

Colliding Worlds



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When the director of the 2009 'Come Out' Festival approached the Samstag Museum of Art, inviting us to participate in this biennial South Australia-wide cultural festival for 'young people', we saw an opportunity to elevate the role of the visual arts in a context that, hitherto, had looked mostly to the performing arts for ways to engage with this important audience. If the definition of 'young people' is broad (and might even at a stretch include those 'young-at-heart' spirits now past twenty-five, but still open to delight) then the 2009 Come Out Festival was for us.

## Colliding Worlds Erica Green

Pia Borg, Nicholas Folland, Hayden Fowler, Shaun Kirby, Patricia Piccinini and Anna Platten

An additional lure was the interesting concept, 'Colliding Worlds', adopted by the Festival as its overarching theme. But what might this mean, and where does one begin in order to express the visual and interpretive possibilities of this rich idea?

A now-ubiquitous term common in newspaper headlines and even adopted in the music of Neil Finn and Crowded House,<sup>1</sup> the 'colliding worlds' image entered the language of popular culture in 1933 with the science fiction novel, *When Worlds Collide*, by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer. *When Worlds Collide* tells the story of two rogue planets that enter our solar system, one of which collides with Earth causing catastrophic damage and the end of civilisation. With ingenuity and science, however, a few survivors escape to the habitable second rogue planet, Bronson Beta, with its promise of new beginnings. The influential story inspired a visionary 1951 cult film, and a sequel, *After Worlds Collide*, set on the survivors' new world.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, in our present circumstances of climatic disruption and globally threatened ecologies, the colliding worlds concept is remarkably apt, contemporary and prescient. However, it is not only our natural environments and sensitive ecologies that are stressed, reactive and changing. In fact the notion of a 'collision of worlds' can be seen as an allegory of modern times in the broadest sense, portraying also a human world where difference and the unavoidable collision of competing values — political, technological, social, religious and ethnic — threaten the established order. Today, wherever one turns there is unrest and dramatic upheaval in human society, not least in the present worldwide financial meltdown, the most catastrophic development of its kind since the 1929 New York sharemarket crash precipitated the Great Depression.

Yet some say it has always been thus in human affairs, and that crisis in human society is purgative; that 'change' forces evolution!<sup>3</sup>

And where scientists typically look to rare species of rainforest frogs as true indicators of climate change, we might in a similar vein also reflect on the insights that artists provide to us, in their often-inspirational cultural work. Thinking imaginatively outside of society's mainstream of ideas, as they do, artists have long found unique ways to express conditions in society, and to foreshadow developments.

The work of some artists may seem inscrutable, fantastic or bizarre, and may sometimes alienate and even cause offence. But with hindsight we come to revere artistic ideas that open new space and provide new ways of looking, or work that candidly portrays society's underbelly with its flaws and fears. We see the vision and truth, the 'fragile knowledge of wise objects' — as it were — later, at which moment we adopt it as our own. Think Hieronymus Bosch, Vincent van Gogh or Marcel Duchamp for a start.

The six artists invited to participate in this Samstag Museum of Art exhibition, *Colliding Worlds*, are from our own community and era. They each produce an art that in some aspect resonates or engages with ideas of social, cultural or environmental responsibility, or that otherwise communicates the uncertainty, challenge and strangeness of our particular 'colliding world' moment.

Like steel girders crashing, **Patricia Piccinini's** art commands the viewer's immediate and absolute attention, such is the power of her sculpture's life-sized realism, and the disbelief that is prompted on recognising its impossibility. The emotional chemistry of this effect is brilliant, blending viewer awe with incredulity and humour, and spontaneous revulsion with intense forensic scrutiny.

Patricia PICCININI, *Game Boys Advanced*, 2002



Hayden FOWLER, *Second Nature vi*, 2008, photograph by Joy Lai



Nicholas FOLLAND, *floe* (studio work in progress), 2009



For most other artists, this impact would alone be sufficient reward. But Piccinini has something particular to communicate that transcends her work's impressive aesthetic and material qualities. In fact, she is exploring the extreme frontier of biomedical technology and its (potential) application in genetic experiments. In this ambiguous Piccinini world, human genes co-mingle with those from stem-cells and animals, spawning mute organisms of living flesh, children who age prematurely, and aberrant, semi-sentient entities whose human features merge in equal measure with those of animals (among whom we recognise those we might possibly cultivate and harvest for food).

In all this, however, we also see that Piccinini has invested her creations with implicit signs of human-like viability. Though flawed and tragic they project unmistakable qualities of intelligence, and they display a palpable affection (even love), that reminds us of moralities and ethics at risk or lurking unresolved, in this soon-to-collide future shock.

**Hayden Fowler**, too, is pre-occupied with the relationship between animals and humans, along with a growing fear that our present trajectory as the dominant species is untenable. His 36-minute video work, *Second Nature*, draws on classic, science-fiction film narratives (recalling, for example, the artificial bubble-world of 'Zardoz', in parallel with Kubrick's magical, hermetic Jupiter room in '2001') to present a clinical laboratory-like environment set somewhere in space at a future, 'post-Earth' time. We travel here like distanced zoological observers, lingering among Fowler's sterile, air-ducted chambers and witnessing combinations of men, women and animals joined in a strangely purposeless and indolent stupor.

It is as if these beautiful animals and similarly splendid humans represent our unavoidable destiny as exotic remnants of species: inactive, pointless and now only artificially sustained in deep space.

Perhaps, in fact, a species already lost to the unforgiving universe.

Among growing signs of global warming, the thin bridge of ice to the Wilkins Ice Shelf, off the coast of Antarctica, splintered on 5 April, 2009. The 150 x 110 kilometre ice shelf is itself now considered to be in the final stages of collapse: scientists are reported to be concerned that the event shows climate change is happening faster than previously thought.<sup>4</sup>

Although **Nicholas Folland's** interest in Antarctica encompasses his concern for its preservation as the world's pre-eminent wilderness environment, he sees a larger narrative at work in this great southern land, so close to Australia and linked to our history as it is, yet coveted by all nations. The coldest, windiest and driest of the continents and comprised ninety-eight percent of ice, Antarctica's special beauty – and its dangerous, fierce extremes – run in close tandem with compelling tales of courageous human exploration, mythic tragedy and profound mystery.

Folland's installation-work *floe*, inspired by the topographical drawings of legendary explorer Robert Scott, presents a majestic sweep of imagined Antarctic coastline, viewed as it might be seen from the near-distance of arriving boats at sea. Folland's

Antarctica, however, is more an inspirational idea than a navigable place, and *floe* embodies his long-standing interest in maritime themes and his special affinity for materials of glass and ice.

Crafted painstakingly from hundreds of crystal vessels — hung individually, line-by-line, to form the panoramic whole — this Antarctica reminds us of the crystal hung in garden trees, waiting for a gentle breeze by which to tinkle and enchant. But, rather than charm, *floe* emulates Antarctica's grave and stark simplicity, confirming its timeless identity as an unconquered frontier of mysterious and fragile beauty.

The mysterious activities in **Pia Borg's** animated film, *Palimpsest*, point not so much to a collision of contemporary realities, as to the phenomenon of memory and time in which *all* of reality is played out on an ever-changing stage called 'the present'. Somewhere on that stage also co-exists the multitudinous past and, in a peculiar, ultimately incomprehensible sense, the future.

'Palimpsest' means a manuscript written over a partly erased older manuscript, in a way that old words can be read beneath the new. In her film, *Palimpsest*, and using the device of a fixed camera viewpoint, Borg similarly unfolds a sequence of overlapping events and changing characters that — like traces of ghosts oblivious to scrutiny — appear, disappear and then reappear. A soundtrack of shortwave radio recordings evokes the voices of the deceased.

Traversing a cycle of three centuries in ten minutes of stop-frame photography, Borg's generations of lives past are largely imagined, yet they are inspired by found artefacts and photos. She also provides us an atmospheric window to intriguing cultural histories, including 17th century painting and early 20th century cinema. Rich in imagination and the patient skills so characteristic of the animator's art, Borg's *Palimpsest* is a strange and melancholy crucible of time, a world of loss, decay and change where the ghosts of the past re-present themselves and their transient, once-again-lived lives, for our mournful reflection.

The incommunicable inner dimension that humans experience on our journey through life is an abiding theme in the wonderfully inventive and original art of **Anna Platten**. While her paintings depict objective situations and activities that are rich in narrative possibilities (and which quickly engage the viewer in speculation, because of their striking and unusual imagery), Platten's real subject is the self.

More particularly, the complex theatre of the 'outer world' that she cleverly creates in her paintings (and which so commands ones attention), is intended really as a portal to an underlying inner life of emotion and imagination that she seeks to locate and express, but whose meanings are submerged among the signs and symbols of the narrative and must be discerned through insight and feeling.

Platten's art 'speaks' with rare personal power, strengthened with libidinous talismans from her life: her complete mastery of the arcane craft of oil-painting and the contemplative pleasure she provides through her skilled compositions, are integral to her success.



Anna PLATTEN, *The Journey - gate*, 2008



Pia BORG, *Palimpsest*, 2008



Shaun KIRBY, *cousin beast*, 2005

Looking back we see that her paintings consistently have expressed a personal 'journey', traversing childhood's inevitable collision with sexuality and, later, life's progression to relationships, marriage, the responsibilities of parenting, and to emerging anxieties associated with ageing and the loss of creative power.

Platten's triptych in *Colliding Worlds, The Journey*, reveals the mature artist at a new stage of life, and with new strategies and stories. Previously, each individual Platten work has been entirely self-contained in its content; but in *The Journey*, the narrative operates synergistically as a conversation linked across a group of works that make up the single whole (and whose elements may yet continue to grow). In *The Journey*, Platten's intriguing emotional baggage, her 'guilty follies' (as she calls them) and her utterly fascinating arsenal of autobiographical props, are all on display in expanded form. It is a seductive 'landscape of the hidden self', awaiting our curious visitation.

In the 1990 Spielberg-produced film, 'Arachnophobia', well-meaning scientists discover the world's most venomous, dangerous, intelligent, aggressive and fearsome spider that surely ever lived, deep in a South American jungle. Prised from its habitat, however, 'the general' (as he becomes known) inevitably escapes to small-town America, sets up shop among the houses in a backyard barn, and proceeds to breed — like an extraterrestrial invader — causing mayhem, indiscriminate toxic death and, above all, universal fear.

At its most elemental level, the fear experienced on encountering **Shaun Kirby's** astonishing *cousin beast*, is involuntary and instinctive. An impossibly large arachnid that lurks predacious, threatening and 'ready', beneath an ordinary white domestic table, *cousin beast* confronts us with the subliminal ultimate of colliding worlds, a 'real' and visceral brush with tangible, personal danger. It is an encounter that activates our earliest, most dread primeval memories, and which sucks our breath and creeps upon our skin.

A crucial adjunct element in *cousin beast* is manifested through a group of accompanying photographic images — sourced from the 1920s and depicting somewhere in the Australian bush — of snakes, and of young men holding dead snakes.<sup>5</sup>

Kirby's complex art is renowned for its 'abstracted' and challenging mix of multi-media forms; though deeply thoughtful and always rich in allusion, his work typically is opaque in meaning and resists assumptions. Nonetheless, the threatening and in some ways 'gothic' tone apparent in *cousin beast* is intended, and refers obliquely to ideas of Australian-ness, and to our traditionally ambivalent attitude to outsiders and drifters.

But to read *cousin beast* only literally is to miss the work's more far-reaching insinuation, of the immediacy with which civility and modernity may be stripped away in the assault on our personal security, or in response to unwelcome strangers. Even more disturbingly, we might also recognise in *cousin beast* our unwanted relative from an inconceivably distant past, a 'self' who has never gone away. 'She' (or 'he') is our latent Freudian 'id', forever imminent and there, threatening irrational panic and desperate, uncontrollable horror.

When *cousin beast* comes to visit, boys and girls, it might be time for us all to head for the hills!

## Endnotes

- 1 Neil Finn produced a series of five shows under the banner 'Seven Worlds Collide', in Auckland, New Zealand in 2001. The project was revisited in January 2009.
- 2 *When Worlds Collide* had considerable influence on the science fiction genre, including Alex Raymond in his 1934 comic strip *Flash Gordon*, and Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's 1938 comic, *Superman*. The 1951 film *When World's Collide*, directed by Rudolph Mate, in turn inspired *Deep Impact*. The very first song in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* ('Science Fiction, Double Feature') refers to the film. A further film adaptation of *When Worlds Collide* is scheduled for release in 2010 by DreamWorks.
- 3 See for example Philip Adams, Lifextra, *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 7–8 March 2009, p 30, where he quotes the positive spirit of renowned former Headmaster of Geelong Grammar, Dr James Darling, citing 4th century BC Greece and complaining, 'that the cries of pain (Adams) was hearing in the world, are not the pains of death but of birth'.
- 4 ABC online News 6 April, 2009, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/04/06/2535739.htm>
- 5 For a further appraisal of *cousin beast*, see Wendy Walker's succinct essay 'Shaun Kirby', in the exhibition catalogue (Russell Storer, curator), *Interesting Times*, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005, p 95

**Pia BORG**

*Palimpsest*, 2008  
stop-frame animation, 10:05 minutes  
courtesy the artist

**Nicholas FOLLAND**

*floe*, 2009  
found glass, nylon  
dimensions variable (approx 130 x 480 x 190 cm)  
courtesy the artist and Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide

**Hayden FOWLER**

*Second Nature*, 2008  
digital video, 36:20 minutes  
courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney

**Shaun KIRBY**

*cousin beast*, 2005  
mixed media  
dimensions variable (table 90 x 250 x 250 cm)  
courtesy the artist

**Patricia PICCININI**

*Game Boys Advanced*, 2002  
silicone, polyurethane, clothing, human hair  
hand-held video game  
life size, 140 x 75 x 36 cm  
Michael Buxton Collection, Melbourne

*Still Life With Stem Cells*, 2002  
silicone, polyurethane, human hair, clothing, carpet  
life size, dimensions variable  
Monash University Collection  
Monash University Museum of Art

*The Young Family*, 2002  
silicone, polyurethane, leather, human hair, plywood  
85 x 150 x 120 cm approx  
photograph by Graham Baring  
Bendigo Art Gallery, RHS Abbott Bequest Fund 2003

**Anna PLATTEN**

*The Journey*, 2008  
oil on linen  
186 x 130 cm  
Collection: John and Kerry Sanders

*The Journey – gate*, 2008  
oil on linen  
186 x 130 cm  
private collection

*The Journey – crossing*, 2009  
oil on linen  
186 x 130 cm  
courtesy the artist and Eva Breuer Art Dealer, Sydney

All catalogue images courtesy the artists  
Dimensions h x w x d



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