

BEAUTIFUL STRANGER

Curated by Mitch Robertson

Beautiful Stranger was a postcard to New Zealand from Canada. Curated by Canadian artist Mitch Robertson (a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles), the exhibition cleverly united quite diverse practices. It showcased three of his countryfellows, knowingly referencing the impracticality of a dialogue between different sides of the planet – Charles Brasch's old chestnut: "distance looks our way." Actually, distance pays less attention to us than we like to think.

One of the tricks of late twentieth century art, was to sample a leitmotif from the background wallpaper of life, and reproduce it over and over until it formed a modernist grid. This emphasised the object through repetition into an iconic apotheosis. They were ubiquitous things, but what if you pick on some arcane human behaviour that you wouldn't normally think about, highlighting its unheimlich nature? When you start noticing these little signs and synchronicities, as in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, where do you stop?

Kelly Mark explores these neuroses of surveillance and the human need to matter and participate – to leave signs – by putting together a photographic survey of quirky material behaviour. Like Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographic series of water towers, Mark records certain unintentional, anonymous acts of performance and installation, driven by mental tics. One series of photographs is a study in bits of deliberately hidden trash – a bottle top carefully positioned on a doorknob, a piece of rubbish tightly stuffed between the slats of a park bench. Are they offerings to some animistic deity, totems, guilty secrets or fetishistic amulets? Another series records the helpful, but ultimately futile "out of order" notes that nameless, faceless passers-by well meaningly stick to parking metres. Mark locates something peculiarly appealing in the ingenuity and industry of the pointless, discarded, and peripheral.

Mark's third work in the show is Mark herself.

33 Minute Stare is an invitation to engage with the virtual artist at Baudrillardesque second hand. Part parody of TV's talking heads, part Warholian vanity, part Thomas Struth video portrait, the artist is present in the gallery, but remote and behind glass.

In a similar vein, Janet Werner has chosen the distinguished genre of the portrait, but *Michelle 1, 2 and 3* on closer inspection are painted studies of idoru-like identikit combinations of generic features – mutations on a theme. They are portraits of people who may or may not exist somewhere in the world – even the artists can't know for sure, rather like Nancy Burson's composite portraits of the mid 1980s. This continues the theme of anti-portraiture, defying the conventions of recording the face.

Micah Lexier was in this instance more interested in time than space. In *Gallery Hours* he creates a simulation of time in which the gallery visitor is given tangible reward (rather than merely joissance) for participating at certain times of day. This comes in the form of gold coin-like tokens in return for a signature, and the clichés of the gallery experience become the work itself. It is always intriguing when a gallery space forces the visitor to interact with it beyond merely drinking the free wine at the opening.

What these three artists share is an extension of their own presence through absence, all the way to the other side of the world. Artists have always used their art as a vehicle to transmit a part of themselves across time and space. In this case it's probably cheaper than the airfare.

Andrew Paul Wood



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