup> In Sydney, for the Anglo-Celtic population with its English roots and sensibilities, the frontier of otherness is marked by the borders of Western Sydney with its largely working class, immigrant population. A perfect example occurred when the *Chasers War on Everything* (ABC TV) team interviewed residents of wealthy Northern Sydney suburb Mosman, asking their views on the prospect of building a Mosque there. Several of the people interviewed said it would be more 'appropriate' elsewhere, namely in Western Sydney.

But for the diverse population of Western Sydney – including a number of ethnic groups such as Italians, Greeks, and ex-Yugoslavs – the 'other' begins in smaller specific ethnic 'ghettoes'. In many cases the crucial frontier is between themselves as (displaced) representatives of European civilisation and the collective Asian spirit. More specifically, in many cases, the individual groups see themselves as the line of defense against some kind of imagined fundamentalist threat, frequently embodied in Muslim groups. Yet, the Lebanese will frequently tell you that they represent the preservation of the purity of spirit, and family life against the tidal wave of hedonist corruption embodied by the tainted Anglo-Western decadence. And so it goes on indefinitely. The 'other' is always abstracted to elsewhere, to the west, to the south. In this instance Sydney becomes a space of imagined urban cartography onto which many different prejudices are projected.

This understanding of the ‘other’ captures some of the internal construction of boundaries in Australia and highlights the fact that prejudice goes in all directions. It also includes a more general understanding of difference in people based on appearance. While culture may be one way of approaching this question, others could include the categories of class, gender, body, sexuality, and so on. Yet, while it is important to point out that no one is immune to prejudice, the implicit social and political weight of racism is paramount. This articulation of inter-relations of exclusion always refers to otherness understood through its proximity or distance from what Hage calls ‘degrees of whiteness’.<sup>7</sup> What we are dealing with is minority groups establishing themselves through prejudice in relation to an untenable ideal: Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. What is at stake is who will be admitted and excluded into the present capitalist developed order of multicultural Australia. Every group tries to legitimise their place in this order by presenting themselves as a preserver of some important aspect of civilisation, in contrast to the confines of their specific identities.

My intention here has been not to discredit Australia as a space for the playing out of cultural differences, but rather to present an interpretation of it that seeks to open new critical possibilities. I believe that the critical potential of cultural difference has been radically reduced in recent years, and that this can be attributed to the internal tensions of multiculturalism as much as to a product of political conservatism. There is alarming evidence of

parochialism in Australian attitudes towards critical debates. The space for productive and critical dialectic about relevant issues has been discredited, sanitised and substituted with a ‘you are in or out’ approach in present Australian society.<sup>8</sup> I am interested in (re)carving out a space for that critical dialectic in Australia, and the starting point can be the encounter between different groups in open acknowledgement of their prejudices.

Projects such as *Our Lucky Country* that focus on areas where contemporary Australian identity politics are being played out – both geographically and ideologically – represent spaces outside of the limits of multiculturalism and the diversity it upholds. These spaces and the everyday humorous narratives they represent, test the limits of tolerance. Insofar as *Our Lucky Country* puts forward a picture of diverse Australia, it does this through artworks that do not avoid traumatic or problematic issues in Australian history. Such issues are projected onto the cultural plane as the multitude of stories that constitute the Australian history. *Our Lucky Country* thus creates a democratic and open-ended public arena of diversity in which constructed prejudices can be freely negotiated, and as such suggests an honest and appropriate encounter with contemporary Australia.

## NOTES

1. Uros Cvorc, 'Contact Zone Cronulla' in *Broadsheet*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2006.
2. A comprehensive survey of literature on Australian multiculturalism is too extensive to list here. For select examples see books such as Ghassan Hage and Rowanne Couch (Eds), *The Future of Australian Multiculturalism*, Sydney: Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, 1999; Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998; Jon Stratton, *Race Daze: Australian Identity in Crisis*, Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998.
3. Ellie Vasta, 'Dialectics of Domination: Racism and Multiculturalism' in *The Teeth are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural Australia*, (Ed) Ellie Vasta and Stephen Castles, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996. 46-72, 46.
4. See Peter Manning, 'Australian Imagining Islam' in *Muslims and the News Media* (Ed) Elizabeth Poole, London: Tauris, 2006. 128-141, 141. Manning provides a good survey of the stereotypes of Muslims in Australian media in recent years.
5. See Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in Multicultural Society*, Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998.
6. See Slavoj Žižek, 'The Spectre of Balkan' in *The Journal of the International Institute*, available at <http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/journal/vol6no2/zizek.htm> (accessed: October 3, 2007).
7. Hage, *ibid.*, 20.
8. Robyn Archer also points to the lack of a critical dialectic in Australia in the context of the performing arts. See *The Myth of the Mainstream: Politics and the Performing Arts in Australia Today*, Platform Papers, No. 4, Sydney: Currency House, 2005, 1.

## NUHA SAAD

Nuha Saad is intrigued by how our thoughts and behaviour are influenced by often unconscious reactions to spatial and colour stimuli. Her practice has for some time explored how the visceral response we have to colour – its immediacy, apparent irrationality and intensity – interrelates with our embodied experience of spatial delimitations, both the general way in which architecture guides and moulds our movements, but also our perception of specific places cathected with memory and particular identities. Her explorations have taken the form of sculptural ‘paintings’ (or painterly installations) that combine household interior design elements such as skirting boards and balustrades, and graded colours, ‘diluted’ with white.

One significant earlier series (that included *Pegasus Ace*, *Jubilant* and *Cosmobil Ace*) saw Saad draw on her reactions to the huge container vessels docked in her vicinity, whose towering walls of rusted colour and romantic names became associated with her parents’ migration by boat from their native Lebanon. Another work comprised the poetic clumping of brightly coloured turned wood or finials found in the typical Victorian cottages in which so many mid-20th century migrant families grew up. Saad’s composition foregrounded the pieces’ graceful arabesques, thus complicating received ideas of Australian suburbia with a touch of Orientalism. In Saad’s works, ordinary architectural elements are decontextualised and reworked to explore how spatial features and colour work together to construct a sense of place, a cultural identity even. Thus, what might at first appear to be work predominantly concerned with questions of form and the nature of painting opens up broader social and political dialogues.

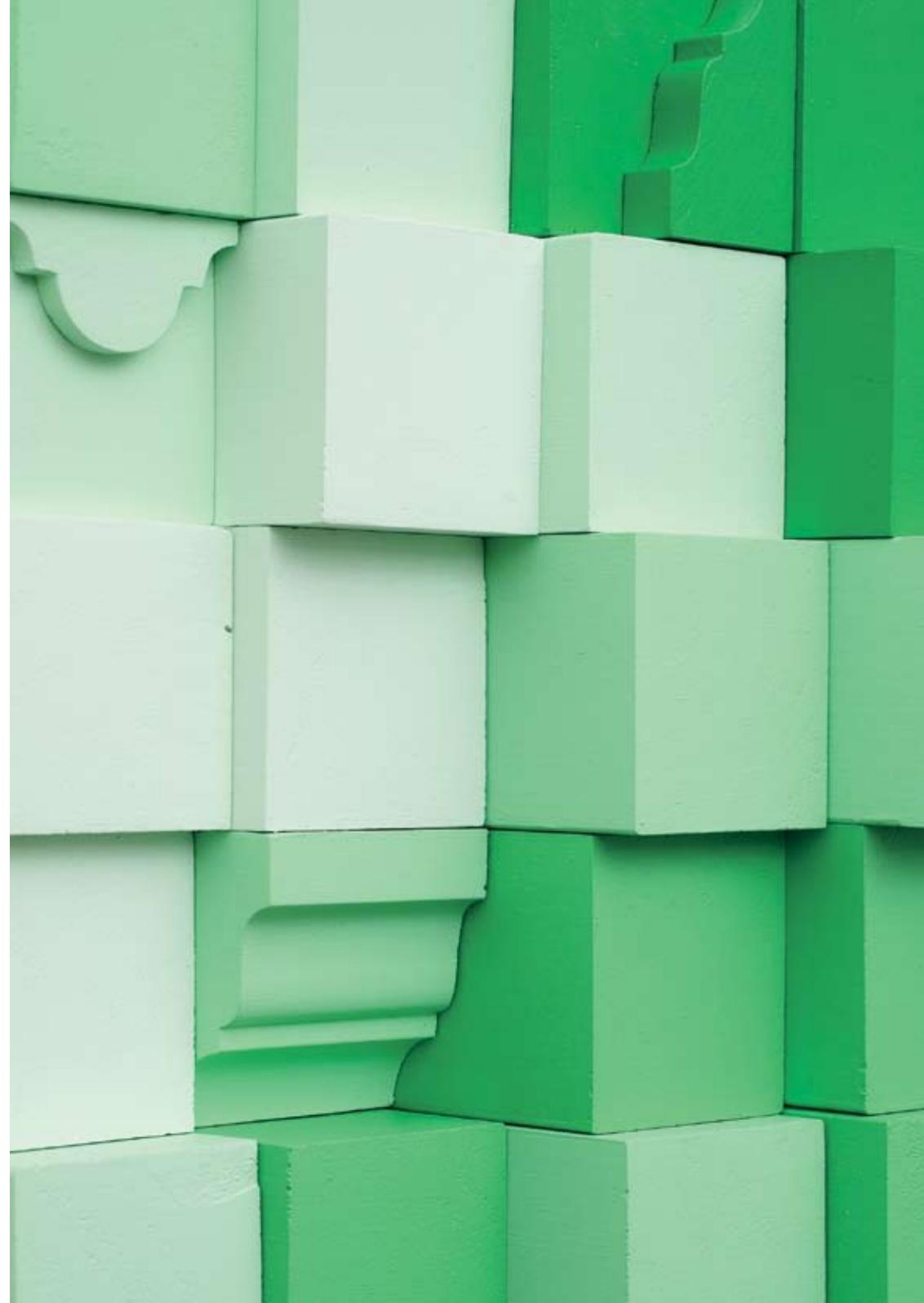
For both *Our Lucky Country* exhibitions, Saad has used her explorations of the relationship between colour, territory and

cultural identity to consider what happened in Cronulla in December 2005. Colour is not only a racial signifier; it also plays a large role in designations of territory and identity, being one of the key elements of maps and, of course, national flags, where the emotive power of colour is mobilised with particular virulence. Saad brings all these associations together in her attempt to ‘re-map’ the site of the riots, to go over the territory, to symbolically shift the violent energies that had cathected onto those places that for many had held fond memories. Her large drawings, executed on tracing paper to capture the sense of a non-ending process of addition and erasure that can be approached from either side, represent a revised and revisited Cronulla, where the past is still visible but does not hold the future captive. Rendered in the colours of both the Lebanese and the Australian flags, Saad’s ‘map’ offers an alternative view of this territory, as a space of possibility and contingency. This Cronulla is a place where cultural identity is not fixed and instantly identifiable, but supple and nuanced, not unlike Saad’s own experience of growing up Australian.

**Jacqueline Millner**

facing page  
*Model for a New Place (detail)*, 2007  
 Acrylic on wood, three pieces: 35 x 35 x  
 10 cm each (Private Collection)

All images courtesy of the artist and  
 James Dorahy Project Space, Sydney





*Model for a New Place, 2007*  
Acrylic on wood, three pieces: 35 x 35 x  
10 cm each (Private Collection)



*Sabotage in Lighter Pastel, 2007*  
Acrylic on wood, two pieces: 31.5 x  
32 x 13 cm each piece (Private  
Collection)



above  
*Medusa*, 2007, Acrylic on wood, 17 x  
 17 x 13 cm

facing page  
*In Between*, 2007, Acrylic on wood,  
 three pieces: 53 x 9 x 10 cm each piece

