

Un-Australian Visions

From 1978 to 1987, the Exxon Corporation sponsored nine exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The series purported to be a presentation of the newest work from countries as varied as the United States, France, Italy, Britain, and Australia. Over this nine-year period, the series introduced a total of eighty-five artists, some of whom are well-known today, among them Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Giuseppe Penone, Barbara Kruger, Martin Puryear, Dale Frank, and Bill Henson.

The 1984 Exxon International *Australian Visions*, curated by the museum's then-Deputy Director, Diane Waldman, was a personalized selection of works meant to epitomize Waldman's vision of Australia. In her vision, Australian art of the 1980s was superior to the previous decade, which was described as having "little of lasting value." This new art was dominated by gestural and figurative painting influenced by European Neo-Expressionism. The "difference" between her chosen examples and the European ones, Waldman explains, is that the Australians responded directly to the "overwhelming presence of the land" that is specific to their country, and that they represent "apocalyptic" landscapes. In sum, this is their "unique contribution" to contemporary art.ⁱ

Waldman's catalogue essay is particularly troubling. Not only does she refer to Australia as having a "convict culture" and being a "pioneer in social reform" (an alarming comment, given the ongoing plight of Australian Aboriginal people), but, her

phrasing throughout harkens back to romantic, colonialist ideals of a paradise lost, the "last frontier." (Indeed, she uncritically quotes a problematic, albeit lyrical, passage from 1789 written by Charles Darwin.) She describes the Australian landscape as "unruly," "lush," and "fertile," all of which smack of the kind of descriptions made by Paul Gauguin on Tahiti in his 1893 book, *Noa Noa!* Considering her outdated romantic vision of Australia, it should come as no surprise that as a curator-explorer Waldman "discovered" artists that ostensibly epitomized the specific "raw energy" she sought. With this context, it would have been unsurprising if she had presented Aborigines as 'noble savages'. Instead, they were jarringly altogether absent. And, while the exhibition was commended at the time for being the only Exxon show to include a reasonable number of women artists (three out of nine), nothing in the surrounding criticism highlighted the lack of Indigenous artists—a reprehensible omission on the part of both curator and art critics, to say the least.ⁱⁱ

History has demonstrated that most of the Exxon shows were not well received critically. As Roberta Smith explains in 1987, "One has the sense that, above all, the Exxon shows occurred faster than their curators could comfortably research and select them, that the money would have been better used if spent more slowly." While Smith singled out Peter Booth's *Painting 1984* as a "sprightly reprise of Neo-Expressionism" (and reproduces it), she describes the rest of the shows as "visual inertia." (Ouch.) Yet, when Vivien Raynor reviewed the exhibition in 1984,

she called it "a strong and truly interesting show," and commended Waldman for having done "a first-rate job of capturing the essence of the country."ⁱⁱⁱ

While the exhibition was seriously lacking, it must be stated that Waldman set herself up with an almost-unachievable task. To organize an exhibition of works epitomizing an entire nation is truly a curatorial impossibility. In other words, while admirable in its aim, *Australian Visions* was doomed to failure. Yet such 'specialized' exhibition models were common then. During the 1970s and '80s, there were countless exhibitions worldwide that sought to represent *the essence* of nations, or of minority groups—with examples including not only the nine Exxon shows, but also innumerable ones devoted to Latin American Art, African Art, Black Art, Queer Art, and, of course, Women's Art.

The problem with exhibitions such as these is that they are often characterized by gender and/or cultural essentialism. Since the 1970s, feminist and post-colonial theorists have been critiquing the former, arguing that it effaces heterogeneity, and does not account for cultural differences between women. These same theorists argue against a monolithic definition of *woman* and, by extension, that of a global sisterhood, definitions that assume a sameness in the forms of women's oppression regardless of local circumstances. Analogously, according to Uma Narayan, cultural essentialism "often equates the values and worldviews of the socially dominant group(s) with those of all members of the culture."^{iv} Opponents of cultural essentialism ask questions like,

What is an American? An Australian? A Saudi? An Egyptian? An Indian? How is it, they argue, that a heterogeneous group of individuals, of different sexes, races, classes, religions, sexualities, and nationalities, can somehow unequivocally 'represent' the essence of a country? And how, in the context of art production, is it that these disparate individuals can express a visually similar national identity?

The current exhibition, *Australia Felix*, curated by Ross Woodrow, addresses these questions head on. As such, it is a direct curatorial response—and 'corrective'—to the 1984 exhibition. What is most refreshing about this exhibition is that it does not presuppose an essentialist definition of Australia. The works in no way reflect a 'national identity' or a recognizably similar formal style. Instead what unites the exhibiting artists is that they are all loosely associated with the Queensland College of Art in Brisbane—as instructors or alumnae. This is the only thing they share—a résumé notation. Some were born in Australia, others the United States, and others the UK. Not all of them identify as being an "Australian artist." In other words, this is simply a representative sampling of 'art (shipped) from Australia', not 'Australian art'.

There are no apocalyptic landscapes in this current exhibition. Instead, we experience contemporary art (again, 'shipped from Australia') as one characterized by the use of multiple media (unlike its predecessor, which emphasized painting) and innumerable artistic themes, ranging from animal rights, fairytales, self-portraiture, migrant communities, and Indigenous politics through gestural abstraction, kineticism, and lyrical works about memory.

Australia Felix is not an attempt at a facile nationalism that would claim to speak for all Australians worldwide. Instead, it recognizes that identity "itself [is] a constitutively multi-voiced arena of struggle,"^v and that no one person can speak for, or represent, the whole. Instead, this exhibition examines the complex relation between and within the centers and the peripheries, the local and the global. *Australia Felix* practises a relational curatorial approach, or what Chandra Talpade Mohanty has called a "comparative studies model,"^{vi} which aims to dismantle restrictive dichotomies (us/them, center/periphery, white/black, east/west) in favor of examining themes about the individual and their collective experiences of individuals cross-culturally.

Because it should always be contextualized and located, any strict definition of "Australian" in this exhibition has been kept open and supple and has not been considered an easily delineated term., e.g., not all Aussies 'come from the land down under', surf, drink VB, or say 'g'day mate'. As such, it is an exhibition that de-essentializes "Australia"—and in so doing demonstrates the complexities of contemporary art, and respects the multifariousness of identities (class, racial, ethnic, gender, sexual), in a way that is not limiting. This is an exhibition about the polyvocal—a cacophony of voices—not a monologue of sameness.

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Notes

- i Diane Waldman, "Impressions of Australia," *Australian Visions* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1984), 9.
- ii Grace Glueck, "At the Guggenheim: 7 Italian Shows in One," *The New York Times*, 2 April 1982.
- iii Vivien Raynor, "Capturing Essence of a Remote Australia," *The New York Times*, 5 October 1984. As an aside it is worth noting Australian author Memory Holloway's essay in the *Australian Visions* catalogue; Holloway argues against Waldman's assertion of an 'authentic' Australia, stating that "There is no one Australia. It is more accurate to view this place, its culture and its art, as Meaghan Morris has recently characterized it, as 'a compilation culture of borrowed fragments, stray reproductions and alien(ated) memories ... what we have to begin with.' And to go from there." Memory Holloway, "Bleak Romantics," *Australian Visions*, 11.
- iv Uma Narayan, "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism," *Hypatia* 13, no. 2, (Spring 1998): 89.
- v Ella Shohat in the introduction to her edited volume, *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 16.
- vi Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggle," in her *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 242–44.