



Curious Colony: *a twenty first century Wunderkammer*

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RIGHT AT THE START of *Curious Colony* is an 1814 portrait by Richard Read Sr of the young immigrant John Buckland. The watercolour has at some point in its history been cleaned using chloramine-T, a process which leaves a crystalline residue, and the picture looks as if it has been dusted with glitter powder. It is an appropriate beginning, for this is an exhibition which sparkles, both literally and figuratively. Curator Lisa Slade has assembled a collection of some three dozen early colonial paintings, drawings, prints and pieces of furniture, together with works by eleven contemporary artists – Brook Andrew, Fiona Hall, Narelle Jubelin, Fiona MacDonald, Danie Mellor, Kate Rohde, Joan Ross, Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, Robyn Stacey, Imants Tillers and Louise Weaver – selected to reflect or comment upon, illuminate or extend the imagery and meanings of the historical material.

Centrepiece and summary of the show is an extraordinary postcolonial artefact, the *Newcastle chest*, a deliberate re-creation or re-imagining of the famous *Macquarie collector's chest*.¹ The original, purchased by the Mitchell Library in 2004, houses the Australian natural history specimens collected by Governor and Mrs Macquarie

– birds, insects, fish, shells, seaweeds – densely packed into the trays and drawers of a cedar chest by convict cabinetmaker William Temple. Regrettably, the box is fragile, and could not travel to the exhibition, but its absence was certainly compensated for by this miniature '21st century *wunderkammer*,' commissioned especially for the Newcastle Region Art Gallery and paid for entirely by local donations. Canberra craftsman Scott Mitchell built a new chassis matching Temple's dimensions and basic structure, and five artists were commissioned to produce the contents: Lionel Bawden, Maria Fernanda Cardoso, Esme Timbery, Louise Weaver (again) and Philip Wolfhagen.

Exhibitions of such imagination, ambition and intelligence are rare enough in the Australian art museum firmament; that this project should also be closely, strategically linked to collection development is further testimony to the institution's curatorial nous.

Why am I so enthusiastic? Let me begin with the hang, an aspect of exhibition making that usually receives scant critical attention. Not the design – colour ways and typography, display furniture and lighting – but the layout, the adjacencies of works, the spaces between them, the



subtle filaments of subject, material, scale, form and colour that create a show's experiential dynamic, its narrative. The perennial challenge of the hang is particularly acute with an exhibition such as this, with its 200-year time span and its great stylistic variety, but it has been managed with both flair and subtlety.

For example, Smuts-Kennedy's shell-fungus-stalagmite columns, topped with varnished and gilded lumps of coal, are arranged on a shelf beneath John Lewin's *Nobby Island from Coal River*. While the objects' collective title, *Pyramid Scheme*, clearly alludes to contemporary capitalism, calling to mind the long lines of coal-loading conveyors just down the road at Port Waratah, the works are equally historical in reference, reminding us as much of the first discovery of coal in the region, of the fact that the Nobbys was originally named Coal Island. This antiquarian resonance continues on the next, perpendicular wall, where some of Smuts-Kennedy's columns are displayed inside the elegantly-proportioned *King secretaire*, oldest known surviving example of Australian colonial furniture. Behind its doors, with their vertical-elliptical windows, the white objects look like rococo porcelain, regency lace or melting candlesticks, while the terracotta ones pick up the rich red-browns of the cabinet's 'beefwood' (she-oak) veneers. From here the eye slips to the next visible wall, the next point of an exhibition visitor's circumambulation. There we see Mellor's *Dreaming beyond paradise (let sleeping giants lie)*, a drawing featuring the artist's trademark postcolonial dialectic of indigenous kangaroo and imperial willow pattern china. But in addition to its image politics, it is significant that this work is contained within a horizontal ellipse, thus providing a subconscious formal continuity from the King cabinet.

Now a choice is offered. The viewer can continue on her clockwise way around the exhibition's perimeter, following authorship and curvature and botany in the direction of Mellor's mezzotint *Cyathea cooperi* and thence to

Hall's *Froning vase* and a suite of fern-mounted emu eggs. Alternatively, she can diverge to the animal right, past Walter Preston's 1820 engraving of cutely incorrect, heraldically-opposed kangaroos, to *The Island V*, Andrew's dramatic appropriation² showing a big old 'boomer' defending himself against a pack of hunting dogs.

Which brings me back to the sparkle I mentioned at the start of this review. Andrew's work is an all-over fresh-blood red, but it is also printed on silver foil, and the reflective nature of the material, together with the crushing and grazing of the printing process, gives the surface a shine that from certain angles and in certain lights quite occludes the image, a flickering ruby *chiaroscuro* which matches that of the firelight in James Wallis and Joseph Lycett's corroboree pictures just around the corner. There is more silver in Hall's *Paradisus Terrestris* sardine cans, in the 19th century mounts of the emu eggs, in the 'holey dollars' of Jubelin's *Origins and originality*. There is gold, too: a golden yellow in the plumage of the regent bowerbird, both as drawn by convict artist Richard Browne and as taxidermically preserved under a Victorian glass dome; a yellow repeated in Weaver's *Newcastle chest* wattle wreath and in her *Golden snipe* (complete with gold-leafed legs and beak); in the sulphur cockatoo crest, the gold-painted coffin and branches and the brass king plates of Mellor's installation *The native's chest*, as well as in Smuts-Kennedy's gilded coal. The allure of precious metals, of trade beads and trinkets, continues in the colour and shine of Rohde's goofy *bombonniere*, in the nacreous glitter of Timbery's shellwork, and in the tiara worn by Mellor's princess parrot.

Of course, one could as easily describe other common devices. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the grid is a recurrent trope. Emblem of the imperial controlling gaze, of mapping and surveying, of classification and compartmentalisation (to divide is to conquer), in the colonial context we see it in



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the geometric layout of the drawers of the collector's chest, in the neat rectilinearity of the early settlement of Newcastle, even in the Macquarie tartan. 200 years on, it echoes in the rectangles of Tillers's canvas boards and Andrew's foil sheets, in MacDonald's woven photographs, in the hexagons of Bawden's pencil honeycombs and in the fine nets of Jubelin's needlepoint and Weaver's crochet. Seashells, a key feature of the *Macquarie chest*, are another favourite, appearing not only in the painted decoration of the 1818 *Riley cabinet* (here publicly exhibited for the first time), but also manifest in various ways in Bawden, Mellor, Rohde, Smuts-Kennedy and Timbery.

Indeed, what is so delightful about this exhibition is its multivalency, the way it establishes a rich, complementary context for each individual artist and/or work while allowing each its own idiosyncrasy. It is committed without being programmatic, informed without being doctrinaire. Although very much a Newcastle affair, it welcomes and promotes reference to other sites and histories: Stacey's photographs are about the Macleays of Elizabeth Bay

P5: *The Newcastle Chest 2010*: Cabinetmaker: Scott Mitchell; Artists: Lionel Bawden, Maria Fernanda Cardoso, Esme Timbery, Louise Weaver and Philip Wolfhagen. Commissioned by Newcastle Region Art Gallery. Purchased with the assistance of James and Judy Hart, Robert and Lindy Henderson, Valerie Ryan, Newcastle Art Gallery Society and Newcastle Region Art Gallery Foundation 2010. Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery.

P6: 1/ John Lewin, *Nobby Island from Coal River*, 1807, watercolour on paper, 33.2 x 43.7 cm. Purchased 1964. Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery.

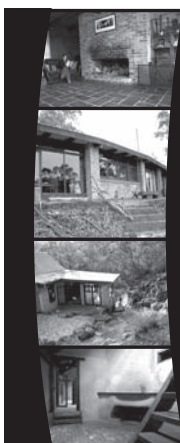
2/ Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *Pyramid scheme*, 2009, Jovi Clay, resin, coal sourced from Newcastle, imitation gold leaf, dimensions variable. Purchased 2009 and gifted by the artist. Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery. Image courtesy the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne.

P7: 1/ Louise Weaver, *Golden snipe*, 2010, hand-crocheted lamb's wool over taxidermied Australian snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*), Australian red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), cotton perlé crochet thread, cotton embroidery thread, felt and gold leaf, 26.6 x 22.5 x 16cm. Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery. Image courtesy the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney. Photograph by Mark Ashkanasy.

2/ Kate Rohde, *Live forever no. 3*, 2010, mixed media, 105 x 40 x 40cm. Image courtesy the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne.

3/ Danie Mellor, *The Native's Chest* (detail), 2010, mixed media installation, dimensions variable. Produced with support from the Australia Council for The Arts. Image courtesy the artist and Caruana and Reid Fine Art, Sydney.

House, Sydney; Wolfhagen's painted parrot is not local, but a Tasmanian species; while Cardoso's camouflage insects comment on the desire of all immigrants to fit in, to not stand out. The exhibition's dynamic cross-referencing of the national and the local, the historical and the contemporary, the theoretical and the sensual is perhaps best exemplified in Ross's wonderfully nutty video, *When I grow up I want to be a forger*, produced (like Mellor's *The native's chest* installation) especially for the show. In this work, Joseph Lycett's print *The sugar loaf mountain, near Newcastle* has been digitally animated. We see the trees waving in the wind, the clouds reshaping into those of Lycett's oil painting *Inner view of Newcastle*, and the two hunters running across the grass, schooners (and the Nobbys, too!) drift across the water, while one vessel runs aground in a 19th century prequel of the 2007 Pasha Bulker stranding. A hunting dog bounds into a tree, flushing out a screeching, squawking flock of psychedelic spirograph circles, while a moth from the Macquarie chest lays a ring of eggs. Furthermore, all the *staffage* (settlers, Aborigines, even a galah) wear hi-vis clothing – a 'visual imperialism' with which the artist is currently obsessed – their orange vests with white flashes making a neat analogy with the redcoat uniforms and cross-belts of



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British colonial soldiery. On the soundtrack, a magpie flying overhead has the drone of a light plane, while the sailing ships make the foghorn blasts of modern coal transports. So right. So wrong.

Okay, there are one or two things in *Curious Colony* with which I would take issue. Tillers's *White Aborigines* sounds a discordant, or rather anachronistic, note: it is a relic of the first, heavily theoretical generation of postcolonial art practice, in which the act of appropriation constituted a sufficient aesthetic-political ground for art in and of itself. Against the ludic, light, bright and nuanced work of the fourteen other artists, Tillers's stolid, Teutonic imagery and palette, his Kieferish grey scale, seem just a bit dull.

On the colonial front, I would like to have seen something of the work of Edward Close, the military engineer responsible for building 'Mrs Macquarie's Pier', the breakwater to the Nobbys. Close's 3.6-metre panorama of Newcastle shows another aspect of early settler artists' voracious appetite for recording the visible facts of their surroundings. Moreover, the self-deprecating inscription (beneath a vignette of dancing Aborigines) 'this corrobbery [sic] has no business here as it is never danced in the daytime' epitomises the artificiality, the ironic self-awareness of much amateur drawing in the early colonial period. Similarly, some of Richard Browne's Aboriginal portrait watercolours would have served to give Awabakal identity an individual face; it is a pity that the gallery was unable to acquire one of those sold in June from the Owston Collection. Still on the question of Aboriginal portraits, it should be pointed out that the two sheets of watercolours from the Newcastle Region Library Collection attributed to Augustus Earle are in fact later 19th century copies after Earle, Nicolas-Martin Petit and others.³ Finally, I would question (as a

number of art historians have since the 1970s) the attribution of the little still life of flowers and fruit at the start of the show to the convict artist W.B. Gould. No matter; the life in the painting glows so brightly, and it makes such a perfect pendant to Robyn Stacey's *Bombe (Cape bulbs)* that it seems churlish to object to its inclusion.

The greater truth of this exhibition, its bigger picture is, quite simply, as irrefutable as it is splendid. ☀

1. Lisa Slade flagged her obsession with this object, and predicted the commission and exhibition in 'Art on the rebound', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 216, December 2008, pp. 11-13. The chest is described in a recent, splendid monograph by Elizabeth Ellis: *Rare & Curious: the secret history of Governor Macquarie's collector's chest*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2010.
2. The original of the image is an engraving by Gustav Mutzel, from naturalist William Blandowski's *Australien in 142 Photographischen Abbildungen*, 1862, soon to be published for the first time in an English edition, edited by Harry Allen for the Aboriginal Studies Press.
3. Apart from the stylistic discrepancies, the inscription 'Papua Malay' on one sheet suggests the drawings date from after the biogeographical Papua-Malaya distinction ('the Wallace Line') was described by Alfred Russell Wallace, in 1869.

Curious Colony: a twenty first century Wunderkammer, curated by Lisa Slade, was exhibited at Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 10 July to 29 August 2010.

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Jeffrey BREN - The Dark Mirror
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Jeffrey Bren, *The Birds*, 1970 (detail), oil on canvas. Collection Art Gallery of Ballarat
Gift of Barbara Seddon under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2002

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