2000 Years

Span Galleries
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Melbourne,
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Australia

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Exhibition dates: Tues 10th – Fri 27th Sept 2002
Gallery Hours: Tues-Fri: 11am-5pm Sat: 11am-4pm

Fremantle Arts Centre
1 Finnerty Street
Fremantle
Western Australia 6160

Tel: 08 9432 9555
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Website: www.fac.org.au

Gallery Hours: Daily 10am-5pm (except Christmas Day, Boxing Day, New Years Day)

Acknowledgments:
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Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood London
Department of Land Administration WA
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Clive Barstow
Span Galleries Melbourne
Fremantle Arts Centre
Unlearning (artist’s note)

Too many wet winter afternoons spent piecing together jigsaws of world maps and flags. In retrospect contributed to my rather distorted and Euro-centric view of world order. As a young child, I was unaware of the significance of this indoctrinated education and blissfully detached from the reality that maps and flags like the jigsaw itself, were simply constructs of a rather powerful and significant kind.

Every piece the puzzle picks up and picks up again, and studies the strokes, every combination he tries and tries a second time, every blender and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated and decided by the other

Perec’s analysis of the jigsaw as a metaphor for life, social power and control could be expanded to include the history of cartography itself. The seemingly innocent subject matter has supplied the puzzle maker with the irresistible opportunity to simulate cultural and political connotations through the manipulation of imagery.

Discovering a world map later in life with Europe as an orbiting satellite to Central Asia therefore, marked a more humble position in my learning curve and removed any point of reference from that time forward. Maps and flags are relatively fixed structural devices and as a consequence pertain to truth and stability, yet they attempt to represent nations in perpetual transition, an improbable scenario for even the most synchronic cultures.

Perhaps a more incidental but no less significant influence in my re-orientation has been the multi-cultural food hall. A seemingly unlimited and indiscriminate mix of cultural references all on the same plate. Unlike the inert nature of flags, the food hall offers a sensory taste of world dis-order, a hint to a future of hybridity and mis-representation where no one owns the cutlery.

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On Collaboration

Reflections on national identity forms the ground rules to this collaboration with friend and artist Nicola Kaye. While our strategies and methods are worlds apart, we have often managed to arrive in the same place at the same time. Collaboration involves compromise and can take many forms, in this instance it has forged a unique position in our individual explorations of hybridity and more importantly it contributes the final and most unpredictable piece to the puzzle. It represents a commonality of themes and issues that have influenced our individual works to a point where ownership, like identity, can be mutual.

Clive Barstow 5.7.02

Double chilli on that ice cream please!

This playful and eclectic series of works reconfigures this “iconography” and projects ahead 2000 years to the time when the Union Jack might briefly signify the nation it represents. A time when cartography can accommodate political, cultural and even meteorological flux, a potpourri of incommensurability perhaps but with a realisation that national identity can no longer be achieved.

Mapping cultural incommensurability

Maps and flags perpetuate the illusion of clearly defined boundaries and harmonious internal consistencies in modern societies. These constructed national truths however can only ever be situational and political. Nationalisms are processes of conditioning and socialisation defined by the dominant cultural groups. The modern nation-state is increasingly being forced to confront its own national fictions and to come to grips with the fact of cross-cultural incommensurability, especially in this age of migratory flows and international border-crossings. As the local social, demographic, increasingly changes in a relatively rapid manner, the likelihood of one’s daily encounter and engagement with cultural alterity proportionally intensifies. At any rate, only certain aspects of certain minority group differences are absorbed and reflected by the national imaginary—noticeably in the form of an easily digestible and commodifiable difference, such as food.

Consider the example of a multicultural food hall. To be sure, it offers a space where varied cultural permutations can be assembled and consumed at any one occasion. At the same time, however, the range of tastes on offer at any given food hall is too narrow a reflection of the diversity of ethnicity and difference within the national-state. The range of choices at any given locale is always reassuringly limited to the (sometimes) narrow international ideal that seeks to absorb formerly marginalised groups into the imagined mainstream. As the history of indigenous peoples has palpably demonstrated for example, group differences, cultural politics and ideological specificities cannot simply be bred out of the multicultural-hybrid equation. Hybridisation is a lived process whereby such incompatibilities or incommensurabilities are continually highlighted. In this respect, hybridity is an ongoing site of interrogation and alienation, ultimately placing pressure on a necessary re-balancing of dominant national cultural values.

Barstow’s current artistic project goes some way towards imagining a transnational understanding of one’s history—and future—through heterogeneity, hybridity and incommensurability. The discontinuities and dislocations in his maps and flags signify the incongruities of unassimilable differences. Distinct elements cannot simply be ‘jigsaw-ed’ together to form a coherent national or global picture. Harmony is seemingly only achievable through a disintegration of sorts, whereby stability or consensus is itself deliberately and permanently left open to contestation. Therein lies the possibility for inscribing a condition of belonging without the fixity of policed national boundaries and standards.

Dr. Dean Chan 18.7.02

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