

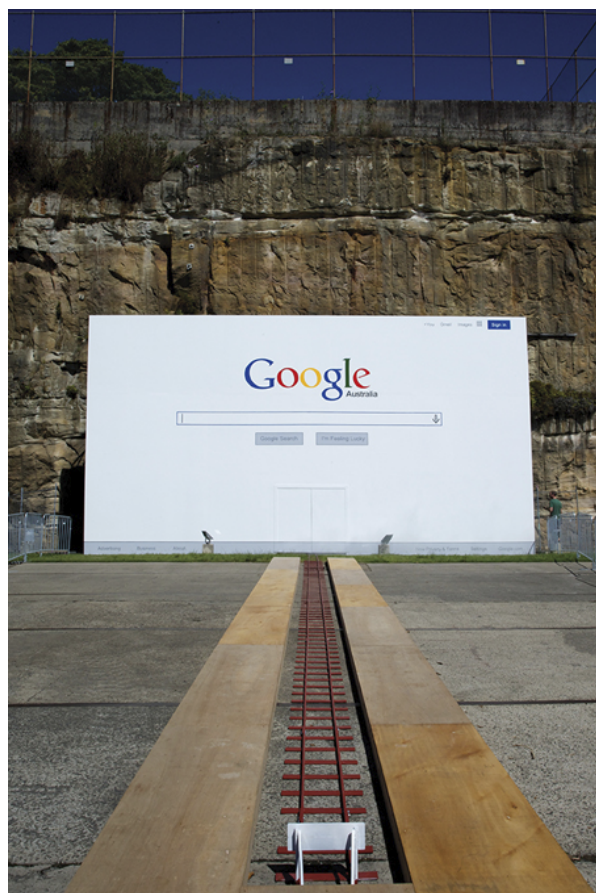
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19th Biennale of Sydney

VARIOUS VENUES, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA



Callum Morton, *The Other Side*, 2014, mixed media, installation view at Cockatoo Island

The launch of the 19th Biennale of Sydney, 'You Imagine What You Desire', was well and truly upstaged by the controversy surrounding one of its main sponsors, Transfield Holdings – a company with financial links to Australia's offshore detention facilities for asylum seekers. The controversy began about a month before the exhibition opened, when 51 participating artists signed an open letter asking the Sydney Biennale board to sever all ties with Transfield, arguing that Australia's mandatory detention of asylum seekers is 'ethically indefensible and in breach of human rights'. After the board refused, nine artists boycotted the show, igniting a national debate about whether artists in this tight economic climate should be obliged to accept all offers of financial support, even from sponsors with conflicting moral standards. The head of Transfield, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, resigned from his role as the chairman of the biennale and all connections between the two organizations were cut. When the exhibition finally opened, a strange silence hung over its first few

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by Wes Hill

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days, as if director Juliana Engberg's curatorial theme had been momentarily buried by the controversy, its re-emergence causing a collective double-take.

Billed as a celebration of the 'power of the imagination', Engberg's rationale for 'You Imagine What You Desire' – a line from George Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* (1921) – is loose to say the least. Engberg, who has been the artistic director of Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art since 2002, opted, rather, for an 'evocation', describing the biennale in one interview as a 'bouillabaisse of an event'. 'Imagination' serves as a default theme – so broad as to allow the inclusion of almost anything. More original is Engberg's account of how the four elements of fire, water, air and earth anchored her exploration of the imaginary, inferring a connection between our mental and physical worlds.

The biennale spans five venues – the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA), the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Artspace, Carriageworks and Cockatoo Island – though the MCA is its symbolic heart, due in part to its spectacular location on the harbour. This year, it featured works over two separate levels, with the entire lower floor handed over to just two artists: Jim Lambie and Pipilotti Rist. Unfortunately, Lambie's huge, hyper-coloured vinyl tape floor installation, *Zobop* (2014), and Rist's *Mercy Garden Retour Skin* (2014) – a dreamy, aquarium-like video installation – left me indifferent. Both artists are known for their seemingly endless permutations of signature, quasi-psychedelic aesthetics; at once casual and opulent. Whilst it was a bold welcoming gesture by Engberg to devote such prime space to these two fun-loving artists – and one appreciated by many visitors – shown together, their works struck me as excessively superficial.

Level two of the MCA houses far more interesting works, several of which relate to Engberg's water motif, including Roni Horn's *Ten Liquid Incidents* (2010–12), ten solid glass castings in various shades of light blue. The sculptures resemble frozen cylinders of water; the space's skylights accentuate the water/sky relationship. James Angus's coloured sculptures of contorted steel tubes and beams, and Benjamin Armstrong's idiosyncratic, white totemic objects are also high points, appearing as clever reinventions of familiar formalist tropes, despite being awkwardly installed together in a narrow section of the gallery. Much of the installation here is dominated by Belgian photographer Aurélien Froment's *Tombeau de Ferdinand Cheval* (The Tomb of Ferdinand Cheval, 2013) – black and white documentation of the French postman and amateur architect's 'Ideal Palace', an extraordinary stone construction which he spent over 30 years building in the late 1800s and that is renowned for having inspired early-20th-century surrealists. Using black cloth to isolate elements of Cheval's hand-built house, Froment's photographs could have benefited from a more concise arrangement, occupying one side of the MCA's corridor-like space.

At opposite ends of the gallery, two videos – Emily Wardill's *When you fall into a trance* and Søren Thilo Funder's *First Citizen* (House of the Deaf Man) (both 2013) – are highlights, bracketing the MCA's upper display with a hypnotic vibe. Wardill's work centres on the loss of proprioception (the sense of how your limbs are oriented in space), which is echoed in the trance-like quality of her narrative and visuals, with many of its mesmerising scenes set in water. Funder's work – with its earthy imagery and palette – is equally mesmerising. It focuses on a psychoanalytic session between a therapist and a patient, and features what might be intermittent scenes from the patient's imagination, raising issues of psycho-suggestion and community obligation. Funder's subtle sense of the political (it made me think of the complex arguments around the biennale boycott) is given an art-historical slant; the work spectacularly recreates Goya's *Fight with Cudgels* (1821–23), which the great artist painted after he went deaf, and to which Funder's title obliquely refers.

At the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the biennale is based more overtly in political reality, opening with an anonymous work in

which an Edward Said quote, rendered in white neon lights, declares: 'Modern western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees.' While this piece establishes a clear political tone for the venue, many of the other pointedly political works here generate a disconnect, as if too much attention had been placed on their 'message', to the detriment of their spatial presence. A highlight, though, is Wael Shawky's *Al Araba Al Madfuna* (2012, which takes its name from an Egyptian village meaning 'the buried vehicle') – a massive black and white video projection detailing an Egyptian parable about the dangers of blindly following one's forebears. Shawky uses children to enact the cyclical moral tale, endowing his actors with fake facial hair and a fantastically deep-throated voice-over, all exploited to farcical effect. Indigenous Australian artist Michael Cook's photographic series 'Majority Rule' (2014) is similarly satirical and open-ended, depicting the same black 'everyman' character, cloned to populate a range of urban Australian sites. Astutely rendered in a 1970s aesthetic to connote a 'white' Australia, Cook's work seems at once strangely nostalgic, utopian and dystopian.

A confusion of past and present continues at Artspace in the Finnish artist Henna-Riikka Halonen's trilogy of video works: *The Bath House* (2009), *Strange Place for Snow* (2010) and *Moderate Manipulations* (2012). Halonen portrays a contemporary world through the language of utopian modernism, from her fable-like documentation of futuro architecture to her staging of constructivist theatre in a Scottish swimming pool. These are exhibited alongside works by artists Sol Archer, Ugo Rondinone, Maxime Rossi and Taca Sui in what is one of the more coherent displays of the biennale. Scattered throughout the gallery, Rondinone's 59 hand-moulded bronze birds (*Primitive*, 2011–12) – individually named after natural elements such as 'fire' and 'dust' – unify the graceful qualities of the other works, all of which are underscored by environmental concerns.

At Carriageworks – a former train yard in Sydney's Redfern district – the biennale takes a cinematic turn. Daniel McKewen's Candice Breitz-esque video appropriations of leading Hollywood actors running endlessly (*Running Men*, 2008–14) and Gabriel Lester's *Where Spirits Dwell* (2014) – a darkly lit sculpture of a house with frozen billowing curtains – give a moody, noir-ish sensibility to the industrial space. Over in the harbour, the imposing location of Cockatoo Island – once home to one of Australia's largest shipyards and a 19th century penal colony – always presents a challenge for artists. Eva Koch's monumental *I AM THE RIVER* (2012), an almost-to-scale video projection of a waterfall, successfully trumps the grandeur of the island's turbine hall, with its four-storey screen and thundering noise. Australian artist Nathan Gray, one of the original nine to boycott the biennale, but who chose to have his work reinstated once the Transfield issue had been resolved, also tackles the imposing venue head-on with his video and sound installation, *Species of Spaces* (2013–14). Immersing the viewer in a bunker-like room, Gray's work consists of five monitors depicting basic actions and sounds made from interactions with the venue's industrial sites, succinctly and undramatically blending sound, architecture and site-specific performance.

Callum Morton's *The Other Side* (2014) might be the most eye-catching work in this biennale. It comprises a giant billboard of the Google homepage with a door through which a miniature train takes viewers on a mock ghost ride, 12 at a time, in one of Cockatoo Island's existing tunnels. The work's kitsch sensibility turns into a menacing journey, with viewers plodding down a dark tunnel to a choreographed display of light, sound and smoke. Despite its darker undertones, Morton's work is essentially a gimmick (in a good way), its fairground flavour contrasting with the gravitas that elsewhere pervades, and at times encumbers, the show.

It might be that Engberg has given us two Sydney Biennales for the price of one – a surrealist exploration of the imagination and a materialist exploration, via the four elements, of environmental and political issues. 'You Imagine What You Desire' includes some

brilliant new works, many by young artists (and many working with video). However, the biennale's sheer scale and loose curatorial direction makes it hard to assess what's at stake here. Nonetheless, it's an informed and absorbing exhibition, reflecting the concerns and complications of our contemporary mindset.

Wes Hill

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