

below the surface

KEVIN MURRAY DELVES INTO THIS SUBSTANTIAL TEXTILE EXHIBITION AND ASSOCIATED CONFERENCE
INITIATED BY GOULBURN REGIONAL ART GALLERY, 1996

***Below the Surface* is a major undertaking. Two and a half years of preparation, including curatorial seminars and a public forum, result in an exhibition touring sixteen venues, a handsome 72 page catalogue, weekend conference and world wide web site. At such a scale, *Below the Surface* warrants close scrutiny.**

Start with the title, which unravels as: 'a contemporary textiles exhibition resulting from a collaborative curatorial process.' What is a 'collaborative curatorial process'? *Below the Surface* has three curators—Jennifer Lamb, Doreen Mellor and Sue Rowley—whose method of collaboration extends beyond their circle and embraces the eleven artists. Thus, the work for this exhibition evolved out of group meetings, rather than selection from above. Sue Rowley clearly articulates the method in her curatorial essay:

"*Below the Surface* has intervened in the conventional multiple artist exhibition, the much-vilified 'survey show'. And it has done this by drawing artists into the process of developing the exhibition in parallel with the making of the works, giving them responsibility not only for the installation of a visually coherent and sophisticated exhibition at the first venue but also for the education and public programs, the documentation and the touring of the show."

Curators give over responsibility to makers! The results of such experiments in modern business management are often hailed as great successes—but what kind of exhibition does it result in?

On first impression, *Below the Surface* lacks an identifiable focus. The content ranges widely from abstract to figurative and the forms include both open-ended fabric and traditional weave. The works themselves are individually engaging, but it is difficult to connect them together conceptually. Nonetheless, these works do share something.

Pragmatically, weaving transforms individually

weak threads into a strong fabric. But there are moments in *Below the Surface* when this weakness is re-admitted. Liz Williamson's almost funerary textiles experiment with the effects of 'suffered fabric'. The capacity of cloth to express the ravages of age makes it an appropriate stage on which to play out the transformation of human skin in the latter course of life. This delicacy is complemented in a more wholesome fashion by Keiko Amenomori Schmeisser's application of the traditional Japanese 'shibori' technique to the Australian landscape. This intimate scale of operation is reflected in Jennifer Lamb's detailed catalogue notes by references to darning as a painstaking interpolation of fate into human potential.

A key feature of *Below the Surface* is the inclusion of Ngarrandjeri weavers, Yvonne Koolmatie and Ellen Trevarow. Koolmatie's *Coorong Dreaming* is a successful marriage of method and content: the circular framework of the coil

technique made a fluid space in which to place dreaming motifs.

Though these two weavers were involved in the exhibition development—hosting the group's visit to the Coorong—there seemed to be no overt collaboration between them and other participants.

Fibre is a frequent choice as a medium for bringing together Aboriginal and white makers. *High Fibre Diet*, at the Fremantle Arts Centre in 1994, brought the newly professionalised Maningrida weavers into an exhibition of like-

minded makers. Last year in Darwin, 24 Hour Art Gallery put on *Cross Fibre*, which combined baroque works by Lia Gill with the more eccentric designs by Yolngu weavers of Ramangining and Milingimbi. This trend shows fibre to be a medium which is conducive to cross-cultural exhibitions. (Also see the *Tamworth Biennial* reviewed in issue 1/97. Ed.) Why is this so? Perhaps because weaving

is a combinatory rather than inscriptive technique, or that it is practised mostly by women who may be less concerned with defending territory. We are as yet, however, to see substantial interweaving of these cultural traditions.

'Collaboration' as used in *Below the Surface* turns out to be a very loose word. The word is employed to describe not only participant interaction, but also combinations of materials (Wendy Dodd's

'collaboration between modern plastic and exotic fibre') and complementary attitudes (Liz Williamson's 'collaboration—between her interest in exploring ideas—and her technical ability'). This relatively liberal use of 'collaboration' demonstrates the wave of camaraderie which carried this project along.

The 'collaborative curatorial process' established a supportive space in which weavers might express something of their place in the world. This is a welcome contrast to the trash formalism that pervades contemporary galleries, but it has two problems.



Sue Rosenthal, *Bang Bang/ Nothing Changes* (detail of diptych), 1996. Supplementary weft weaving. H 1400 x W 1200mm.

First, not all artists kept up with this style. The works sometimes had a problem fitting comfortably into their stories. The colourful grids constructed by Wendy Dodd seem only abstractly related to the gates which supposedly inspired them. Other times, it may fit too neatly, such as Liz Jeneid's grid inspired by E. Annie Proux's *Postcards*.

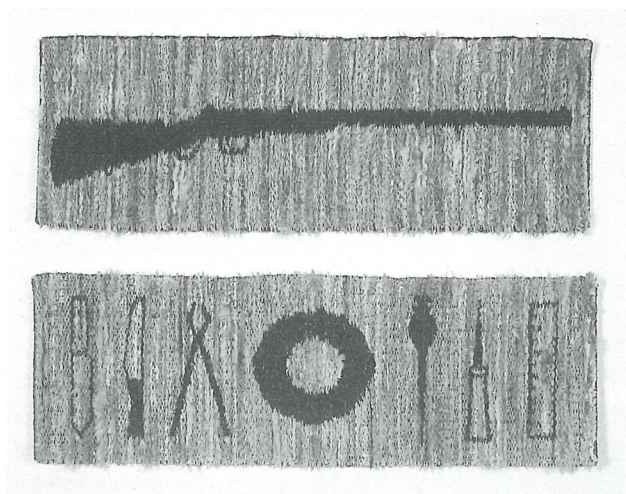
Second, the absence of a formal conceptual

concerns of closure. Where is the curatorial method? the common theme? the proof of the pudding? ask I, reaching for my cap gun... but here I come to the most compelling part of the entire exercise—the strange presence of the male principle. Stereotyped masculine values—hierarchy, discipline and violence—had both a general and specific manifestation in this exhibition. (For this point, you will

Sue Rosenthal has continued her interest in mass-mediated violence with a diptych tribute to the Kalishnikov AK47 rifle, as carried by a Bosnian soldier and a child in playful imitation. Her simple hand-woven form envelopes this weapon within the gentle concerns of a domestic realm.

While Rosenthal's work is materially not as effective as Hatton's, they conspire together to

THE RESULT IS NOT WORKS OF MIXED ORIGINS, BUT FABRICS SITUATED IN STRONG PERSONAL NARRATIVES.



Beth Hatton,
*Kangaroo Rifle and
Tanning Implements*,
1996. Kangaroo skin
off-cuts and wool on
cotton warp. 380 x
1100mm and 380 x
1150mm (h x w).

structure makes it difficult for the exhibition to translate beyond the experience of those belonging to the group. The catalogue's description of the works

chronicles the time participants shared together. There are obvious parallels between this exercise and popular films such as *Company of Women*, or *How to Make an American Quilt*. At its worst, it creates a kind of 'you had to be there' aura around the works, which may alienate a broader audience.

The accompanying conference, *Collaborations: Working in the Arts*, was a spirited event, but it left little room for doubt or critical analysis. The international guest, Anne Wilson, gave a solid presentation but it would have been more interesting to hear her talk with more detail about her own work.

There, perhaps, I am showing my gender. As a male commentator on a women's project it is naturally my task to adopt the obsessive

shadows that fall across this grid are necessary in order to display its looseness, fabric requires an inert form over which it might be draped. This male-female dualism seems implicated in the business of weaving itself: note the mutual dependence of the steady warp and expressive weft. It is the dialogue between these two elements which generates the most striking works.

More specifically, the male principle emerged in the coincidental choice of guns as subject matter by Beth Hatton and Sue Rosenthal. Given her own sensitivities, Hatton has shown considerable courage to enter a knackery and gather kangaroo off-cuts for her strigose brown mats. Through this process, Hatton unpicks the gentle crafts at work in the marsupial slaughterhouse and produces work with both historical and personal resonance. Her homage to the kangaroo rifle in particular (as a tool for accuracy rather than volume) is an ironic comment on the care that might lie within a seemingly brutal trade.

need to concede a little gender essentialism.)

Generally, maleness emerged as a structure against which looseness could define itself. As Diana Wood Conroy notes: the grid is firmly in place here, (note Liz Jeneid's, Karen Edin's and Sue Blanchfield's pieces) indicating that doubt and questioning are permitted and held within the geometric structure of textiles. The

exercise a feminine register in a challenging, dangerous manner.

Regional politics had a rather strange part to play in this conspiracy. The week before the exhibition opened in Goulburn, local gunner Michael Diamond won a gold medal at the Atlanta Olympics. The shop windows down the main street were decked out in tributes to the 'shooting star'.

One of the first adventures of *Below the Surface* was to host the civic reception to welcome home this crack shot. We can only wonder what the responses of such high calibre guests were to the textiles around them. As the exhibition tours Australia, accompanied by a national destruction of lethal weapons, we hope that it provides a space to positively acknowledge this moment of rare collective repairation.

While the exercise of curatorial collaboration sustains a supportive space for artists, it can lead to an inward focus on the group. When this groupiness is cast aside, though, there is certainly more *Below the Surface* than threads the eye.

endnotes

Below the Surface touring itinerary over 1996–1998: Gippsland Art Gallery, Campbelltown City Art Gallery, McClelland Gallery – Langwarrin, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, The University Gallery – Launceston, Broken Hill City Art Gallery, Mildura Arts Centre, The Millicent Art Gallery, Riddoch Art Gallery – Mt Gambier, Naracoorte Art Gallery, Benalla Art Gallery, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Gladstone Regional Art Gallery and Museum, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Tamworth City Art Gallery. For information phone: Jennifer Lamb, Director, Goulburn Regional Art Gallery on (048) 23 0443

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