

## realtime 45

### Red Fern reckonings

#### Cassi Plate: Reckonings



Ruark Lewis, Jonathan Bottrell Jones, Nuha Saad, Oysters, 2001

Reckoning: to settle accounts with, to rely or depend on, of considerable importance or influence...

In the winter of 2001 there are a lot of reckonings going on. The poisonous assumptions of White Australia pervade public and private life; not since before the 60s—the era of civil rights—has ‘Australia’ so blatantly been made to mean ‘Anglo’, asylum seekers imprisoned, crimes racialised. During this winter, and the spring months before, a group of 4 installation artists and 2 curators, commissioned by Performance Space, have been collectively reckoning with the meanings and contexts of reconciliation (or, as Wesley Enoch calls it, “Wreck – Con – Silly – Nation”).

The brief was to explore and problematise popular and political notions of reconciliation, undertaking a rewriting and remapping of Redfern through the exchange of memories and histories, and to develop a collective art process and collaborative means of production. Redfern, the site of the Performance Space, is a long-term meeting place for decades of Aboriginal people arriving from the country and interstate, as well as the site of some of Sydney’s oldest non-Anglo migrant communities.

The 2 curators, Rea and Ihab Shalbak, and the 4 installation artists, Jonathan Bottrell Jones, Ruark Lewis, Romaine Moreton and Nuha Saad, each have complex histories and memories of Redfern; ‘funereal’ is how Ruark describes it—many of their combined memories of Redfern relate to a past of deceased people and cultures passed away.

In Shalbak’s words, “the experimental collectivity initiated by Reckonings” released poetic responses to

ideas of place and home. As you entered the gallery, you heard people discussing Redfern as both place and idea, a set of histories and present stories, recorded on the move through Redfern's streets. This is the first of many layers of remapping, compounded by further works: video images of faces exiting Redfern station; Drive-by Shooting—flashing impressions of Redfern's streets from the safety of the car, playing on the outsider's fear of the area's Mean Streets; and a tiny screen around a dark corner intimately revealing interspersed shots of a private and public Redfern. More immediately, you are arrested by Moreton's use of footage of the largest gathering of Aboriginal people ever, the protests against celebrating 200 years of white invasion in '88, the celebration of survival, the March Against Forgetting. Running around this installation are 2 contrasting soliloquies to the idea of place: Kafka's late 19th century yearning for the security of home (in German) and 'Bindamayi's song about Country:

Murtanga-ulla-la tharkiart kumarnha-la putarri  
Kulawina yarku kujurri kuralanha  
(When I come back to my country  
Someone has built a stockyard on the flat land,  
And a whitefella, Bluey, is sleeping in my birthplace.)

Despite the quotations representing the unequal power relationships of colonialism, an urgent poignancy erupts in the meaning produced between them. They share a sense of yearning, not just for a home but, on Bindamayi's part—as Joseph Pugliese writes in the Reckonings catalogue—of the right to offer hospitality, “a right so brutally arrogated from Aboriginal peoples”, in that first moment of invasion, and throughout white/Aboriginal contact.

Moving through the rooms the sense of collaboration between the artists is expressed through Jonathon Bottrell Jones' forty ambivalent words, running stencilled along the walls in 2 parallel lines, cohering the diverse work on exhibit. The viewer is left with plenty of space to insert their own meanings into the often abstract and oblique formalist work: Ruark Lewis' tall ruler-like measuring sticks, totemic in size and colour, calibrating differing systems of measuring land title, evoking those flood-level, river-crossing poles; Nuha Saad's pieces of architrave, painted green, arranged and lit on the floor, surrounded by dissected banister poles. Only after several viewings did I start to comprehend the poetics of these pieces; in counterpoint with the name of the architrave work, Green Lake, you could hear the whispering of 19th century houses, and the name's relationship to 'The Red Fern'. The child-size house-frames offered beguiling pillows to be hauntingly smoothed, Daisy Bates-way, 'for a dying race.'

We are saturated with imagery from a popular, global culture in denial of history and memory; incorporating words in conjunction with images works to create a new dynamic. Within this dialectical space, new meanings erupt. One of the themes produced through the process of inter-cultural and inter-racial collaboration, through talking and listening, is the idea of living and working within difference, and listening to the layers of the past as they exist in the present. The Reckonings exhibition featured white powder as a central motif—the lime produced from the first days of white invasion by grinding down the massive shell middens (or “monuments” as Peter Myers calls them) which lined Sydney harbour. Oyster shells spilling over bricks and mortar tell how a second Sydney was built from the Eora place—the shells of the Eora

contained to this day within the lime mortar of Sydney's buildings. But the white powder also brings into the present the white flour, white sugar—mission food, arsenic-laced 'White Man's Poison', and the ubiquitous heroin currently poisoning the community.

The urgency of the questions surrounding reconciliation creates the context for the formalist artists producing the Reckonings exhibition, highlighting the difference between meaningless abstraction and the creation of poetically charged objects whose material value resonates. This was not an exhibition to be quickly consumed. Ruark Lewis commented that, like all allegorical work, disguising and masking initiates you slowly into a process, much like the reconciliation process itself. Unlike the directness and speed of agit prop, allegorical formalist work requires time to ponder the signs, and make your own connections. Or you could miss the strategies of reclaiming, incorporated in the simple way the re-writing of 'Red Fern' magically unleashes the imagination to hear the sounds of a pre-colonial past, a fern-lined creek, dripping water and calling voices, breaking apart the conquering myths of place.

Reckonings, curated by Rea & Ihab Shalbak,  
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