

# REPORT FROM AUSTRALIA

## Down Under No More

*With globalization now an art-world fait accompli, Australia has outgrown its status as a promising outpost and become, increasingly, an art center in its own right.*

BY RICHARD KALINA

I'd been harboring a desire to travel to Australia and New Zealand for the past four or five years, so last spring (autumn down there), blessed with a chunk of free time, plenty of frequent-flier miles and some helpful introductions, my wife and I set off for six weeks—four in Australia and two in New Zealand. The trip proved to be an eye-opener in terms of art, culture, social orderings and, not surprisingly, landscape. Those six weeks yielded such a plethora of material that one report could scarcely do it justice. Australia and New Zealand certainly deserve separate coverage, and Australian Aboriginal art raises so many questions that it, too, needs to be examined on its own. Having landed in Australia first, I've decided to make it the subject of my initial report.

One of the things that a traveler to Australia quickly comes to grips with is how huge the country is, and how empty. The size of the continental U.S. but with a population of under 20 million people, most of whom are clustered along the southern half of the east coast and the eastern half of the south coast, Australia boasts vast stretches of some of the most inhospitable desert country in the world (although Aboriginal people have survived in it for about 40,000 years). There are also mountains, rainforests, grasslands, dramatic sculptured coastlines, the Great Barrier Reef and pretty much anything else nature can provide. While the countryside and outback of Australia readily evoke the sublime, with all that term's aura of wonder and trepidation, its cities are as accommodating, lively, pollution- and crime-free, humanly scaled and livable as any you're likely to run across. The Australians have fashioned a society that is refreshingly egalitarian and progressive, with a high premium placed on the quality of public life. (For example, citizens are required to vote; you are fined if you do not.) It is a country of excellent food and wine and, surprisingly, very fine coffee.

Australia's history as a Western country (and its mythology) is deeply tied to immigration, settlement and exploration. That history has been at times a

fraught one. From the mass transportation of convicts from England and their subsequent brutalization, to the shameful "White Australia" immigration policies that persisted into the late 1960s, to the overtly genocidal treatment of Aboriginal culture, Australia has frequently stumbled trying to create a sense of what it was, is, and might one day be. While the U.K. provided the bulk of Australia's early settlers and for many years its dominant culture (the Anglophilia of its richer citizens was no doubt responsible for the enervating sludge of Victoriana clogging up so much of its museum space), there was, and continues to be, a great deal of vitalizing immigration from the rest of Europe. (Melbourne, for example, is home to more Greeks than any city other than Athens.) With the end of racially exclusionary policies in the late '60s, immigration patterns changed, and Australia moved to embrace its multicultural makeup. It has turned to Asia and the Pacific, both commercially and culturally, and its museums—particularly the influential Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, with its Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art—consciously reflect that connection.

Australia might be the oldest continent geologically, but it is a pretty recent addition to Western society: the 19th century is about as far back as anything seems to go. In big American cities (and even in the medium-sized ones), we are accustomed to history served up, if not in the streetscapes, then at least in the museums. European works before Impressionism appear spottily in Australia's museum collections, and the large picture of the modern period (outside of Australia) is not presented in a particularly coherent way. There are marvelous modern things to be found, however. The National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, for example, has one of my favorite Signacs, *Gasometers at Clitichy*



View of the entrance foyer of the National Gallery of Victoria International, Melbourne. Courtesy NGV.

(1886), the Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney possesses possibly the best Morandi still life that I have ever seen, and Canberra's National Gallery owns Pollock's *Blue Poles* (1952). It may make perfect sense to decry canonical didacticism at the Art Institute of Chicago or the Museum of Modern Art, but if you're going to tell the story of art (in whichever way you wish), it helps to have enough of the relevant objects. The museums of Europe and the United States have had the time and the resources to create what is, to all intents and purposes, a vocabulary of Western art. Australia has not. It has, however, done a good job in presenting the narrative of its own art, and it is an art well worth noting.

Artistic multiculturalism is particularly evident when it comes to Aboriginal art. That art—almost all of it contemporary—is highly prized, collected in depth and figures prominently in the country's important museums, as well as its corporate and private collections. While the success of their art has given Aboriginal artists (and their communities) a certain amount of money and prestige, the lot of the Aboriginal people as a whole is truly a sad one, marked by poverty, disease, unemployment, alcoholism, high levels of incarceration, mortality rates way out of sync with the rest of society and by any number of other markers of social disintegration. The problem is deeply rooted and not easily ameliorated from the outside, even (or especially) with the best of intentions. It continues to be a source of concern and unease for much of the nation.

### Melbourne

We had set aside a month for Australia, and even with that generous time frame, there was no way to see all that we wanted. We missed the lightly settled west and north coasts, including the cities of Perth

Exterior view of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. Photo Derek Swalwell.



**ACCA fulfills an important role in the Melbourne art world, functioning as a noncollecting venue for developing Australian artists, particularly those most interested in installation work.**

and Darwin, as well as the island state of Tasmania on the south. Melbourne was our first stop. Located on the south coast of the state of Victoria, it has traditionally vied with Sydney farther up on the east coast in New South Wales for the honor of being Australia's most important city. Partisanship shows itself in quite a number of areas. On the cultural end, I found that people in either city were quite ready to dismiss the production of the rival town as stodgy and unimaginative, or conversely, flashy and empty. Despite this reflexive competitiveness, artists seemed perfectly happy to show anywhere, and there is plenty of interchange—Melbournians regularly exhibiting in Sydney and vice versa. The conflict also expressed itself politically in the choice of the nation's permanent capital. There was no possibility of either city accepting the other as the seat of government, so the honor went instead to Canberra, a new garden city planned in the early 20th century by Walter Burley Griffin, a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright. Set in the hills more or less between Melbourne and Sydney, it is the only major Australian city not on the sea. It is home to the Australian National Gallery and to Romaldo Giurgola's Parliament House, dedicated in 1988 (more on that later).

Melbourne is logically laid out, with wide streets (supposedly the result of a draftsman's error), an extensive tram system and the lovely, curving Yarra River, with its continuous procession of sleek crew shells manned by very fit young people, running through its center and marking its north-south division. South of the river near the center of town, one finds the newer art precincts. They are home to the recently and impressively renovated National Gallery of Victoria, the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art and the Royal Botanical Gardens (a work of art itself). The NGV was hosting a very good show

of Caravaggio and his followers—Gentileschi, de la Tour and Ribera, among them—which they had organized with the Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. While scarcely the definitive Caravaggio exhibition, it brought together some beautiful paintings. Carravaggio's *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (1603), from the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, entranced me. A profusion of fruits—melons, pomegranates, figs, grapes and plums, plus a variety of squashes, some rounded, almost pregnant-looking, others long and phallic—were laid out on a warm, ancient-looking gray stone sill and illuminated by a diagonal shaft of soft light. Still-life painting doesn't get much better, and unfortunately it made much of the NGV's own permanent collection look either stiff or sentimental. Still, how can one fail to be moved by a painting like August Friedrich Albrecht Schenck's *Anguish* (1878), with its snow-bound mother ewe, her breath crystallizing in the darkening air, standing over her dead lamb, protecting it from an ominous circle of crows waddling ever closer, or by St. George Hare's *The Victory of Faith* (1890-91), whose wall text helpfully explains that "The depiction of naked women in chains seemed to hold a special interest for Hare, and he returned to this subject frequently."

The NGV does have some very fine holdings. They are strong in crafts and the decorative arts, fashion and textiles, prints and drawings, and in pre-Columbian funerary objects. Their contemporary program, under the curatorial hand of Jason Smith, is solid, and, from what I gathered, somewhat more focused on Europe and the U.S. than are the contemporary departments of other Australian museums. I was impressed by a recently commissioned sculpture by Sarah Sze, which worked its way up through several stories of the building like some strange mechanical plant trying to get at the light.

The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, or ACCA, founded in 1984, is housed in a striking new building with slanting steel walls rusted to a uniform cinnamon color. The structure, designed by the Melbourne-based firm Wood Marsh and inaugurated in 2002, looks like a cross between a power plant and a particularly scary Richard Serra sculpture. ACCA fulfills an important role in the Melbourne art world, functioning as a noncollecting venue for developing Australian artists, particularly those interested in installation work. The gallery's annual invitational exhibition, "NEW04," was being put into place when we visited, and through the hammering and sawing I could discern the emerging outlines of the sorts of imaginative set-ups that are the staples of university galleries and project spaces around the world these days. The director and the curators of ACCA, Kay Campbell, Juliana Engberg and Geraldine Barlow, are actively committed to the program, and they seem to be making a good deal of headway in promoting the cause of young, risk-taking artists.

Immediately north of the Yarra lies the most controversial—at least architecturally—of the new art centers in Melbourne, if not the country. Federation Square is a jumble of buildings and plazas—all multicolored stone; odd, jutting angles; pierced, boxy shapes; and glass and metal facades strangely patterned with what look like computer-



Dale Frank: *Turning the corner . . .*, 2004, acrylic and varnish on linen, 78 1/2 inches square. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.



Stieg Persson: *Downsizing*, 2004, oil on canvas, 72 by 66 inches. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery.



Brook Andrew: *Ignorantia (Kookaburra)*, 2003, Cibachrome, 49 by 78 1/2 inches. Courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne.

generated crystalline orderings. Designed by a local firm, Lab Architecture, the complex has the feeling of a Daniel Libeskind scheme run through a food processor and reconstituted. It is, however, extremely popular, and is crowded all day and through the evening. The Ian Potter Centre—a branch of the NGV, not to be confused with the Ian Potter Museum of Art, currently closed for renovations, at the University of Melbourne—forms the centerpiece of the complex. It houses the bulk of the museum's collection of Australian art, and the decision to move that collection away from the main museum has created controversy, with some feeling that it highlights the art, and others that it ghettoizes it. In either case, it does manage to give the viewer a good introduction to the complexities of Australian art.

Australian art, especially before World War II bears a good deal of similarity to American art of the same period. Imbued with the English tradition yet influenced by French art, artists tried to adapt the methods of realism to the depiction of a very non-European landscape, while also coming to terms with the various modernisms that unfolded in Europe. Australia produced some excellent landscape painters. Arthur Streeton (1867-1943) was among the best. His landscapes, particularly of rural New South Wales, are dryly lush and accurately convey both the look and the feel of the broad horizon

and the heat-flattened ochers and celadons so characteristic of that countryside. Portraiture was much admired in 19th-century Australia, and Hugh Ramsay, who died of tuberculosis in 1906 at the age of 28, had the visual acuity and flair of a John Singer Sargent or a Robert Henri. His turn-of-the-century portraits speak with an almost painful immediacy, 100 years later, of the youth and vitality of his sitters. Cubism and its variants are well represented in Australian art, with the mechanization of the urban environment in Sydney and Melbourne providing an impetus for artistic innovation. Possibly the movement's two strongest proponents in Australia were women: Grace Cossington Smith (1892-1964) and Grace Crowley (1890-1984). Roland Wakelin (1887-1971) and Roy de Maistre (1894-1968) were also important in introducing modernism to Australia, and explored the structural and expressive potential of color. Another early modernist, Margaret Preston (1875-1973), painted innovative still lifes and landscapes and will be the subject of a major retrospective at the Gallery of New South Wales next year.

More problematical for American eyes are two of Australia's best known painters, Sidney Nolan (1917-1992) and Arthur Boyd (1920-1999). Their work is ubiquitous—every museum in the country seems to have whole rooms devoted to them—and national pride aside, you wonder why. Often crudely painted



*Documentary image of Mike Parr's performance Close the Concentration Camps 2002, 2000. Photo Felizitas Parr. Courtesy Sherman Galleries, Sydney.*

and self-consciously idiosyncratic, their work mythologizes Australian folk heroes like the bandit Ned Kelly, or casts biblical stories (frequently with an apocalyptic bent) into quasi-modern dress. The real problem seems to be unevenness and an apparently uncritical acceptance of it. It's not that there isn't some fine work by these artists. Boyd's huge *Great Hall Tapestry* (1984-88) in Canberra's parliament building is an extraordinary endeavor. Fabricated by the master weavers at Melbourne's Victorian Tapestry Workshop (who have worked with some of Australia's best artists and can transform any painting, no matter how gestural or nuanced,

into a tapestry), Boyd's piece depicts a dense grove of thin, white-barked trees, slashed through with brushy passages of high-keyed color. The tapestry, three years in the making, gains considerable presence by its scale (at about 30 by 65 feet, it is one of the largest in the world). It manages to combine delicacy of touch with a full and robustly articulated space. The tapestry is marked by the reiteration of parallel vertical forms, their variation in height setting up a complex contrapuntal structure that feels swellingly musical. Its great size allows it to breathe, and the materiality of the tapestry, with its optically softening effect, lends the work a necessary coolness and distance.

In addition to its public art spaces, Melbourne has an active commercial gallery scene. I visited several galleries within a few blocks of Federation Square. The Anna Schwartz Gallery, like most Australian galleries, shows almost entirely Australian work. A spare white industrial-looking space, the gallery could just as easily be found in Chelsea or Santa Monica. On display during our visit were paintings by Melbourne-based artist Stieg Persson, which would also be at home in New York or Los Angeles. Persson works in a number of modes, some more or less naturalistic—depictions of seeds and spores—and others more abstract. The paintings that I found most appealing were complex linear compositions which recalled baroque wallpaper-like ornamentation on the one hand, or ornately filigreed calligraphy on the other. There were also paintings in the gallery by veteran minimalist Robert Hunter, whose subtle geometric structures underlie monochromatic fields, and by Dale Frank, who works with large colorful pours of sleek varnish. The Tolarno Gallery, a few blocks away, shows some of the most highly regarded Australian artists, and a preview exhibition of the upcoming season (which starts in our spring) was installed when we visited. Of particular interest were the large-scale, moodily ambiguous photographs of night landscapes by Bill Henson, who showed this past year at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '04].

Another important Melbourne venue is the Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, one of the pioneers in the showing of Aboriginal art. Pizzi represents both traditional work from remote communities such as Papunya, Utopia, the Tiwi Islands and Arnhem Land, and contemporary urban art, like the conceptual photographic pieces by Brook Andrew that were on view when we visited. Andrew's work, like that of a number of city-based and often art-school-trained Aboriginal artists, features subject



*Rosemary Laing: One Dozen Unnatural Disasters in the Australian Landscape (#2), 2003, C-print, 43 3/4 by 81 inches. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.*

matter that explores Aboriginal themes (this show featured darkly toned images of birds in symmetrically mirrored configurations), but does so in a way that feels akin to the wider world of conceptually oriented photo and installation art.

## Adelaide

The next stop was Adelaide, three days' drive west of Melbourne. The Great Ocean Road reputedly offers the most spectacular vistas in the country, and I don't doubt it. Winding along the limestone cliffs that border the sapphire blue Southern Ocean, with the pounding waves to your left and the ozone-fresh air straight from the Antarctic blowing in the window, is an exhilarating experience. Midway through the drive we encountered the Twelve Apostles, tall rock formations standing like monumental sentinels in the sea. The Apostles were at one time part of the cliff face but were cut away by the incessant action of the waves. The sea is fierce, and that part of the country is known as the Shipwreck Coast for the large number of vessels and lives that it has claimed.

Adelaide is the principal city of the state of South Australia (where one sets one's watch back half an hour when crossing the border). The area is prosperous, with a thriving wine industry—its Barossa Valley is home to some of the country's best red wines—and such a strong commitment to the arts that South Australia's license plates proclaim it to be the Festival State. Adelaide is a handsome town with well-proportioned Victorian buildings, fine weather, a gracious urban university in its center and a superb botanical garden. Its natural history museum is one of the country's best, and the art museum next door, the Art Gallery of South Australia, has an excellent collection

*Still from Patricia Piccinini's Plasmid Region, 2003, DVD. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.*





East facade of the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. Photo courtesy Architectus.

of Australian art, with strong Aboriginal holdings. During our visit, the gallery was presenting the 2004 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. Organized by Julie Robinson, the museum's curator of prints, drawings and photographs, this year's exhibition focused on photo media, including video. The works dealt with the sorts of contemporary issues much contemplated in exhibitions of this sort—globalization, the environment, self-image and identity prominent among them.

I particularly liked Sydney-based Liu Xiao Xian's "Home" series. His large-format, digitally manipulated photographs plunk a Chinese family group down in various well-known Western tourist locales—Sydney Harbor, the Arc de Triomphe, Buckingham Palace and the like. Behind the smiling family there has been placed, as one might find in an old-fashioned photographer's studio, a naively painted backdrop depicting a common Chinese scene or motif. To make things twistier, the painted Chinese scene is thematically related to the actual Western one—for example, a palace in the Forbidden City is used for the shot in front of Buckingham Palace. These deadpan and ultimately touching pieces play with the experience of tourism and immigration, of longing and belonging, of familiarity and strangeness. Where exactly does this family (and by extension, the artist) situate itself—here, there or in some uncomfortable middle zone?

I was also impressed by the work of Rosemary Laing, who showed photographs from her series "One Dozen Unnatural Disasters in the Australian Landscape." In them Laing piles up modernist furniture in a flat, barren landscape and covers the items with the heavy red sand characteristic of the Australian desert. The resulting form is meant to recall Ayer's Rock, or Uluru, as it is now known—that huge red monolith, the largest rock in the world, which looms in the center of the country. In one striking photo the pile glows in the sunset as the Uluru does in countless postcards. In another, Laing has set the furniture ablaze. This is not just a take on an interesting landscape feature. Uluru is a site with complex references and meanings for Australians—

an icon of the country and a major tourist destination whose ownership by Aboriginal groups is now recognized but not always treated as sacred by the larger culture. Laing nicely captures the ambiguous and often incendiary mix of signs that constitute Australia's relation to its landscape. The series was shown in New York at Galerie Lelong last May, and while that sort of high-end international exposure is fervently desired by most artists, I couldn't help wondering whether, in this case, much of the works' meaning wasn't lost on a non-Australian audience.

The Biennial also featured powerful work by the conceptualist Mike Parr, who showed an unsettling 20-minute performance video of his face and lips being sewn up, and Patricia Piccinini, whose convincingly creepy animation, *Plasmid*

*Region*, illustrated quivering life forms emerging from a pulsing mass of primordial tissue. Piccinini, who was born in Sierra Leone in 1965 and emigrated to Australia in 1972, is one of the country's most talked about artists. She represented Australia at the 2003 Venice Biennale, and her work was exhibited in New York at the Robert Miller Gallery last March and April.

## Brisbane

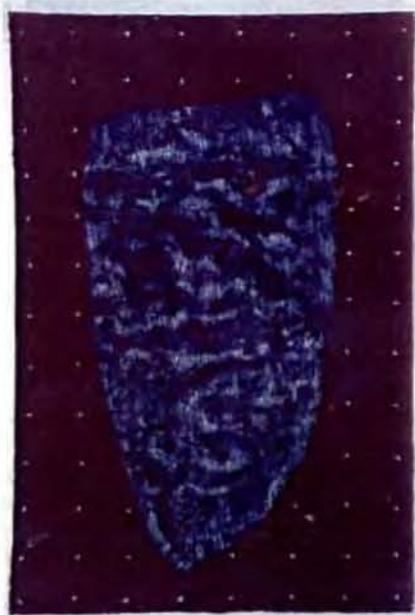
From Adelaide, our trip took us to Alice Springs and the desert region of Central Australia. Alice Springs is a key locale of the Aboriginal art movement, which I will discuss in a later article. After a number of days in the desert and then a relatively art-free sojourn along the tropical coast of northern Queensland—home to the Great Barrier Reef—we flew south to Brisbane, capital of the state of Queensland. Brisbane is a hilly, bustling, commercial city, somewhat short on charm, but with an active art scene centered on the city's major art museum, the Queensland Art Gallery. Under the direction of Doug Hall and his energetic curatorial staff, the museum is moving to expand its reach with an ambitious collecting program and a second building, the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, currently under construction and set for completion in 2006. Designed by Architectus, a firm with offices in Australia, New Zealand and Shanghai, the new building will be, at close to 79,000 square feet, the largest gallery of modern art in the country.

The museum has a good collection of early as well as contemporary Australian art, excellent holdings in a range of Australian indigenous art, quite a lot of prints, drawings and photographs, and, as seems to be the case with most Australian museums, considerable strength in the decorative arts. Where the Queensland Art Gallery distinguishes itself, however, is in its commitment to the acquisition of contemporary Asian as well as Pacific art (which includes New Zealand artists of Maori background), and its collection in this area is considered one of the best in the world. The centerpiece of the museum's efforts is the

Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art [last held in 2002, see *A.i.A.*, July '03]. Hosting this exhibition offers the museum the chance both to keep tabs on a rapidly evolving art scene and to add to its holdings. I had just missed a show of the sculptures of the Chinese-born artist Ah Xian [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '02], although there were some of his works still on view. The artist uses traditional materials—cloisonné, glazed porcelain and carved lacquer—in quite untraditional ways. Instead of vases, bowls and the like, he sculpts heads, busts and, in one stunning cloisonné work, a full human figure. Facial features are indicated three-dimensionally but are not delineated in color. Instead, the form is densely covered, in a tattoo-like way, with classical Chinese landscape and floral motifs. The result is a work that, while ostensibly self-contained and reticent, is also remarkably aggressive and over-the-top in its imagery.

At the time of our visit, the museum's cinema department was presenting an international show of some of the more artful music videos of the last 10 or so years. Designed in part to widen the museum's appeal, the exhibition appeared to be doing just that, with teenagers lounging around on beanbag chairs, watching the screens and listening to the music on headphones. After another look at the very interesting multipaneled collaborative paintings of Tim Johnson, Karma Phuntsok and My Le Thi, which blended Aboriginal and Buddhist motifs into a sweetly colored, Pop-inflected pointillist confection, we left to see the survey of Judy Watson's abstract paintings at the Institute of Modern Art in nearby Fortitude Valley.

Watson is one of the best-known and widely exhibited urban Aboriginal artists. Her paintings are generally large-scale, with an easy command of surface. She knows how much to stain in and how much to build up, when to stretch a canvas and when to emphasize its materiality by leaving it unstretched. The paintings that I was most attracted to were richly colored, balancing elegant biomorphic shapes



Judy Watson: *Stone Knife*, 2001, pigment, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 61 by 40 1/2 inches.



Ron Mueck: *Pregnant Woman*, 2002, fiberglass, resin, silicone, 99 1/2 inches high. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Photo courtesy National Gallery of Victoria.

with a sinuous line. Watson is an interesting case: although her paintings might speak in some manner to Aboriginal myths and issues, they can be readily understood and appreciated in the context of late 20th-century painting practice. Indeed, if seen outside Australia, they would scarcely evoke issues of culture or identity. This cannot be said for desert-based Aboriginal painting. Although that work bears a strong formal relationship to certain sectors of modernist abstraction (Color Field painting in particular), it must be seen in a quite different way, with formal invention functioning as one layer of meaning in a complex semiotic enterprise. Watson's references might be a departure point for her, a way of generating forms, but they don't strike me as being absolutely essential to the operation.

## Canberra

Although Brisbane had much to offer, I was looking forward to the next stop, Canberra—in part to see the National Gallery, and in part to meet up with an old friend, the architect Romaldo Giurgola. Canberra has the reputation of being a dull town, and it is not difficult to see why. It was built as a garden city composed of various hamlets and centered on an artificial lake. This yielded, as a consequence, a lot of trees, greenery and water views, but not much of a sense of urban space. Factor in low population density and the general solemnity of government buildings, and you have a place that is, well, *quiet*. This can be very nice if you just want to relax, as we did for several very pleasant days, one of which was spent driving out into the

hills to see the beautiful little weekend house that Giurgola built for himself and his daughter, Paola. Giurgola, who had been based in New York and Philadelphia, won the 1980 competition to design the new Parliament House. He ended up enjoying the country so much that he moved there permanently during the building's construction (it opened in 1988), and he has been working throughout Australia and Asia ever since. His recently completed restoration and expansion of St. Patrick's Cathedral in the Sydney neighborhood of Paramatta just won Australia's prestigious Sir Zelman Cowan Award for Public Buildings. I visited St. Patrick's, which had been virtually destroyed by arson in 1996, and was impressed both by Giurgola's sensitivity to the portion of the church left standing and by the audacity of the added cathedral and chapel.

That ability to infuse monumentality with modesty served him well in the design of Parliament House, a striking and very large (though not tall) building. It contains some 4,500 rooms and is crowned with a monumental, iconic flagpole. Yet, in the Australian manner, it remains accessible and

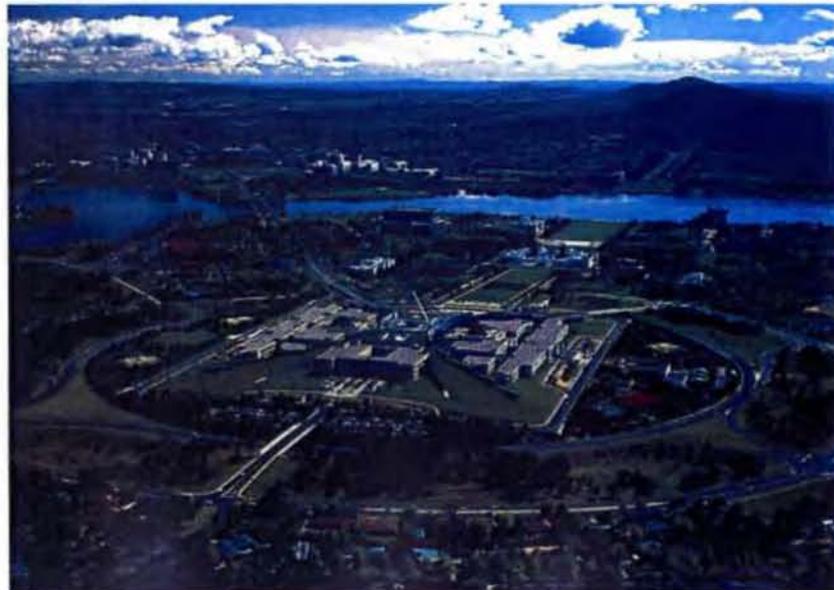
down to earth, in this case quite literally. Enlivened with a series of internal gardens, it is nestled into the hilly landscape, and portions of its roof are covered with turf. The building's placement and orientation are vital, for it functions as one end of the long visual axis—the city's most important—that stretches across the lake and the wide brick Anzac Parade to the Australian War Memorial.

Art played a central role in the building's development. Its construction engendered a large-scale collecting effort by the government. In the initial purchasing phase, 1985-87, almost 3,000 works by Australian artists in all mediums were acquired. The collection is broad-based, but the quality level has remained high. I found the way the artworks were integrated into the architectural design to be particularly satisfying. Giurgola was a younger colleague of Louis Kahn, and like Kahn, his architecture is bold and idiosyncratic. Parliament House scarcely functions as a neutral white space placed in the service of art. But just as Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth highlights the art it houses without sacrificing spatial grandeur and architectural innovation, so,

Arthur Boyd: *Great Hall Tapestry*, 1984-88, interpreted and executed by Victorian Tapestry Workshop, wool, mercerized cotton and linen weft on a seine warp, 29' by 65' feet. Courtesy Parliament House Art Collection, Canberra.



Parliament House in Canberra, designed by Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp Architects, 1988. Photo Heide Smith.



**I met a number of veteran painters and sculptors in Sydney whose work was characterized by compositional complexity, chromatic richness, and a mastery of mark and surface.**

too, does Parliament House. Museums and seats of government are symbolic places. That Australia's government chose to highlight the symbolism of art, as opposed to, say, power or historical or theological legitimacy, speaks well of the country's priorities.

The National Gallery of Australia reflects a similar commitment to art. Its present building, designed to house the National Collection, was opened to the public in 1982. It is a well-attended and appreciated museum, with holdings of over 100,000 works. The purchase of Pollock's *Blue Poles* in 1973 for the then astronomical sum of \$2 million, and the attendant storm of controversy it engendered, have now settled into the status of a fondly recalled family story, and the painting is easily the best-known work in the collection. As might be expected, Australian art is the museum's strong suit. Its postwar collection is solid in non-indigenous Australian art and truly first rate in Aboriginal work. American and other international work occupies four out of 14 galleries; the museum owns about 150 American paintings and sculptures and about 300 European. Many of the key American pieces were collected in the '70s by James Mollison, the first director. While the collection does include some significant post-'80s work by Richard Artschwager, Bill Viola, Gary Hill, Bruce Nauman, Ann Hamilton and Sean Scully, as well as late paintings by de Kooning and Warhol, the pace of acquisition of American art has slowed down considerably (although nothing has been deaccessioned). Currently about 40 American and 50 European works are on display.

On view during my visit was a very nice de Kooning *Woman* from 1952-53, as well as the large and important 1954 *Léger Trapeze Artists*, a 1970 Bacon triptych, a Warhol *Elvis* and a huge, glower-

ing Kiefer painting of railroad tracks, concocted from lead, ash, cement and earth, among other things. It is titled, with a bow to Oswald Spengler, *Twilight of the West*. On the subject of scale, the work that seemed to garner the most attention (although more people seemed to be watching the video of its making than looking at the art itself) was Ron Mueck's recently acquired sculpture *Pregnant Woman* (2002). Mueck, who was born in Melbourne but now lives in London, has fashioned a standing nude figure of a young, fair-haired woman, gazing downward, her hands crossed over her head. She is convincingly painted and detailed, very pregnant, and, most importantly, nearly 9 feet high. Although I found the level of craft impressive, I couldn't help feeling manipulated. The experience of being a passive recipient of an artist's theatrical impulses and overt technical virtuosity seems to be increasingly common, particularly in the area of figurative sculpture. I've always felt that much of the pleasure of looking at art is working at it, being an active participant in the construction of meaning, rather than being purely on the receiving end.

What did impress me, however, was the work of Rosalie Gascoigne [see *A.I.A.*, Feb. '99]. I mention Gascoigne at this point (even though her work was included in all the museum collections that I'd previously seen) because she lived in Canberra for most of her adult life. Canberra is also home to a number of particularly fine Gascoigne works, and, at the time of my visit, she was featured in a comprehensive show of Australian art held at the National Library of Australia called "Sublime: 25 Years of the Westfarmers Collection of Australian Art." I will, however, save a more extended discussion of her art for my report from New Zealand. Gascoigne, a native New Zealander (although she gratefully left it in her mid-20s, never to live there again) was the subject of a revelatory show in the City Gallery in Wellington that was at its midpoint when I visited.

**Sydney**

The last stop on our trip was Sydney, a 3½-hour bus ride from Canberra. Sydney is a major metropolis, a diverse harbor city of about four million people. The city lives and works on both sides of the water, and the harbor is continually traversed by bridge and ferry traffic. We stayed in Paddington, a semi-raffish, low-rise neighborhood of shops, cinemas, galleries and restaurants that looked like a cross between Greenwich Village, Savannah, and Venice, Calif.

The major museum in Sydney is the Art Gallery of New South Wales. People in town were talking about the upcoming Sydney Biennale, which was to be held in a few months at various venues around the city [see *A.I.A.*, Dec. '04]. Perhaps in consequence, it was a relatively quiet time for contemporary art. The Art Gallery of New South Wales offered a modest Man Ray photography show, a contemporary print review, a number of prize shows of limited interest (in one, the portrait exhibition,



*Rover Thomas: Two Men Dreaming, ca. 1985, earth pigments on canvas board, 35 1/2 by 24 inches. Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.*



*Bill Culbert: White Shadow II, 2004, fluorescent lights, electrical cords, plastic bottles, 22 1/2 by 24 1/2 by 5 1/2 inches. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.*

*Bill Henson: Untitled, 1995-96, C-prints, adhesive tape, pins, glassine, 73 by 118 inches; in his recent show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.*



museum-goers got to cast their votes for best in show) and finally a survey (titled with affecting directness, "I Want to Paint") of the work of the Aboriginal painter Rover Thomas (1926-1998), who in 1990 was one of the first indigenous artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale. The show that really stood out for me, however, was "Fantastic Mountains: Chinese Landscape Painting from the Shanghai Museum." Featuring hanging and hand scrolls, album pages and fan shapes painted between the 14th and 19th centuries, this scholarly exhibition explored the theme of the mountain in Chinese landscape painting. Most of the work had never been outside of China, and I can't remember ever seeing a more beautiful offering of this kind.

American art does not seem to be much in evi-

dence in Australia these days, so it came as a pleasant surprise to see a full-scale survey of the work of Ed Ruscha installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Housed in a large Art Deco building on the West Circular Quay, in the heart of Sydney's downtown harbor district, the MCA has a permanent collection, but it is rarely on view. Instead the museum functions as a kunsthalle, bringing various contemporary exhibitions to town. The Ruscha show, whose itinerary included the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome and the National Gallery in Berlin, presented a comprehensive selection of drawings, photographs and artist's books from the '60s on, and 42 large-scale paintings from the late '80s to the present. Ruscha has been widely exhibited lately, and even though I thoroughly enjoyed the show, it didn't hold much in the way of surprises for me. One painting, however, stood out for its charming loopiness. The background of *Charles Atlas Landscape* (2003) is classic Ed Ruscha—a perfectly graded sunset sky, going from deep blue to light blue to orange. Elegantly depicted black plumbing pipes form a cross in the center of the canvas and extend out to the edges. The threaded pipes, however, seem to have been screwed out a little too far, and, jacklike, they have pushed on the sides of the canvas, literally deforming its shape. It's a witty work, a deadpan play on the idea of "muscular" painting.

Easter weekend was not the best time to see galleries in Sydney, but a number of Paddington galleries were open. The Sherman Gallery, under the directorship of Bill Wright, a former dean of the New York Studio School, is one of the best-known contemporary galleries in town, and it featured two good shows that had opened the night before our visit. Lauren Berkowitz's wall-mounted works reference Minimalism, looking at first glance like vertically striped paintings in earth tones. They are, in fact, composed of clear plastic boxes, divided into narrow upright sections. Each section is filled with colored sand from a specific locale and then carefully tamped down. The works set up an interesting dialogue between abstract formalism, earth art and performance (in the trips undertaken to obtain the sand samples). In the gallery's back room James Darling created a high, dense wall composed of stacked and intertwined mallee roots. The mallee tree, a kind of eucalyptus, has a particular

metaphorical resonance for Australians, and speaks of the harsh and dry conditions of the continent. It is very slow growing, so dense that the wood will not float in water even when thoroughly dried out, and it can live on a minimal amount of rainfall. It also has the ability to re-sprout from its roots when the trunk is destroyed, as it often is, by fire. The roots that Darling uses have a mottled gray-brown coloration, and the wall is a beautiful and evocative object. Unfortunately Darling chose to overload his sculpture by attaching a run of coiled razor wire along its top in reference to central Australia's much-criticized detention camps for illegal immigrants. However well-intentioned that allusion might have been, it undercut the work's subtle emotional power.

The Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, another major Sydney venue, was showing sculptures by Bill Culbert combining fluorescent light fixtures and translucent plastic containers in orderly, mostly symmetrical configurations. There was also a very fine show of large-format architectural photographs by Harry Seidler, taken at various sites around the world. The show was titled "Harry Seidler: The Grand Tour," and the pictures were included in his recent book of architectural photography. Seidler, born in Vienna in 1923, is one of Australia's best-known architects, a modernist in the great tradition. Photography represents a relatively recent turn in his professional life, and his book has enjoyed critical and popular success. While all of the photographs in the exhibition are striking, some subjects, such as Frank

Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water*, are so iconic that it's hard to imagine any photograph of the building staking out new artistic territory. Less familiar subjects, however, like Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer's Niteroi Contemporary Art Museum (completed in 1996 in Rio de Janeiro), make for more compelling images. For this photograph, Seidler placed himself on a white sand beach overlooking a turquoise lagoon. In the distance one sees, slightly blurred by the atmosphere, Rio de Janeiro's famous Sugarloaf Mountain. Niemeyer's building is perched in the middle ground, on the end of a green, clifflike promontory, looking like a very large flying saucer. Seidler's photograph of Beijing's Forbidden City in the snow strikes a different mood—darker and more sensual, marked by curves, a lowering gray sky and an undisturbed covering of snow that seems to muffle all activity.

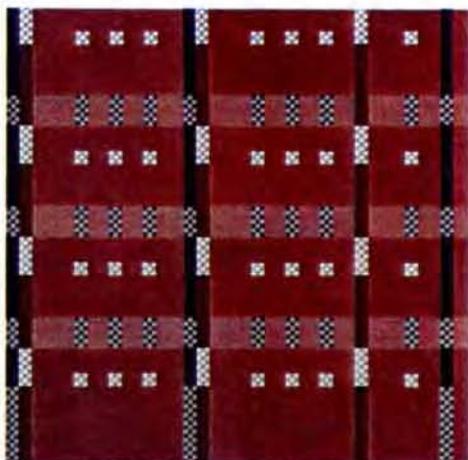
In Paddington we also visited the smaller Kaliman Gallery. A relative newcomer to the Sydney scene, it is devoted to emerging Australian artists. Lara Merrett, a young Melbourne-based painter, was showing inventive abstractions executed in chalky but slightly sour



Harry Seidler: Chandigarh, The Secretariat Building, 1963, color photograph, 28 by 42 inches. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.



Lauren Berkowitz: *Salt and Sand*, 2003-04, salt, brick, concrete and plaster sands, Perspex, 90 1/2 inches high. Photo John Gollings. Courtesy Sherman Galleries, Sydney.



Andrew Christofides: *Splendour II*, 2002-03, acrylic on canvas, 72 inches square. Courtesy King Street Gallery, Sydney.

home-decorator colors. The flatly painted canvases pitted sinuous plantlike forms against larger, irregular planar areas. The paintings had a smart Pop look and seemed lively and up to date.

In addition to gallery- and museum-going, we spent time with artists and toured a corporate collection. Trevor Chappell, the head of Austcorp, a major property firm, showed me the strong group of Australian paintings and sculpture that the firm has collected in the last few years with the help of Barbara Flynn, a former New York dealer and art consultant now living in Sydney. As is well understood these days, the collection could not be considered comprehensive if it did not include a significant number of Aboriginal works, and Austcorp has managed to secure some excellent examples. They are interspersed in the collection and not separated off in their own area. This curatorial integration is common practice in Australia, in both public and private collections, and it is done in what seems to be a perfectly matter-of-fact way.

The growing importance of Aboriginal art has put other Australian artists in somewhat of a quandary.

They readily acknowledge the value of indigenous art, and I never heard it dismissed out of hand. Yet no artist that I talked with seemed tempted to incorporate something of that work into his or her production—quite the contrary. I got the sense that to be influenced by Aboriginal art would constitute a kind of unacceptable poaching. Needless to say, there are many other avenues for modern artists to travel, and for those artists who have been working for a long time, their own artistic progress has led them in independent directions.

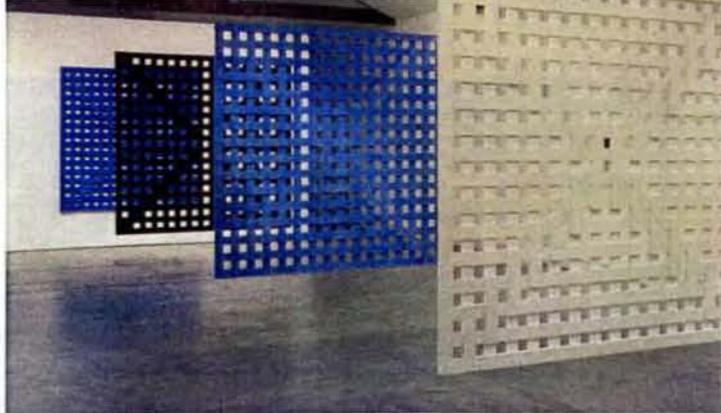
Alun Leach-Jones is just such an artist. Primarily a painter, although he also makes sculptures, drawings, prints and multiples, Leach-Jones produces

abstract work that is complex, colorful and finely wrought—intricate, hard-edge spatial concoctions that seem to hum and bubble with barely contained energy. I met a number of other veteran painters and sculptors in Sydney, and I found their work characterized by compositional complexity, chromatic richness, and a mastery of mark and surface. The work can take a number of forms, from the dense, subtly colored, batiklike figure and landscape compositions of Guy Warren, to the bright, declarative cityscapes and still lifes of Peter Pinson, to the compactly curvilinear (and funny) wall reliefs of Nola Jones. Even geometric work—normally more austere—seems to take on a kind of glow or patina in these artists' hands. Andrew Christofides's asymmetrically gridded paintings are delicately graded and modeled. Although muted in tone, they possess an iconlike radiance. Hilarie Mais makes tough-minded, monochromatic wooden lattice structures that hang on the wall or lean up against it. This sort of work has the potential for being industrial-looking and overly cerebral, but Mais infuses her sculpture with a quiet, painterly warmth.

In talking with artists on my trip, I sensed a strong desire for a connection with art formed outside their own rather comfortable society. I had read earlier

accounts of Australian art that characterized it as a work in progress, the cultural manifestations of a society actively engaged in the task of self-definition. While the art of earlier decades might have relied too heavily on received notions, today's Australian art seems to have found itself. The internationalization of the art world means that significant work is being made on a daily basis in studios around the world. There still are, of course, art-world centers, but the concepts of centrality and its partner, universality, seem to be markedly on the wane. This may be bad news for those who value ideological and historical tidiness, but it makes for lots of interesting things to look at. Australia is a land of artistic plenty and should be on anyone's must-see list. □

Author: *Richard Kalina is a painter who writes on art.*



*Hilarie Mais: Divide #1-4, 2002, oil on wood, four panels 80 by 80 by 2 inches each. Courtesy Sherman Galleries, Sydney.*



*Alun Leach-Jones: The Fountain, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 66 by 72 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Rex Irwin Gallery, Sydney.*

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