

2006 Unpublished Review by Lycia Trouton

Textile Journal of Cloth and Culture, London, Berg
Common Goods: Cultures Meet Through Craft
Curated by Kevin Murray and Kate Rhodes.
Melbourne Museum, Australia. 6 February – 7 May 2006
Craft Victoria. 9 March to 1 April 2006

TANDURRUM = 'GIFT'

When the visitor leaves the land of the host the earlier exchange of gifts ensures that both parties separate on equal terms. They may both have gained something additional to the exchange of gifts through the experience of socialisation, dialogue and the sharing of knowledge.

catalogue contributor, Australian writer Tony Birch¹.

Common Goods is an exhibition in which artist-artisans took ordinary 'stuff-at-hand' and, through shared dialogue, to create precious, crafted intercultural artworks – many of which are textiles objects. The objects were then displayed on pedestals designed by Rosemary Simons that resemble recently disembarked packing crates from a shipping wharf, set-up into market booths. This exhibit developed out of a 2004 Melbourne conference on the *South Project*, an initiative that brings together southern hemisphere artists and writers to celebrate cultural endeavours and dialogue about postcolonial politics. For one month, in early 2006, artists from various Commonwealth countries worked with local artists in and around Melbourne (see list at the conclusion of this article). Each artist displayed an initial, traditional artwork and a newly-developed collaborative, contemporary piece from their shared dialogue. Thus was the lead-up to the *Common Goods* exhibition, part of the visual arts and crafts component of cultural programming to accompany the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Australia. The exhibition was situated amongst other related participatory-textiles exhibits such as *Canopy of the Commonwealth*, by curator Jasleen Dhamija, Australian artist Ani O'Neill's *The Buddy System*, a collective performative-

installation dedicated to her Pacific Islander grandmother, Mama Pareu Ebera Nia, of many hundred crocheted flowers about oral history and interconnectedness (see www.artingeneral.org), and *Golden Tapestry*, a large-scale textual embroidery narrating the values of citizenship, social cohesion and environmental protection. The latter was made up of 360 one metre square tapestries from numerous schools across Australia and every region of the Commonwealth.

Simon created a signature style for the pedestal-booths through her exhibition design. This produced a necessary cohesion for the disparate culturally distinct objects which could be viewed in three-dimensions and allowed for hanging/hung elements, objects and folded/flat works. Especially effective were the bright, orange banner-roofs marked with declarative statements in many languages about gift-giving, compassion, humanness and hospitality in bold, black capitals¹. Yet, I was frustrated in viewing the artwork-artefacts through the netting Simon used to 'cage' them. Thus, Simon's self-assured industrial design overwhelmed the delicately crafted objects. This shifted my conceptualisation of the entire exhibition: perhaps making a more apt sub-title to *Common Goods* would be '*culture meets through packaged and traded goods*'. Alas – my attention was drawn to the disparaged history of traditionally crafted objects and the related fragility of shared dialogue/oral history of those in oppressed circumstances throughout colonial/postcolonial relations. Artworks are commodities packaged up for a superficial perusal by trade brokers, who pay lip-service to the physically and emotionally painstaking and underpaid efforts of traditional and itinerant artist-artisans and derive profit from them.

ARTISTS' WORK:

A rusted wire basket made by Lorraine Connelly-Northey (b. Swan Hill, Victoria) captured my interest. Her larger-scale installation work was also part the 2006 Contemporary Commonwealth group exhibition -- the second of a major collaborative survey of contemporary art, held at the National Gallery of Victoria, 24 February to 25 June. Author-poet, Tony Birch, from the exhibition catalogue, writes, "We live in a time of violence, not only in Australia but also across the globe" (103). As such, Connelly-Northey's poetic wire baskets contain more than nostalgic references to the Australian landscape now littered with the debris of 'progress', but her work could be placed in the context of a country where notorious detention centres for illegal migrant arrivals also mark the greater socio-political landscape with their razor wire fence/barriers.

Mary Farrugia's Maltese lace practice had an influence on local artist Mark McDean who created an aptly titled, *Dis/Place*, decorating a hand-cut 'empire' bag with a cut-out snow-flake pattern, faced with a black background. Empire bags are common with Australian students and others for quick storage, laundry and such. The quality is only marginally better than a disposable plastic bag and the empire bags are collapsable when not in use. These bags are in high demand, especially for the highly mobile or working poor.

Jennifer Bartholomew was influenced by her collaborator Lewis Dick from Mauritius and created an interesting stuffed creature in a naval uniform which referenced the double extinction of the dodo bird and colonial rule (29).

In the 'New Zealand booth', artists Julie Tipene-O'Toole and Te Atiwei Ririnui created work in New Zealand flax; Tipene-O'Toole enhanced her work with mixed

media, using strips of edited letters, correspondence between friends and family living in Commonwealth countries. The textile/text cross-over makes obvious that materials which reference cloth are emblematic of interconnectedness, loss of personal history or identity and seem to 'contain' a longing in the migrant psyche of the push-pull relationship between mother (read: motherland) and offspring (read: migrant experience). Such semiotic potential of the personal 'textile transitional object', as opposed to the 'publicness' of textile-tapestries has been researched by Australian Diana Wood Conroy, in the mid-1990s, and references French theorist Kristeva. Another example of the making the striking and iconic conceptual link between textiles and daily human connectedness or human communication through the voice/oral history was the work of artist Hlengiwe Dube of South Africa. Dube created a beautifully bright coloured and patterned bowl, 2005-6, in the non-traditional material, telephone wire, for the UBUNTU booth-pedestal. My understanding is that telephone wire is quite inflexible and has no 'give', making it a very time-consuming material with which to weave properly. Dube's collaborator, Lucy Irvine created Nurture Object in the same period: 2005-6. Her piece looked like a translucent, plastic alien plant form using colourless plastic piping, cable ties and acrylic.

The exhibition could have used some tighter editing; for example, Niki Hastings-McFall's 'Little Light' was an artificial flowered lampshade – the type of object one might come across at a country arts market!

CONCLUSION

It is a complex task to host, match and gather together for a compelling display, the work of such disparate artists. The catalogue also contains photographs of the artists-in-action: visiting artists teamed up with local artists conducting workshops and engaged in the processes of making and installed their work in

Australia. The strongest artistic dialogues occurred when the contemporary merged seamlessly with another tradition to create an unexpected and well-crafted (material and conceptual) comment on colonialism and/or the painful, powerful hierarchies associated with dislocation.

As co-curator Kevin Murray stated in the catalogue, the exhibition seeks to prove that there is a "Beyond" to the "Bi-polarity" of colonialism: rich tapestries, an interplay of the jigsaw puzzle(s) of The South, various composite wholes. This exhibition has a subtext of a socio-politically progressive movement of "revitalisation which seeks to build on people's collective memory and identity in arts/culture", refining the "barometers" of popular sentiments and human sensibilities and, possibly even redemption!

The catalogue concludes with a quote from William Morris, 1890, which purports his nineteenth century socialist philosophy about maintaining a mastery over one's craft, alongside the working class struggle... I am uncertain of the appropriateness of quoting the efforts of such an utopian exercise in 2006. If so, what exactly is the "Do-Gooder"/"Do-Good" conceptual underpinning of Common Goods?

However, overall, Murray and co. have done well with the monumental exercise of gathering together some very intriguing and disparate artists who manipulate ordinary materials into the inspired material culture of social exchange. Such a cross-pollination exercise seeks (through the processes of making, sharing and display) to restore 'reconciliation' between different and oft-divided Others. This exhibition of textiles, basketry, ceramics and stone carving is displayed in an open corridor or 'de-centred' space. Therefore, the curators have reworked public space, translating 'made objects' into social capital. Common Goods references The Commons – a democratic public space with a speaker's corner for

people to gather, debate and dialogue. Murray's catalogue essay states that 'common good(s)', used in the plural, refers to a variety of shared ideals, each reflecting a belief in humanness, but not reduced to a single concept. The curators are also interested in artists who have the patience to 'make and mend' in our consumer-driven culture. As such, in this exhibition, the artists have been re-working the infamous third space of postcolonialism.

Common Goods exhibition partners include Craft Victoria, The Festival of Melbourne Commonwealth Games and The South Project with sponsorship from The Australia Council for the Arts and Arts Victoria, among others.

Complete list of visiting artists in exhibition:

Intekhab Ahmed and Zakir Hussain, India
Audrey Boyle, New Zealand
Lewis Dick, Mauritius
Hlengiwe Dube, South Africa
Mary Farrugia, Malta
Niki Hastings-McFall, Samoa
Ahmed Nimad, Maldives
Te Atiwei Ririnui, New Zealand
Margarita Sampson, Norfolk Island
Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Sri Lanka

Complete list of participating Melbourne/regional Australian artists:

Kerri-Ann Abbott
Jennifer Bartholomew
Lorraine Connelly-Northey
Lucy Irvine
Wendy Lugg
Mark McDean
David Ray
Julie Tipene-O'Toole

Tribal Expressions Artists:

Sandra Aitken
Lorraine Connelly-Northey
Aunty Zelda Couzens
Treaahna Hamm
Aunty Connie Hart
Aunty Dot (Dorothy) Peters

Writers in the catalogue are: Tony Birch and Eric Rolls, Australia; Taiarahia Black, New Zealand; Lindsey Collen, Mauritius; Lou Drogenik, Malta; Sia Figiel, Samoa; Ramchandra Gandhi, India; Mbulelo Mzamane, South Africa; Mamduh Waheed, Maldives; Sunil Wijesiriwardena, Sri Lanka; Jodie Williams, Norfolk Island.

Works cited:

Murray, Kevin 'Introduction: A New Deal?' *Common Goods: Cultures Meet Through Craft* catalogue, Craft Victoria, March 2006, Melbourne, pp. 59 - 61.

Birch, Tony 'finger prints marking time': a Tandurrum for contemporary Australia *Common Goods: Cultures Meet Through Craft* catalogue, Craft Victoria, March 2006, Melbourne, pp. 101 - 104.

For more information about the exhibition or for a copy of the catalogue (dedicated in memory of Ibrahim Rugova, 'Ghandi of the Balkans', 1944-2006), please contact:

www.craftvic.asn.au

email: craftvic@craftvic.asn.au

Endnotes:

Common Good = UBUNTU: 'humanness'.

Included on the large, printed orange banners were the following words in capital letters: UBUNTU, loosely translated as 'humanness' (the greater theme to the exhibition, directly influenced by the rhetoric of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and used extensively during the South African Truth and Reconciliation dialogues), IL MISTEDNIN, the Maltese for 'the guest'; LAKORITE, OAGARTHERIKAN is a word for 'compassion' in the Maldives, VAO; SHRAMADANA is the Sri Lankan word for 'the gift of labour'; MANAATIKANGA, means 'hospitality' in the Maori language; TANDURRUM in an Aboriginal language is 'the gift'; SANMATI, India, meaning 'reality-mindedness'.

¹ Birch reference to first settlers and Wurrundjeri – first attempts at exchange with first settlers.

About the author:

Lycia Trouton received her DCA (postcolonial material culture theory) from the University of Wollongong, Australia, 2005, and her MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art (site-conscious sculpture), USA, 1991. She is an installation artist and was a lecturer in art history and theory at The University of South Australia, Adelaide, 2006. Her current major project, funded by The Canada Council, is *The Linen Memorial* www.linenmemorial.org