

## 20TH BIENNALE OF SYDNEY

THE FUTURE IS ALREADY HERE – IT'S JUST NOT EVENLY DISTRIBUTED



There's a moment in Alexis Teplin's three-character play *Arch (The Politics of Fragmentation)* (2016) when one of the actors, wearing a costume fashioned of painted rags, drolly intones: "Some very precarious patterns of civilization are going to dissolve, which is why all of the time I feel so unreal." Another character then blurts out: "There's something wrong with my mouth; I can't scream." So continues this alternately comic-yet-ponderous, articulate-yet-alienated production, set within the Biennale of Sydney's "Embassy of the Real" (at Cockatoo Island), amid Teplin's own painted-then-shredded-and-reassembled canvases, and loosely evoking modern utopianism through references to the Italian neorealist cinema of Roberto Rossellini and the socialist activism of Safdar Hashmi's street theater. The play epitomizes the tone of artistic director Stephanie Rosenthal's Biennale of Sydney, whose seven so-called thematic "Embassies" (as well as the "In-Between Spaces") are based around central concerns of artists working today, and where the discursive thread usually leads to forlorn, and foregone, conclusions about the inevitability of destruction—of dreams, peoples, communities, identities and even individuals. But, at least, the Biennale augurs many beautiful ends.

What, then, could be a better emblem for our times than a massive billboard of a pollution-induced, brilliantly hued sunset? At the "Embassy of Disappearance," held in the Carriageworks art space, is Neha Choksi's *The Sun's Rehearsal* (2016), comprising seven images of the sunset as seen from the shores of Mumbai, layered on top of one another with a black curtain hiding a hole where the sun should appear. Over the course of the Biennale, a performer (Alice Cummings) using a ladder leaning against the billboard successively strips away the layers to reveal the

one underneath. Erasure and the twin actions of creation and destruction are also embodied in Lee Mingwei's immaculate *Guernica in Sand* (2006/16), a laborious 13-meter-wide re-creation of Picasso's famous lament that visitors were allowed to walk across one day in April before the image was swept away. That many communities and their stories have already been lost is the subject of FX Harsono's *Ranjang Hujan (The Raining Bed)* (2013), a sculpture of water cascading down onto a surface of letters contained within a Chinese-style bed, marking the erasure of the Chinese-Indonesian (*Tionghoa*) community's long history. While some things are effaced, others go up in flames: Apichatpong Weerasethakul's haunting projection, *Home Movie* (2016), of what seems to be a suspended fireball in a darkened room, reveals itself to be several circular fans being incinerated; while Mike Parr's opening-day performance, *BDH* (referring to the Talking Heads song *Burning Down the House*), saw the artist cremate AUD 750,000 (USD 570,000) worth of his own prints in protest of the world's inaction over climate change, which he sees as the inevitable death of culture.

Rosenthal's title for the 20th Biennale of Sydney, "The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed," comes from science-fiction writer William Gibson. Fittingly, there are futuristic threads throughout the show: as in Heman Chong's mobile bookstall selling versions of Polish sci-fi writer Stanislaw Lem's books; Ming Wong's 24-channel video display of materials related to science fiction in Chinese cinema and Cantonese opera; and Lee Bul's monumental installation of striped-fabric mountains, a silver zeppelin and a transparent hot-air balloon, evoking the tragic grandiosity of modernist utopianism. In a nice twist, "The Embassy of the Real" tries to discern how we view the world today by looking at the





intersection of fantastical and physical realms. So, while Cécile B. Evans's *Preamble to a Prequel (of sorts)* (2016) is a video of a digitally created environment made for a faux-VR (virtual reality) headset, viewers are invited to experience it while simultaneously walking through a completely different setting, in a tunnel on Cockatoo Island. Arriving in the "uncanny valley," but not from the usual path of cutting-edge technology, are Bharti Kher's plaster sculptures of six female sex workers; the process of physically casting the seated naked figures required Kher to become intensely intimate with the women's bodies, giving them a sense of hyperrealism. Meanwhile, Cevdet Ereğ has created a spatial experience merely through speakers emitting tones and rhythms in *Room of Rhythms – Long Distance Relationship* (2016), and choreographer William Forsythe's *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time, no. 2* (2013) turns viewers into spatial performers as they navigate a constantly shifting, labyrinthine field of lead weights hanging from strings just above the floor.

In her catalog essay, Rosenthal interprets Gibson's quip as suggesting that "we have already surpassed our own ideas about the future," although "access to information, the internet and other more basic resources is by no means universal." Such inequities are, she acknowledges, "the result of historical and current geopolitics and economic power structures." Nonetheless, this interpretation still reflects an arch-Euro-American perspective that holds in high regard the "progress" created at the great expense of the many others exploited and destroyed along the way. Perhaps, then, it makes more sense to turn Gibson's line on its head, and see that "the future" was never "progress" at all—rather, just its opposite. In that case, the horrific end of days that has already arrived for many populations is, in fact, what has not been "evenly distributed."

The boldest testament to this inversion is a simple brick hut standing on the lawn of Government House on Bennelong Point, overlooking the magisterial late-modernist temple to European art, the Sydney Opera House. *A Home Away from Home (Bennelong/Vera's Hut)* (2016), by Archie Moore, refers to the small shelter built by Governor Arthur Phillip on this peninsula in 1790 for Aboriginal leader Woollarawarre Bennelong, a small gesture of supposed goodwill in the two men's struggle over the land around the

harbor that, once expropriated from local tribes, became Sydney. The inside of Moore's structure reveals walls of corrugated iron, a dirt floor and a bare-hanging light bulb, a simulation of his grandmother's home in Glenmorgan, Queensland. With its powerful evocation of historical dispossession and displacement, Moore's work deserves to be a permanent fixture on the site.

The Biennale's elegiac apex comes in two works at the "The Embassy of Spirits" (in the Art Gallery of New South Wales), where Nyapanypa Yunupingu's darkened, dreamlike space of carved and painted wooden poles, covered in the artist's expressive, spontaneous marks, creates a forest of mourning. Similarly contemplative is Taro Shinoda's installation *Abstraction of Confusion* (2016), inspired by a visit to Yirrkala, Arnhem Land. Shinoda has furnished visitors with a beautifully crafted wooden and tatami-mat platform from which to contemplate an entire room plastered with white clay that, over the course of the Biennale, has dried, cracked and crumbled, revealing a blood-red ochre pigment underneath.

Although many works in the Biennale tend toward resignation, several projects are used as active discursive sites. Most prominently is Richard Bell's *Embassy* (2013– ), a tent bearing signs reading "White Invaders You Are Living on Stolen Land" and "If You Can't Let Me Live Aboriginal Why Preach Democracy," which references the various structures mounted on the lawn of the Old Parliament House in Canberra since 1972 by Aboriginal activists. Positioned outside the imperious Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and in front of the nearby cruise-ship terminal during the beginning and end of the Biennale, Bell's tent hosted speakers and conversations around indigenous rights in the heart of Sydney's tourism-industrial-complex. In a similar vein, but in the fast-gentrifying district of Redfern, is Keg de Souza's *We Built This City* (2016), a structure made up of colorful tents that is the site of the Redfern School of Displacement (RSD)—a series of talks and tours during the Biennale meant to increase, in the artist's words, "local knowledge about globally relevant issues of displacement," including gentrification, mass migration and linguistic shifts from indigenous to dominant languages. For these artists, and others, the apocalyptic future has already been visited upon their communities. Their projects push the entire Biennale to figure out what we are going to do about it, now.

HG MASTERS



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**ALEXIS TEPLIN**

*Arch (The Politics of Fragmentation)*  
2016

Oil and pigment on linen paintings and performances at Cockatoo Island. Courtesy the artist, Mary Mary, Glasgow, and Gavlak, Los Angeles/Palm Beach.

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**LEE BUL**

*Willing To Be Vulnerable*  
2015–16

Heavy-duty fabric, metalized film, transparent film, polyurethane ink, fog machine, LED lighting and electronic wiring, dimensions variable. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, 2016. Courtesy the artist.

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**WILLIAM FORSYTHE**

*Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time, no. 2*  
2013

Plumb bobs, string, compressed air cylinders and aluminum frames, dimensions variable. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, 2016. Photo by Bob Barrett. Courtesy the artist.

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**RICHARD BELL**

*Embassy*

2013–  
Canvas tent with annex, aluminum frame, rope, screens and synthetic polymer paint on board, dimensions variable. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia Forecourt, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.