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Contemporary Australian Art: A Provocative Analysis Contemporary Australian Identities and Visual Art*

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Introduction

In this presentation, my aim has been to present and analyse artworks by contemporary Australian artists as a means of exploring the complexities of contemporary Australian identities, and some of the comparatively recent shifts or changes in those identities. If we accept that artwork, accompanied by 'careful looking' on the part of the viewer, can indeed lead us to a better understanding of 'the complexity of our experience, a complexity that is easily overlooked', as Noë asserts, in that case, providing an historical overview of Australia's visual art is surely as good a way as any other (for example, reading books or sociological dissertations, or listening to conventional "chalk and talk" lectures about Australian identity) of exploring and bearing witness to the changes in Australian identities over the past hundred years or so. It needs to be pointed out that this is only one way of examining Australian art, and by no means the only way. It would be possible to analyse each of the works I will be showing you today exclusively in terms of their aesthetic values, but this is not the approach I am taking today, because my intention is different.

In the time available however, it has been possible only to paint the broadest of brush-stroke pictures of some of the important changes and shifts in Australian identities that have occurred over the past hundred years. I have attempted to 'map' the images created by important Australian artists onto certain significant changes in Australian society and Australian identities, especially in terms of Australia's regional identity, over the same period of time.

There are also many other practising artists working in Australia today whose work is equally worthy of inclusion in such an overview, but I have had to be selective because of the time factor. In addition, I have had to move through the images at a more rapid pace than is desirable for the 'careful looking' at artworks advocated by Noë, because another of my aims has been to acquaint you with a cross-section of contemporary Australian artwork rather than just a few examples. This approach is

* This was originally delivered in the form of a powerpoint presentation as the keynote address at the annual Japanese Australian Studies Association at Kyoto's Doshisha University on 11th June 2005. The original powerpoint presentation included many images of contemporary Australian visual art that can not be reproduced here. The written version that appears here complements that original powerpoint presentation.

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somewhat at odds with the desirable goal of ‘careful looking’ at artworks. To some extent I have had to take a ‘snapshot view’ of Australian art, for the purpose of introducing you to the broad field.

Deliberate use of the plural form ‘Australian identities’ has been used throughout my talk. Rather than talking about ‘*the* Australian (national) identity’ the plural form ‘identities’ has been used quite intentionally because it better reflects contemporary Australian reality. Implicit in this argument is the idea that there is no one, single, monolithic, homogenous Australian national identity, and furthermore, that such a unitary, homogenous identity is not regarded as desirable. Rather, contemporary Australian identities may be regarded as a kind of patchwork quilt, a stitching together of the diverse identities that contribute to our collective identity. To use another metaphor, contemporary Australian identity can be regarded as a mosaic, with many parts comprising a whole⁽¹⁾.

In making such observations, I find myself agreeing with the views of the late Donald Horne:

There is [only] one sense in which discussion on ‘national identity’ is fruitful, despite the name. Seeking ‘the national identity’ is as much a waste of time as seeking the typical Australian — because Australia is a diverse and changing society. But often all that people mean by discussing ‘national identity’ are questions such as: Where are we now? How are we changing? How are we reacting to changes in the rest of the world?

These are the questions any society must be asking of itself all the time —because each society is in certain ways distinctive and each society in a modern world is in some ways changing. To say that there are some ways in which Australia is distinctive is not nationalistic ...There are some things that are distinctive about the Australian political system, its social mix, its physical environment, its demographic mixits mix of faiths, habits, lifestyles and values —and what these are must necessarily be the basis for a continuing discussion. (Donald Horne, 1994:15)

In a rather different context, Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf has asserted that identity can be a ‘false friend’. One’s identity obviously comprises a range of affiliations and allegiances, but Maalouf strongly implies that when individuals or nations or other groups have one overriding political affiliation or “essential” allegiance to a single cause it can lead to fanaticism, fundamentalism and even sectarian violence. Without wanting to take a triumphalist view of Australian society, because no society is perfect, I believe that Australia is indeed fortunate to have avoided — for the most part — such fanaticism and hatred, based on the narrowest forms of nationalism and identity politics (see Glossary). Echoing Donald Horne’s statement, Maalouf goes on to say that all identity comprises various component parts but also that in every case there is also a certain level of specificity to our identities.

(1) I am arguing here that Australian identities are frequently additive, in the sense that when new dimensions of identity are embraced, this does not necessarily mean that they replace older dimensions of Australian identity.