



NS Harsha, *Strands people event*, 2011; image courtesy the artist and courtesy Fondazione MAXXI; photo: Sebastiano Luciano

Restless: The Adelaide International

DAVID CORBET

Victoria Lynn's second Adelaide International, titled *Restless*, left some people feeling a little, well ... *restless*. The disquiet focused on venues and presentation – I heard it remarked that *Restless* struggled to achieve thematic 'momentum'. Some suggested this wasn't the best work from some very distinguished artists, for example a decade-old video work (*Gringo*, 2003) by celebrated Belgian/Mexican artist Francis Alÿs. Spread across four widespread venues, none of them very large, this selection of eighteen international artists had none of the advantages of the *Biennale* up the road at the Art Gallery of South Australia, i.e., a contiguous, dedicated space and generous production budget.

If once it was Old Masters or Impressionists who could reliably drum up the crowds, we now live in the age of the contemporary crowd-pleaser, Christian Marclay's hugely popular *The Clock* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney) being an excellent example. Attendance figures are pored over as never before, and state tourism bodies fall over each other to compete for contemporary kudos – I recently heard MONA described as 'Hobart's *Bridgeclimb*'. Viewed in these terms, it's perhaps not surprising that the *International's* quiet seriousness might fail to connect with the public taste for sensation and spectacle.

Samstag hosted the greater part of *Restless*, and the downstairs space featured the late Nancy Spero's major opus *Maypole/take no prisoners* (2007), alongside N.S. Harsha's *Extraction* (2012) and Lisa Reihana's *PELT* (2010) series. This room was the closest thing to spectacle offered by *Restless*, and Harsha's engaging whole-wall painting, of figures falling towards installed piles of stone,

rope and sugarcane, was rendered in naïve style and bright, flat colours. The notion of extraction was most readily apparent in the juice leaking stickily from the crushed sugar cane, but the artist talks in more general terms about the human need to 'extract meaning'. Spero's maypole, each strand culminating in a two-dimensional severed head cut from plate aluminium, dominated the room, but would have benefited from a dedicated space, and more dramatic lighting. The 200 heads, graphically rendered in paint and collage, represent the victims of the Vietnam and Iraq wars, and are stylistically evocative of Goya's *Misfortunes of War* etchings, and of Dadang Christanto's severed heads.

Lisa Reihana's large photomedia works were described by the curator as 'interpretations of imagined beings presented in digitally-rendered utopian landscapes'¹, and the artist invokes the Maori concept of an 'under/other' world. The works, depicting alabaster-white women glamorously adorned with animal pelts, explore the vocabulary of idealised fashion images, but the titles (*Aquila*, *Camarillo*, *Sabino*, *Pilosus*) refer to horses, monkeys and eagles, all powerful totems in many Indigenous mythologies. Reihana is well known for her powerful explorations of Maori figures, and these works expand her themes into an interrogation of hybrid cultural identity. Greek/Cypriot Socratis Sacratous also uses photomedia in his series *Architectural Strategy* series (2011). These images initially read as abstractions and could, at first glance, have been computer rendered, but are in fact photographs of shards of metal and wood thrown into the air and frozen in time. For the Athens-based artist, these are evocations of social upheaval and



1/ Lisa Reihana, *PELT: Camarillo*, 2010, digital print on Hahnemühle 305gsm paper; image courtesy the artist



2/ Lisa Reihana, *PELT: Pilosus*, 2010, digital print on Hahnemühle 305gsm paper; image courtesy the artist

civic disorder. They left me emotionally cold, but perhaps that is the point. I do get their liminal allure, and it's interesting that a Socratous work was the key image for the *International's* marketing.

Everything else at Samstag was video, and this may explain the lukewarm response. However it was here that I found the curatorial themes resonating most strongly, with three works of particular note: Anri Sala's *Answer me* (2008), Danae Stratou's *The Globalising Wall* (2011), and Saskia Olde Wolbers *Pareidolia* (2011). Albanian/German Sala's claustrophobic and aurally unsettling piece was shot under an echoing (Bucky Fuller) dome, once a Soviet-era 'listening station' in Berlin. In his words, 'A woman tries to end a relationship, her companion refuses to listen and plays the drums

fiercely to silence her. Next to her, the drumsticks resting on a vacant drum play to the echo of his drumming.' Stratou, an Athenian woman, has compiled a grimly compelling, rapid 'slideshow' of stills taken in the shadows of walls in Berlin, Kosovo, Palestine, Kashmir, Korea, Northern Ireland, Mexico and California. Wolbers's (Netherlands/UK) piece is truly 'strange' in the best sense of the word. Computer-generated plant/bird-like forms are intercut with shots of Japanese interiors, but it is the soundtrack that equally beguiles, drawn from the book *Zen in the Art of Archery*, by Eugen Herrigel. Alÿs's work, referred to earlier, features a low-res re-enactment of a dog attack encountered on one of the artist's marathon walks, in the Mexican province of Hidalgo. Alÿs has said how he 'instinctively used the camera ... as a shield to protect myself from the dogs' aggression'. The work sat well within the *International's* dystopian undercurrents despite (and partly because of) its inherent banality.

At the Flinders University City Gallery, the Indigenous USA collective Postcommodity presented an excellent and ambitious multi-channel work, *With salvage and my knife tongue* (2011-12), in which American and Australian Indigenous people speak direct and close-up to camera, their utterances digitally co-mingled and iterated into a quietly absorbing meditation on global indigeneity. CACSA (Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia) presented three artists: Chosil Kil (South Korea), Rabih Mroué (Lebanon), and Jinoos Taghizadeh (Iran), with selections evidently restricted by space limitations. Kil, a renowned large-scale installation artist, presented a series of smallish, 'three-dimensional', geometric paintings. Mroué and Taghizadeh showed wall-hung works with strong stylistic similarities – both working in low-res graphic montage, around documentation of the missing and displaced.

Finally to AEAFF (the Australian Experimental Art Foundation), and Teresa Margolles – perhaps the component that exemplified the problems faced by a project like *Restless*. To a critic armed with a knowledge of Margolles's oeuvre, *127 cuerpos (127 bodies)* (2006), an installation with remnants of autopsy threads, it was a case of 'De que otra podremos hablar?' – 'What else can we talk about?', the title of her 2007 Venice Biennale installation. To the uninitiated it was a grubby string (actually 127 short pieces tied together) suspended across an otherwise empty gallery. Margolles's refusal to engage in facile spectacle presents a curatorial conundrum – how to present difficult but important conceptual art in an accessible way? A showman like Delvoye makes death kinda fun and shiny, but Margolles presents its aftermath, in an unadorned, if strangely elegiac way. Hers is the language of the mortuary, and her long-term collective SEMEFO (Forensic Medical Service) implies a no-nonsense investigative role in her country's frightening culture of narco-slaughter.

There is a yawning disconnect between the contemporary art of North and South, and the critical/curatorial discourses around it. For me this crystallised in *Artist's Week*, during keynotes by two extraordinary thinker/curators – Jan Verwoerd (Netherlands/



1/ Socratis Sacratous, digital print from the *Architectural Strategy* photographic series, 2011



2/ *Postcommodity, Mother, Teacher, Destroyer* 2011, four-channel video installation with sound, mixed-media sculpture (wood, deer antler, deer hide, boar bladder, found materials), dimensions variable; image courtesy the artists

Germany), and Cuauhtémoc Medina (Mexico) who curated Margolles's Venice pavilion and is director of *Manifesta* (Belgium, from 2 June). Both delivered absorbing presentations, dense with critical allusion and cultural detail, but I had the sense they were speaking of, and from, different worlds. Verwoerd's methodology of 'radical empathy' is a resonant one. In a tour-de-force that began with Adorno (on mimesis) and ended with a joke about a chicken and a frog borrowing library books, he spoke with originality and humour for an art that reconnects us with natural energies, with magic, with psychic wholeness (not his term). Co-convenor Nick Papastergiadis spoke of it as a kind of paean to 'the sublime'. Medina took us in an opposing direction, on a journey into the art of 'the New South' – urgent, social, political; engaged with dislocation, murder and mayhem, blood and belonging. 'Debates about art', he said in response to a question from Verwoerd, 'are the business of the North'.

Shoot me down (and I'm sure you will) but here's my simplistic take. The art of the 'old' North is largely self-referential, suffering terminal mannerism and loss of relevance, and spends its time navel-gazing at its own decline. It is engaged in a kind of search for a lost authenticity, and looks for it increasingly in the work of Southern artists. The South just doesn't get the agonising. It has emerged, vigorous and vocal, from centuries of tribalism and cultural marginalisation, with its own language of global assertiveness. Straddling this cultural faultline, in the shadow of the wall if you will, is the problematic work presented in *Restless*. Australia may 'luckily' sail on, but out there much of the planet is in social turmoil. Like all evils, injustice and oppression have their banalities, and some of their more dispiriting cultural manifestations can feel like a blow upon a bruise. We may not be temperamentally inclined to confront Diaspora and despair as subjects for contemporary art, but in its quiet way *Restless* brought these things to us. It's not a relaxed or comfortable feeling, and it's not supposed to be.



3/ + 4/ Saskia Olde Wolbers, *Pareidolia*, 2011, video stills no. 4 and no. 23; images courtesy the artist

1. Victoria Lynn, *Restless: Adelaide International 2012*, exhibition catalogue, Adelaide Festival Corporation, Adelaide, 2012.

Restless: The Adelaide International was shown at various venues, 1 March to 5 April 2012.

David Corbet is a writer, curator and artist based in Sydney. He will curate the exhibition *South³* at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery in 2013.