



BETTER PLACES

PERTH INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS
4 DECEMBER 2008 - 1 FEBRUARY 2009

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Yearning for a better place, whether it be a 'promised land' or a hopeful harmonious world, has always been part of human nature. The cataclysmic issues that confront humanity today, including climate change; war; environmental catastrophe; collapse of food systems and the global financial crisis, have seriously eroded our optimism. The enterprise of making sense of, or bettering, our world has never appeared more unattainable

The exhibition *Better Places* playfully and critically engages our sense of hope, fear and cynicism about the present, and our aspirations and dreams for a better place in the future. It touches upon our concept of place and purpose in a complex and dynamic global environment that defies neat summary, easy answers and old solutions. Featuring new and recent work by established artists from across Australia and New Zealand, this exhibition navigates the space between the world we live in, and the one we wish for.

Jurek Wybraniec's sculptural intervention *Wall, Floor, Rug and Table combo # 1* (2008) is loaded with modernist utopian associations. A constantly inflating and deflating architectural form, the work makes an up-sized absurdist play on the modernist desire to create a new and better world by improving people's 'physical and psychological conditions' through sleek functional design across all facets of the built environment.¹ Combining the geometric forms of modernism with the complex line of the baroque (the filigree-like formation), it represents the convergence of two sets of competing styles, impulses and philosophies that can be summarised as the forces of restraint and excess. A LUX table stands in for the ultimate 'thing' that will make one's life and one's home perfect or complete. When inflated (or engorged), the sculpture can be interpreted as representing 'the ideal' – where all elements are in harmony – and when deflated this harmony is lost. In this constant process of transition from one state to another the construction literally embodies the rupture of modern utopian ideals.

Alongside Wybraniec's modernist grotesquerie **Saskia Leek's** paintings explore the humbling contradictions of human hope and despair. Sourced from junkshop amateur pictures, postcards and anonymous snap shots, Leek's pictures are eerily placeless and of no particular time. Echoing generic subject matter yet devoid of specific detail, they are composed with soft effects of light, such as the moon, reflections on water or other barely distinguishable tonal designs. Arrayed in sequences of subject and titles, they hint at narrative cycles that somehow never quite cohere, appearing to draw upon faintly remembered nostalgias, or unrealised optimisms of non-specific bygone eras. These seductive and perplexing paintings present faded utopias, things and places left behind, gone but not completely forgotten. They are redolent with exquisite longing, suggesting other worlds, which are familiar, but faraway.

In contrast to Leek's dreamlike musings **Raquel Ormella's** installation *130 Davey Street* (2005) is grounded in the *realpolitik* of her work as an artist and activist. Presented as an arrangement of whiteboards, this work takes the viewer into the Wilderness Society's Hobart Campaign Centre. Based on photographs taken of this space over a two-year period, the drawings on each whiteboard are crowded and layered with meticulously detailed depictions of nondescript office spaces, campaign strategies, planning material, gantt charts, graphs, timetables and maps. They tell stories about the daily activity of campaigning and include paraphernalia such as stickers, posters, fliers and assorted calls-to action which cover every surface. Looking closely, one can identify references to landmark campaigns such as the Lake Pedder and the Styx Valley crusades, along with files on RFAs (Regional Forest Agreements). One board features a drawing of Peter Dombovskis' iconic and influential photograph *Rock Island Bend*, which is credited with shifting national public opinion against a proposed hydroelectric scheme that would have flooded wilderness areas. Like the forests that the Wilderness Society activism seeks to preserve, Ormella's endeavour is also at risk of erasure. Searching and uncertain in its nature, this project occupies the intersections of art and politics, examining the role of the artist as an agent of change in the creation and perception of significance, meaning and value.

Also fascinated by the way that incidents and histories transpose themselves onto places, but with a macabre rather than political edge, **Fiona Lowry's** paintings adduce a deep disquiet. Focusing on 'tainted' landscapes, Lowry is well known for her earlier paintings of psychically fraught locations made infamous by death cults and psychopaths. This new body of work dwells on the colonial mythology of the Australian bush as a 'strange and malevolent space'.² Referencing history and landscape painting, cinema and photojournalism, Lowry's imagery taps into contemporary paranoia. In *do you think i would leave you* (2008) the artist's naked figure lies exposed in a rocky and forested landscape. The subject meets the viewer's gaze, ensnaring us in a scenario that appears to be sinister yet defies immediate explanation. While Lowry's fuzzy soft black and white images are reminiscent of deteriorated newspaper print or shaky low-res stills, the vividly painted *it is you talking* (2008) is made up of intense pink, orange and blue hues that blend across the stark white canvas, creating a landscape that is both bleached and stained. A deep melancholia pervades many of Lowry's pictures. Like Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, before her these paintings of the Australian bush have strong biblical resonances, in this case echoing the expulsion from Eden and paradise never quite found.³

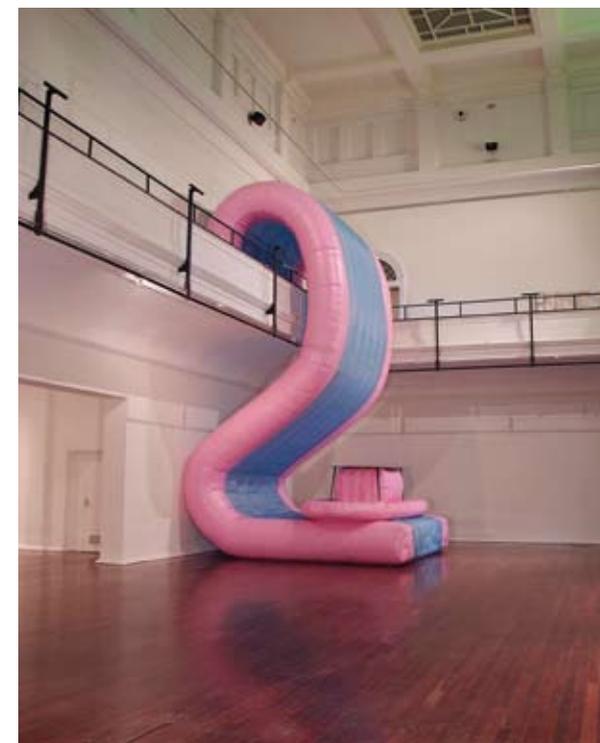
Like Lowry, **Ruth Watson** is interested in how we understand and define spaces and places but on a universal level. Her fragile glass globe mirror distorts the environment surrounding it, offering the viewer a misshapen reflection of both themselves and the world they inhabit. Etched with a quote by Oscar Wilde; 'A map of the world without Utopia on it is not worth even glancing at', Watson's poignant hand blown globe reminds us that when we look at the world – we invariably see a distorted self reflection. Similarly Watson's *Fab* (2008), a global map

created from washing powder scattered across the gallery floor, resonates with associations of artificiality, hygiene, chemical pollution and consumption. It's uneven spread evokes the ever-changing, unstable dynamics and fragility of our time. Watson critiques the authoritative and immutable ways with which we perceive and register all that is around us and points out how this is at odds with the impermanence and uncertainty of the world itself.

Richard Lewer punctures the national posture with a single sentence in a work that reveals a state of mind riddled with anxieties, prohibitions and exclusions. The aphorism 'I MUST LEARN TO LIKE MYSELF' is painted in a simple bold hand across a standard classroom map of Australia found by the artist. Long, gothic streaks of paint run down the map's surface. The statement is imperfectly rendered and arranged. Several neighbouring nations are relocated to fit the horizontal format of the map, Australia's broad shoulders spread east and west. A type of artistic anti-heroism underpins Lewer's exploration of antipodean culture. An acute observer of the world that surrounds him, Lewer, is a poetic sociologist of our times. His work is loaded with a fine sense of balance between the comic, tragic and absurd.⁴

Attentive to how the world fits together **Emily Floyd** plays with the currency of ideas and historic moments. Reminiscent in turn of children's building blocks, puzzles, architectural structures and ruins, her pieces are populated by enigmatic toy sentinels. Floyd's 'Art School' series queries the nature of art and its interface with the world. The fragments of texts composed across each installation are extracts from a series of essay questions that Floyd sourced from Melbourne academic Justin Clemens. Forming the titles for her works, these topical questions probe philosophical issues foundational to contemporary art. One work reads, 'NEW WAYS OF THINKING' in a bold typeface – the emphasis is on 'NEW'. The viewer is encouraged to wonder if, like puzzles, these blocks may, over time, be progressively assembled together into arrangements approximating solutions, signposts or pathways into the future.

There is a sense of alchemy underpinning **Benjamin Armstrong's** suite of pastel-coloured prints tilted *Sorcery* (2008). As one spends time with his images they appear to continuously dissolve and reform in a chain of correspondences and associations that morph endlessly into one another. Resembling a strange anatomy or even cosmology, the prints combine notions of extraordinary fecundity alongside suggestions of decay. At once compelling and repulsive, the organisms and energies inhabiting these works escape categorisation but nonetheless connote the cycle of life and death. Installed in the shape of a shallow and pale rainbow-like arc, Armstrong's prints form an entry point into realms outside the effable.



Jurek Wybraniec, *Wall, Floor, Rug and Table combo#1* 2008 (installation view PICA)
Courtesy of the artist and Goddard de Fiddes Gallery, Perth. Photo: Tony Nathan



Also beyond the territory of the everyday, Clare Davies' images present fantastical multi-dimensional worlds in which everything is connected to everything else. Spaces flow into one another, blending and merging, ceilings are carpeted with stars and naked bodies levitate and drift in unbounded fields of colour. Clusters of ecstatic figures seek consummation on every level and sometimes one body literally disappears inside another. The formlessness and liquidity of these compositions evoke the viscousness of bodily fluids. Davies' animation *Journey to Pompeii* (2008) depicts a group of figures in a communal bath, with another figure diving through portals and liquid pools into other dimensions. With the title *The Last Days of Pompeii* (2008) this series brings to mind a range of responses and emotions including terror, violence and a sense of catastrophic transformation, as well as profound loss for a mysterious and beautiful world, which, despite being physically obliterated two millennia ago nevertheless persists deep in the popular imagination. While the references to Pompeii are often oblique, Davies' strange worlds suggest possibilities for renewal through destruction and transmutation.

Better places are always on the horizon. Without them we inhabit a present that can only be located in the past. Scanning the current moment for our future, art and artists provide us with bridges to new possibilities and 'new ways of thinking'. From modest hopes for a brighter tomorrow, to the ambitious imaginings of utopias never realised, we irrepressibly dream about our world remade.

Melissa Keys
November 2008

¹ Christopher Wilk, 'Utopia', in *Modernism: Designing a New World 1914–1939*, V&A publications, London 2006.

² Fiona Lowry, correspondence with the artist, 2008.

³ This recent body of work is based on photographs taken in and around Bundanon on the banks of the Shoalhaven.

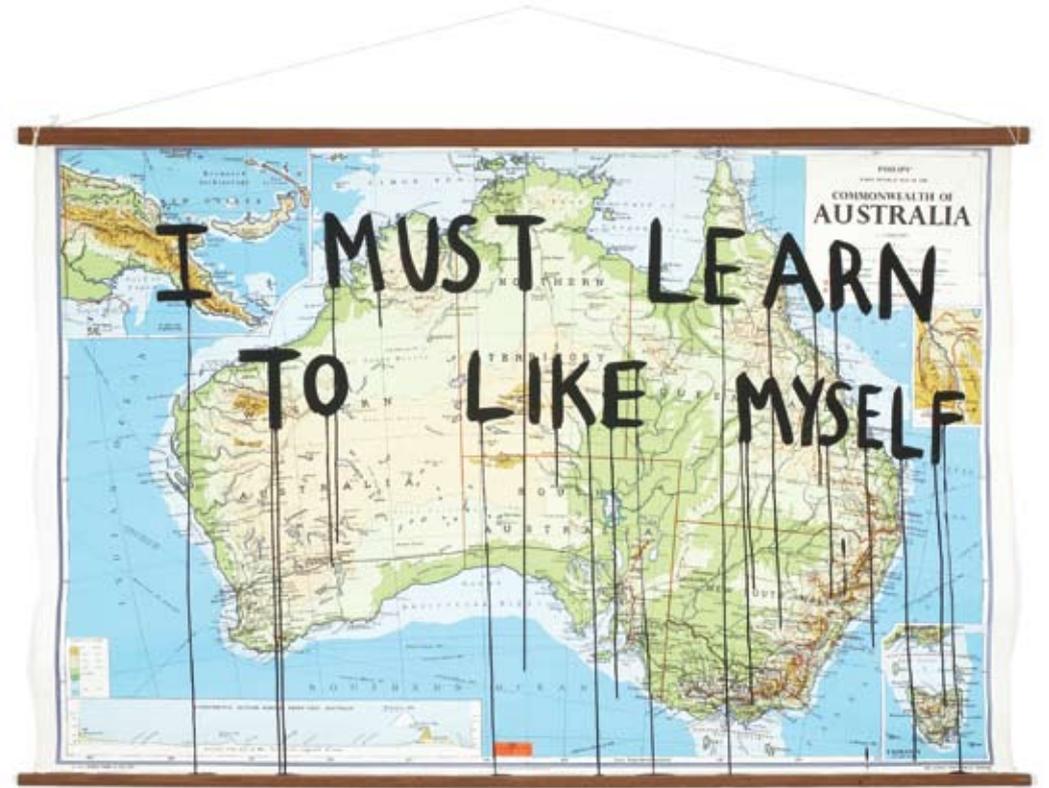
⁴ Richard Lewer: 'It starts as an idle thought grows into an obsession', posted on the *National Art School Blog*, Sydney, April 24 2007.

Benjamin Armstrong, *Sorcery* 2008

Courtesy of the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne. Photo: Christian Capurro



Ruth Watson, *A map of the world without Utopia on it is not worth even glancing at...* 2004
Courtesy of the artist and Two Rooms Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand



Richard Lewer, *I Must Learn to Like Myself* 2006
Courtesy of the artist and Block Projects, Melbourne. Photo: Christian Capurro



Raquel Ormella, *130 Davey Street* 2005
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane



Emily Floyd, *Is art a truth procedure? Does it provide new ways of thinking about the world?* 2004
Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne



Emily Floyd, *Untitled (corner work)* 2004
Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne



Saskia Leek, *High Places* 2005
Saskia Leek, *Glasshead* 2007
Saskia Leek, *Ghostrider* 2005

All works courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney. Photos: Tony Nathan

LIST OF WORKS

BENJAMIN ARMSTRONG

Sorcery 2008
lino-cuts printed with activated carbon and metallic pigment on dyed BFK rives paper
7 parts, each 48.0 x 38.0 cm
Edition of 10 + 2 Artist proofs

Collection of the artist, Melbourne

CLARE DAVIES

Apollo with pandanas 2008
From the Series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
ink, watercolour and gouache
56.5 x 76.0 cm

black room #2 2008
From the Series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
lithography, monoprint, watercolour and gouache
56.5 x 76.0 cm

dancing scene in front of mountain 2008
From the series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
watercolour and gouache
56.5 x 76.0 cm

Girl and mountain 2006
From the Series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
watercolour and gouache
45.0 x 30.0 cm

grey circle 2008
From the series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
acrylic, watercolour and gouache
56.5 x 76.0 cm

Journey to Pompeii 2008
mixed media animation
duration 03:07 min

Women in the House of Menander 2008
From the Series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
lithography, watercolour, gouache, pastel
56.5 x 76.0 cm

pink couple with two hands 2005
From the Series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
watercolour and ink
56.5 x 76.0 cm

Untitled 2007
watercolour and monoprint
34.0 x 43.0 cm

Untitled: (black circle, people and water) 2008
From the Series: *The last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
lithography, monoprint, watercolour and gouache
56.5 x 76.0 cm

Untitled: (black face) 2006
From the Series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
watercolour and gouache
30.0 x 15.0 cm

Untitled: (pink room with vortex in doorway) 2008
From the series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* 2005–08
ink, watercolour and gouache
56.5 x 76.0 cm

All works collection of the artist, Perth

EMILY FLOYD

Is art a truth procedure? Does it provide new ways of thinking about the world? 2004
plywood, huon pine, beeswax, linseed oil, chalk and estapol
3 parts, dimensions variable
Private Collection, Melbourne

Is art useful as a therapeutic tool? Discuss this idea in relation to a community based mural project of your choice 2004
plywood, huon pine, beeswax, linseed oil, chalk and estapol
3 parts, dimensions variable
Private Collection, Melbourne

Untitled (corner piece) 2004
marine-ply, huon pine, chalk, linseed oil, beeswax
dimensions variable (figure 33 x 15 x 15 cm)
Private Collection, Melbourne

Walter Benjamin claimed that fascism is the intrusion of aesthetics into politics. Is he correct? Discuss using two or more examples to support your argument 2004
plywood, huon pine, beeswax, linseed oil, chalk and estapol
4 parts, 134 x 75 x 76 cm
Private Collection, Perth

SASKIA LEEK

Ghostrider 2005
oil on board
21.0 x 30.0 cm

Glasshead 2007
oil on board
27.5 x 35.5 cm

High Places 2005
oil on board
21.0 x 30.0 cm

Mayfair 2005
oil on board
21.0 x 30.0 cm

Mystic Eyes 2007
oil on board
27.5 x 35.5 cm

Night Day Night 2005
oil on board
21.0 x 30.0 cm

Point of Vanishing 2005
oil on board
30.0 x 21.0 cm

Shadow History 2005
oil on board
30.0 x 21.0 cm

Sleep 2005
oil on board
21.0 x 30.0 cm

Third Wish 2007
oil on board
27.5 x 35.5 cm

All works collection of the artist, Auckland

RICHARD LEWER

I Must Learn to Like Myself, 2006
acrylic on found school map
dimensions

Collection of the artist, Melbourne

FIONA LOWRY

do you think i would leave you 2008
acrylic on canvas
123.0 x 138.0 cm

it is you talking 2008
acrylic on canvas
220.0 x 153.0 cm

you cant stop what's coming 2008
acrylic on canvas
214.0 x 153.0 cm

All works collection of the artist, Sydney

RAQUEL ORMELLA

130 Davey Street 2005
whiteboards, temporary and permanent text markers
dimensions variable

Collection of the artist, Sydney

RUTH WATSON

A map of the world without Utopia on it is not worth even glancing at... 2004
hand-blown, mirrored glass with sandblasted text, aluminium fittings and wooden base

Fab 2008
washing powder
dimensions variable

All works collection of the artist, Auckland

JUREK WYBRANIEC

Wall, Floor, Rug and Table combo #1 2008
inflatable vinyl, Lux table (composite fibre)
800.0 x 420.0 x 460.0 cm

Collection of the artist, Perth



Clare Davies, *pink couple with two hands* 2005, from the series: *The Last Days of Pompeii*
 Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Tony Nathan

COVER IMAGE: Fiona Lowry, *it is you talking* 2008
 Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney.
 Photo: Richard Glover

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Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

Curator: Melissa Keys

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