

A New Book On Australian Contemporary Art Foregrounds Questions About Diversity

POSTED BY: NAIMA.MORELLI AUGUST 4, 2017

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Polemics about the lack of diversity in the image of Australian art ensued after the publication of a new book entitled *Australiana to Zeitgeist: An A-Z of Australian Contemporary Art* (2017). But is Australian contemporary art as white as it seems? And how is it perceived abroad?



Tony Albert, *A Collected History*, 2002-2010, courtesy of the artist

Art mirrors the society and times that produce it. These are the lenses art critics take up when using the German word “zeitgeist,” meaning “spirit of the times.” It goes without saying that the image we are given of Australian art by galleries, museums and art publications attempts to explain who Australians are, both to themselves and to an international public. In this sense, it can be argued that the image of Australian art strives to be as diverse as the nation that creates it.

Art curator, writer and former gallerist Melissa Loughnan likes the word “zeitgeist,” having used it in the title of her new book *Australiana to Zeitgeist*. The text is organized as a thematic A to Z and aims to advance the conversation between the Australian public, the global art community and the artists themselves about contemporary Australian art.

Loughnan has focused on “new and under-represented Australian artists,” meaning practitioners who are emerging or are in the early stages of their careers, as well as those who have not received the critical or commercial recognition she believes they deserve. The choice of artists is also restricted to those that have practices or bodies of work that relate to each theme.



Australiana to Zeitgeist, Melissa Loughnan, Thames Hudson 2017

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The book is to date the only survey of contemporary Australian art currently in print and has sparked conversation while fuelling criticism. Perth artist Abdul Abdullah, who is among those included in it, has pointed out in a Facebook post that of the 78 practitioners featured in the book, only 6 are artists of color. “This doesn’t really reflect the art community I’m a part of. Or maybe it does,” he commented. In the discussion that followed, many shared his concern that the book presents an overly-white image of contemporary Australian art.



Melissa Loughnan at Melbourne’s Station Gallery with works by Jake Walker and Michael Staniak, photo by David Geraghty

“Publications like this perpetuate an accumulative sense of alienation in artists of color, not only excluding black and brown voices from the public discourse but also effectively rendering them invisible,” says Abdullah. “Our contributions aren’t valued, our critical discourse is dismissed, and our ideas are reduced to our most obvious indicator of identity.”

Lack of Diversity

For writer and curator Sophia Cai, the publication of the book represented a chance to tackle head on the diversity problem in contemporary Australian art, which she perceives as happening behind closed doors rather than in a public forum. On her blog, she wrote an essay on the subject, pointing out the scarcity of art organizations, collectives or galleries specializing in or focusing on contemporary Asian art – her area of specialization.



Abdul Abdullah, photo National Association for the Visual Arts

“For Abdul Abdullah to speak out was highly laudable given that he is one of the artists in the book. I suppose because the arts community is quite tightly knit, and is based very much on sustaining personal relationships, there is a difficulty in speaking out – particularly against the perceived ‘status quo,’” she said.

This “status quo,” in the view of artist Tony Albert, presents a very narrow view of the Australian art world. Growing up, he says, the scene was dominated by art galleries created by white people for white people. “I didn’t know they existed, and when I did they were intimidating. I didn’t know if they cost money; did I have to wear special clothes? I just felt I didn’t fit.” Role models have been important for him; it was only when he came across work by Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett that he was able to see his potential as an artist.



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Tony Albert, *Exotica (Mid Century Modern)*, 2016, photographic prints, acrylic paint, stickers, aluminum, archival glue, manual embroidery rayon thread on fabric, Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf

Though he too is among the artists included in *Australiana to Zeitgeist*, Albert was saddened to see so few Aboriginal artist or artists of color involved.

“Unfortunately this is all too familiar. For Aboriginal artists we have a space within institutions we refer to as ‘Darkies’ Corner’. It is a space in the gallery which is usually right at the back, or after you go down many escalators and staircases, you find a gallery dedicated to Aboriginal art. That’s ‘Darkies’ Corner’. We all know it exists.” The solution for him is to have curators not segregate international, Australian and Aboriginal art, but rather have these “genres” cross over and be shown together.



Tony Albert with *Exotica (Mid Century Modern)*, 2016, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2017, photo Saul Steed

Quality and Content

In the past, part of the conversation involved the difficulty of criticizing art by people of color in terms of quality, especially if the work addressed sensitive topics connected to the artist’s background or heritage. Some feel these two aspects – quality and content – are difficult to separate when it comes to black, Asian, Muslim or Indigenous artists, and in this case, silence is the easier response.



Tony Albert, *Exotica (Mid Century Modern)* , 2016, photographic prints, acrylic paint, stickers, aluminum, archival glue, manual embroidery rayon thread on fabric, Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf

Sophia Cai does not believe that artists of color are having their work judged on different terms, or that they are getting a “pass” on quality because of their identity: “If anything, I sometimes feel that the works of artists of color are examined on much more critical terms, particularly if it relates to sensitive topics. That is, we bear the additional burden of having to create work that is judged or understood in relation to these topics, rather than perhaps existing in its own right. Identity often becomes a ‘shorthand’ or marker to understand your work,” she said.

In his familiarity with the international art world, Tony Albert finds Australia is producing outstanding work in terms of both quality and content: “The best of this is being done by Aboriginal people and by women. This is because these artists have something strong and powerful to say and the work corresponds.”



Australiana to Zeitgeist, Melissa Loughnan, Thames Hudson 2017

The Representation Factor

In her curatorial practice and in the writing of the book, Loughnan contends she has never aligned quality or conceptual and aesthetic rigor with an artist's background or heritage. In response to the criticism, she agrees that racially diverse artists deserve greater recognition by the art community and public.

She clarifies that, unless an artist's work was about their racial identity, she did not ask them to confirm their racial background: "While it is very important for some artists, not all artists want their work to be defined, or determined, by their personal identity." As a result, she cannot confirm the full racial backgrounds of all the artists featured in the book, but she says she knows enough to confirm that the numbers cited by Abdul Abdullah are not correct: "The book features artists with Malaysian, Samoan, Mauritian, Japanese, Canadian, Indigenous Australian, and Central, Western and Northern European heritages. The artists roughly range in age from their early-twenties to early-fifties. Of the Anglo-Celtic artists featured in the book, I understand that at least three have disabilities, two are gender neutral and nine are queer. Additionally, a number of artists of color are referenced in the introductory sections of my chapters, and in relation to specific artists' practices and works. This diversity is not just limited to race, but also includes artists with disabilities, gender neutral, queer, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Atheist, Christian, young and remotely-located artists," Loughnan points out.



Australiana to Zeitgeist, Melissa Loughnan, Thames & Hudson, 2017

However, Loughnan notes that what she put together should be seen as an overview of one person's perspective, experience, and knowledge: "It is an A to Z, not the A to Z, and does not endeavor to provide a definitive guide or exhaustive index to Australian contemporary Australian art."

The International Stage

Loughnan defines the art that she aims to reflect in the book as one that exists within global dialogues and will be of interest to an audience beyond our borders. The stereotype she wants to dispel is that a lot of Australian art is deemed provincial or parochial by the international community.



Tracey Moffatt, *My Horizon*, Mother and Baby Passage series, detail, courtesy of Australian Pavilion at 57th Venice Biennale

This reflection on the cosmopolitan nature and diversity of the image contemporary Australian art presents to an international audience is timely, with Tracey Moffatt's pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale proving a great success. At the same time, many other Australian artists are currently appearing in a multitude of areas and contexts, such as Gordon Hookey, Bonita Ely and Dale Harding, currently part of documenta 14, and Reko Rennie, who is presenting a new film as a satellite project for the Venice Biennale.

"There are many ways to infiltrate and I like the idea of cultural incursions, whether Australian artists appear in a publication, compendium, conference paper or exhibition. All modes and auxiliary events are relevant," says Natalie King, curator of the Australian Pavilion.



Natalie King, photo by Kate Ballis

King has a history of working with Aboriginal artists: "I like to work alongside artists as a comrade, confidant, and accomplice," she says. "Many of the artists with whom I work are unstintingly passionate and habitually outspoken. It has been an enormous privilege to curate an artist like Tracey who is tenacious and uncompromising in her focus. I have always had an affinity with artists whose work has currency and urgency, especially considering we live in a precarious era of seismic upheaval."

She points out that the Venice Biennale is a remarkable occasion, with 5,000 journalists registering as media, 3400 from abroad, and the Australian Pavilion attracting a record 6421 visitors on the first day: "I think the success is not only due to Tracey's profile in the international arena, but how her highly-staged photo narratives take the tempo of our times. She alludes to the plight of refugees and asylum seekers, loss, longing, and displacement by melding fiction and her voracious imagination."



Tracey Moffatt's *My Horizon*, Rock Shadow (Body Remembers series) (detail), courtesy of Australian Pavilion at 57th Venice Biennale

Sophia Cai acknowledges this is a big step forward from past endeavors, such as the critically panned exhibition at the Royal Academy in London entitled *Australia*, which presented a very biased narrative and excluded many voices. However, she is aware that Moffatt is the first Indigenous artist to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale. Tony Albert shares similar concerns: "Of course Tracey's Venice show was excellent – but why wasn't it there twenty years ago when it deserved to be? And will this continue, or does she just tick the Aboriginal Box and then we go back to the white male?"

To Cai, the image of Australian art which will ultimately emerge is about opportunities and having people who care about diversity getting them. She would love to see more books about contemporary Australian art being published by diverse scholars and curators. She notes that this work is already done through independent writing, as well as online publications and journals including *Overland*, *Peril Magazine* and the *4A Papers*. There is indeed room for positive change. “In these critical times of stress, new opportunities and avenues arise, particularly from artist-led enterprises,” she says. “I am thinking, for example, of the history of the 4A, which started from similar conversations in Sydney. I believe the future is in organizing between different art communities and groups towards a more intersectional approach – power in numbers, so to speak.”



Tracey Moffatt, *My Horizon*, Australian Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale, photo courtesy of Espoarte

Speaking of precarious times, Natalie King quotes Christine Macel, the curator of the Venice Biennale: “Art is the place where you can reinvent the world, the absolutely necessary place to make us fully human.” In this light, we can see how art can represent the best place to redefine the “zeitgeist”, the spirit of the times. It definitely is for Australia.

Many critics have traditionally dismissed Australian art as derivative. *Australiana to Zeitgeist* offers an immersive look at a new breed of early career Australian artists proving them wrong. Championing underrepresented and often, unrepresented up-and-comers, it delves into the various themes shaping the Australian psyche and showcases not only contemporary artists, but artists who are making work that is new and relevant. From a range of disciplines and working across multiple mediums, these rising stars are making waves here and offshore and setting the direction for generations to follow. From *Australiana* to *Zeitgeist* with *Kitsch*, *Land Art* and *Xerox* in between, this book brings together the work of 78 dynamic Australian artists you need to know, now.

[*Australiana to Zeitgeist: An A-Z of Australian Contemporary Art* \(2017\)](#) is published by Thames and Hudson Australia

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