

stella brennan
another green world





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Stella Brennan

14 February – 2 March 2002

Artspace
Artist in Residence Project

Introduction

Artspace is pleased to present another green world, a new project by Stella Brennan and the fourth exhibition resulting from the New Zealand artist-in-residence program funded by Creative New Zealand.

As Brennan reveals in the catalogue text, her interest during her stay in Sydney has centred on the tensions between personal, sensate experiences and trans-global economies, between specific sites of enactment and reconfigurations of world maps. The materiality, texture and aesthetics of another green world are informed by these parallel interests, revealing the ambiguous relationship we all have with both biology and technology.

The New Zealand artist-in-residence program is important for both the visiting artist and Artspace, as it offers unique opportunities for New Zealand artists to explore ideas in a supportive context, allows new projects to evolve over a period of three months and fosters productive cultural exchange. Artspace works closely with the artists throughout the residency, which culminates in an exhibition and publication. The New Zealand residency gives both the artists and the Australian audiences an opportunity to investigate ideas and practices in our collectively broader framework.

I would like to extend thanks to Elizabeth Caldwell, Creative New Zealand's Visual Arts Advisor, for her commitment to the residency program and her facilitation of the process, as well as to thank Creative New Zealand for their generosity and financial assistance. We look forward to working with them in the future to strengthen the connections between Australia and New Zealand.

Nicholas Tsoutas
Director

In **another green world** two projections sit adjacent to one another; one, a slow pan over polystyrene packaging, the other a constantly refolding Dymaxion animation. What are the connections between the two?

A while ago I was putting together images for a website, scanning old photographs of works and installations. Of photographs I have taken, there are very few sensible long shots of works in situ. Mostly they are extreme close-ups of surfaces and effects, reducing objects to textures. I make things and then go through a process of blowing them up to become habitable worlds, so every chip and imperfection, every fold and bubble become features of some enormous landscape. There's a really nice essay about Mikala Dwyer's work that talks about remembered childhood environments, about the disparity of mental imagery and real-world size. There's a strange relationship between scale and desire.

I think one of the reasons I find sculpture so exciting is that I'm often spatially bewildered – I have terrible depth perception. I'm utterly surprised by the relation of one object to another, by real and apparent distance. So I'm really interested in representations of

space, in maps, and in the way mapping influences your experience of space. I'm thinking about that a lot right now, being in a new city, trying to find things and get a sense of the relationship of one place to another. Psychogeography. The mental scale of the visitor is strange, you get into a plane, a capsule that compresses distance, and then you end up in some unknown city, walking, or being driven around the convolutions of underpasses and one-way streets. So your passage through space goes from this exaggerated aeronautical scale: hundreds of kilometers an hour, to a pedestrian one: five or so an hour. Maybe mapping is an attempt to unpick that disjuncture. Also, coming from a little country, an antipode to the world my ancestors came from, geographical relationships become kind of obsessional. New Zealand often gets left off maps.

So how does Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion map connect to these concerns?

I was mooching round the Net, and I came across this map that Fuller developed. His Dymaxion projection represents the landmasses of the world as more or less continuous, with minimal distortion in terms of size. There's all that stuff about the politics of differ-

Stella Brennan talks to Sophie O'Brien



ent map projections, the difficulties of representing something spherical as a flat plane, and the way distortions that occur often reflect political biases. The Mercator projection, which is around four or five hundred years old, makes countries in the far North and South appear much larger than the Equatorial ones, maybe reflecting the imperial mindset. And once these inscriptions are made, it becomes hard to see the world any other way. I was reading the other day about the Great Circle route to Australia and New Zealand, which was this huge navigational leap forward when mariners realized that the world was indeed spherical, and that though their Mercator maps told them that a straight line from a to b was the fastest way, in actual fact arcing around (by the map) cut a thousand miles off the passage.

The animation of the Dymaxion map, which was made by Chris Rywalt (www.westnet/%Ecrywalt/unfold.htm) and which I downloaded through the official Buckminster Fuller website (www.bfi.org) reflects a different, contiguous, political reality, and also evokes Fuller's idea of "spaceship earth". He argued that there wasn't any such thing as North, South, East or West, that these were flat earth ideas and that there was



iBook triptych

just 'in', towards the center of the earth, and 'out', towards space. The animation is Open Source, there for anyone to use, and I liked the utopianism of that gesture, too. And New Zealand is at the top!

So I've got this globe unfurling and flattening, like some odd flower, chunky and skipping because the source file is a heavily compressed QuickTime movie, juxtaposed with a looped and lingering pass over the surface of some polystyrene, then there's this triptych of composite scans of my iBook and its foam shell. All dealing with scale, representing and constructing things that the naked eye, the five kilometre an hour human body cannot apprehend. There are differences within the body too, with the size of touch. There's an image you see in medical textbooks, the Homunculus, a drawing of a man with each part in scale with the number of nerve endings it possesses. It's this really odd picture of a figure with enormous hands and feet, huge, bulbous lips, and an enormous tongue. An explanation of that feeling, when you get a stone in your shoe, that it must be an enormous rock, and when you tip it out, it's a piddly little piece of gravel. Or like little kids who always want to put everything in their mouths, partly

because rolling it round on your tongue is the best way of perceiving texture, shape, vagaries invisible to the eye. Like those little silver casts of chewing gum that Rosemary Trockel made, Mouth-sculptures, she called them.

The scans blow up the objects by about a factor of four, so an object that is designed to sit on you – a laptop – becomes big enough to be a piece of furniture.

The triptych presents a kind of analogue of the gaps between sight and touch. There's an idea of the two senses being related, of touch being like a kind of close-range vision. Sight, unlike touch, is discontinuous – as you look, your eye does this thing called saccadic scanning where it flicks around to build up a picture which your brain pastes together to form your field of vision. So the images are a weird kind of visual Frankensteining of two attempts to represent the unrepresentable: what your fingers and your eyes might think if your brain wasn't smoothing the transitions and Vaselining the lens. Also they're an attempt to use the means available – my scanner and printer – to produce large-scale images, which you'd normally have to go to a bureau to get done. They're all that domestic A4 size; the ubiquitous

dimension of modern paper life. But they cohere into something quite odd, that lacks the smoothness of something that just rolled off a megaprinter.

You're editing the video on the computer which is also depicted, along with its packaging, in the composite scans. These decisions and the looping of the video represent a certain kind of solipsism, don't they?

It's interesting how the process is so self contained, how it reflects the importance of means to my projects. One thing I get really het up about is shiny technology, I'm constantly cruising the Apple site, leafing through geek magazines for the five or ten thousand dollar solution to all my problems. It's a dream. It's excessive desire. When I got my new computer I went through a whole romance; glazed and sweaty with the prospect of this big purchase, trembly at the computer shop, a sense of elation, and then by the time I got it home, I could barely be bothered unpacking it. You forget how long it takes to get a computer configured the way you want it. So then there's this whole falling in love again, once you start really working out how to do stuff. For me that's video editing; I'm finally able to make


work that's been in my head for ages. It is solipsistic to make movies of the packaging of the thing you're using to make movies. But it's really just enacting a more subtle solipsism of new technology. The tools form your expectations and notions of the possible, as much as fulfilling them. And it's classic fetishism, isn't it? Mistaking things for persons. My iBook has a small white light that pulses like a heartbeat when it's on standby – the product design colluding in this personalisation. On the box it came in are two pictures, one of a male and one of a female torso, both cradling the computer in their arms. It's a post-nuclear family – Mommy, Daddy, iBook.

I know what I'm doing, my Frankfurt-School conscience is telling me it's wrong, but I don't care. Maybe by making the obsession the subject of the obsession, I can somehow analyse or expiate it. But I'm not sure it works like that – maybe I'm just rendering exponentially this economy of desire – so a melancholy creeps in.

What is the role of Science Fiction in your work? And how does it link to the objects you produce?

I grew up on budget space television – the toothpaste-tube futurism of



 Tested to comply

old Sci-Fi programmes like Blake's 7 and Doctor Who, which worked magical transformations on mundane objects – flashing coloured lights, laser guns with curly phone cords, kitset spaceships. It's about transformation and also suspension of disbelief, but if you choose to continue suspending disbelief after the TV's off and dinner's ready, then how does the world look? I'm really interested in a kind of romantic notion of autism, an inability to put objects and people in their 'proper' relation. Like the classic storyline of the man who fell to earth, of the alien to whom the ordinary world is an exotic mystery. Fredric Jameson describes Sci-Fi as a history of the present, a mechanism for creating critical distance from the all-encompassing now. You can often effect that alienation by a simple play with scale. Bottle-top spaceships again.

The imagery of the main room also has an undertow of interplanetary images, a hint of satellite fly-bys, ringed moons. Objects hanging in cold, black, Photoshopped outer space. There's an argument that the spatial expansionism of the modern era – from Captain Cook to the Apollo project – has inverted, that dreams of other worlds, new worlds (although, of course they weren't new to

everybody) have become an exploration of miniaturization, compression, of atom smashing and microchip factories. This is linked too, to the displacement of production from the old industrial nations, the flows of capital that also shape worlds. Like the bottom of my computer says, "designed in California, assembled in Taiwan".

For **another green world**, as well as the gallery, you're using the window space, a cavity that runs around the internal gallery and is visible from the street. How are the two connected?

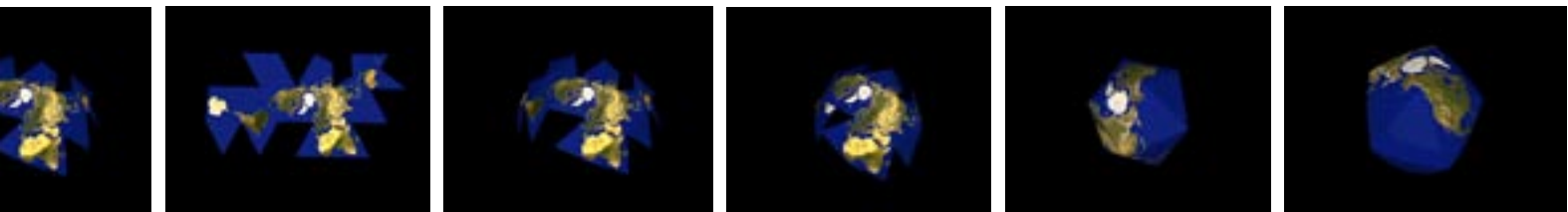
When I first arrived at Artspace, it was pitch dark. There was no light at all in the galleries, the windows were blacked out. So the first experience I had was walking around blindly with one hand on the wall, and the other out in front of me. I did some drawings of the space in the dark. Eventually I got to see it with the lights on. Then, after I'd been plotting my show for a while, I realized there was this crawlspace or corridor right around the outside of the gallery, and the bottom fell out of my conception of the installation. It was great, because I had been having this difficulty with the relationship between two sets of work I wanted to use. This other, peripheral

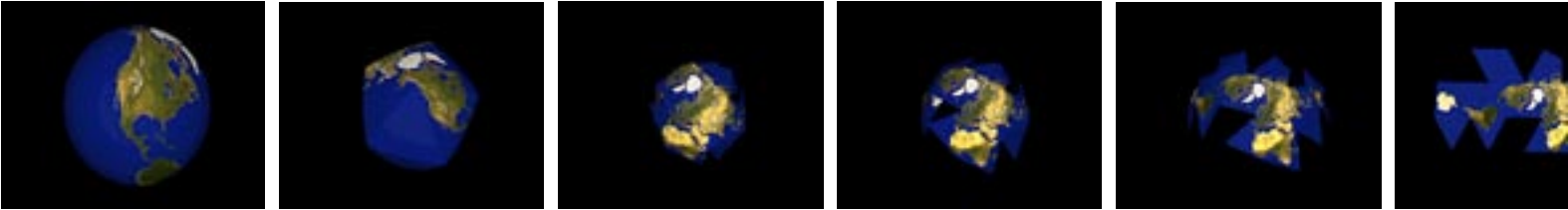


Artspace exterior

– yet in a way dominant – space, provided a counterpoint or subtext to the other gallery.

The outside is kind of a ghost space; in this installation, not accessible to the public, partly visible from outside, through the bars in the window, casting a light into the main gallery. There's a bleed of light over the partition wall, but for me the Dymaxion projection is the thing that hinges the two spaces. Being on a residency got me thinking again about that hoary old tyranny of distance stuff, about centres, peripheries, and cultural export. I've been dwelling on maps, and that particular representation helped me realize what people mean when they talk about how far New Zealand is from anywhere. I mean, I've spent 36 hours on planes, but it's all just blank space and transit lounges. Looking at the landmasses all linked up and Aotearoa on the very edge of it explained something to me. Of course those complaints of distance are very much about senses of isolation from particular centres of culture, but even so, it's odd to come to Australia and hear the same complaints, particularly when there's simultaneous political movement against the very problem of proximity, with the detainees, or 'queue jumpers'





Dymaxion animation



coming in from Indonesia, just to the North.

Woolloomooloo also has this economic, spatial division. There's a veneer of money along the waterfront, with the new hotel, flash new apartments and the threat of further development. Then there's public housing, ordinary new-ish municipal terraces, but also people hanging out under the railway viaduct, sleeping on the footpath or under tarpaulins.

What's the origin of the image you're using on the wall?

The wall drawing is part of a series I've been making based on unpacking diagrams from the inside of cardboard boxes. The imagery is very functional, dispassionate. The instructions are pictographic, there for when you've bought the product. They're not trying to persuade you, or anyone else – "make me, buy me" – their aim is to help you get your new toy out of the box in one piece. They're interesting images, iconic, but often really beautifully detailed. The last one I did was of polystyrene, with all the forms carefully delineated, those strange smoothed-out shapes. This one is more isometric, the base of an exploded diagram. I like the way it echoes the unfold-

ing of the globe into the Dymaxion map, and the way it reminds me of the layout of the gallery – boxes within boxes. The drawing is executed stencil-fashion, with charcoal rubbed into the wall. It's a tactile process, a nice combination of precision and haphazardness. I think of these images as icons for some kind of future cargo cult, attenuated cultural signs for a silicate stone age. I guess the cavernousness of the gallery made me think of cave painting, too.

So in a way it's a plan, a map. Like those Smithsonian works, Hypothetical Continents, models of imaginary landmasses formed from piles of shells or broken glass. Another suspension of disbelief, of applying inconsistent systems to each other. This is a pile of junk, but it's also a map of Atlantis. It's like a syncretic logic that allows you to get a distance on your own processes. I think that's the popular appeal of the idea of cargo cults – those social and political movements, formed mainly in Melanesia in the early-to-mid Twentieth century. They evolved out of the clash of tribal and industrial knowledge, out of the exercise of colonial power and local attempts to accommodate and gain the advantage. They're complex and diverse movements, often trivialised by cursory

description, but part of the currency of the notion of cargo cults has to do with a kind of mirroring of industrialised life, a self-alienation on the part of observers seeing the objective and social relations of modernity refelected by a different cultural logic, a foreign world-view. It's a kind of anthropological narcissism. I'm interested in generating a similar distance or self-alienation without 'othering' anybody.

Is materiality a way to achieve that? Your choice of materials seems to tend towards the mundane and readily available.

Well, part of what I'm trying to do is about making the familiar strange, so perhaps the more familiar, the more strange.

I went through a period of making big, heavy, highly finished sculpture, and just got tired of needing five burly friends to move my work around. In that sense polystyrene is the perfect material – cheap, bulky, but insubstantial. Plus it'll last a million years. I like temporary solutions that get fossilized. A lot of energy goes into packaging design, and sometimes I wonder how many people involved look at their work and think to themselves that they may have just produced one of the most enduring artifacts

of contemporary culture, heading for eternal preservation in a landfill.

I love polystyrene packaging – strange vacant objects made to be discarded – commodity husks. But as well as this attraction to the material, there's a melancholy. It's much easier to fetishise what other people throw away. The tang of new technology still clings to the packaging, so it's also about wanting things you can't afford. And, although it's not entirely rational, or supported by the facts, there is this notion that it's a kind of hyper-pollutant – persistent and morally bankrupt. As a response to that idea, a lot of technology now comes in recycled paper shells, like egg cartons, but with more nooks.

Other materials I use have a similar temporary, interstitial quality – tape, bubble wrap, plastic sheeting, cable ties, hot glue. I was walking in Chinatown on Boxing Day, and I came across this building that was half-finished. The workers were on Christmas break, and so everything was stowed away. It was really beautiful, this half-built shop and office block, with improvised metal grilles over openings into the street, cables coiled and dangling out of holes between floors, granite facing shimmed up with bits of wood and G-Clamps, new

glass with its protective plastic hanging off in long strips like shed skin. It was half-built, but could have been half-destroyed.

Rem Koolhaas writes about contemporary construction, describing silicone glues and sealants as a kind of spermy matrix holding the city together, bonding glass to marble to steel. I think of it like cartilage, a gristly and pliable substance that may harden into something else. His point was that the most essential component of the modern city is this essentially formless material, a translucent goop.

It doesn't necessarily have to do with poverty of means, this aesthetic, although that's definitely part of it. It's about impermanence, improvisation, and evasion of authority; be that the self-policing of 'doing things properly', or the interventions of building or sanitary codes. It's linked to ideas of nomadic architecture, which in a way has everything to do with Aboriginal people sleeping under bridges.

The corridor space that is visible from the outside, it's much more accessible as a gallery to the actual inhabitants of Woolloomooloo. What's going on in there ?

There's a collection of plants placed on wrapped objects, seen through gaps in the windows. The plants are lit from below in a cheesy horror style. I'm modifying a peripheral space, which has been used for shows, but is currently storage. Making visible a non-public part of the gallery with its boxes, scaffold, bits of wood. But I'm preserving an air of mystery by wrapping and labelling everything. All the contents of the space are taped into protective skins of bubble wrap and soft foam sheeting. These materials are invariably part of a gallery's inventory, so I'm using stockroom vernacular.

Then there's the plants. The use of greenery is a classic method of humanizing otherwise forbidding or anonymous spaces. It's an architectural panacea – like Frank Lloyd Wright said, "A doctor can bury his mistakes, but an architect can only advise his clients to plant ivy."

I've been documenting plantings in the foyers of some of the big towers in the CBD. Sneaking in and taking quick snaps, avoiding the eye of the guy on the security desk. There's lots of glinty, brassy, glassy, granite spaces with strips of shiny greenery; palms marooned in atriums next to the obligatory piece of foyer sculpture. In his essay

about Science Fiction and Minimalism, Entropy and the New Monuments, Robert Smithson talks about the “architectural entropy” of the lobbies of Modernist office buildings. Foyer spaces have this formal similarity in their hard reflective surfaces, their interstitial not-quite-private not-quite-public-ness. Living things mollify them somehow.

The websites of a lot of plant supply people quote a study done by NASA that showed certain types of plants particularly effective at removing airborne pollutants. So there’s also this doctrine of plants naturalizing and even detoxifying the sealed environments of modern commerce. An instant cure for “Sick Building Syndrome”. The irony being that a lot of these plants are sprayed, artificially fed and short-lived. There’s a small range of bulletproof plants, often with a spooky gloss, that haunt the cattle pens of office interiors. But it works, this greenery. I was given an Anthurium for Christmas – Pink Aristocrat – which was a really touching gesture because I’m in this studio that people inhabit transiently, and it’s true, it softens the space up, makes it more homely. It’s this crazy pink hybrid lily with shiny alien flowers – very hard to kill, apparently.

During your residency, we’ve been talking about notions of extraterrestrial pastoralism. It’s an idea clearly connected to the lobby plants in the window space.

I was thinking of colonization as Terraforming. That science fiction notion of converting Mars to a green planet, of adding the right mix of chemicals, microbes and flora to make a breathable atmosphere. Of forming another Earth, in other words. It’s a Sci-Fi staple, a cherished problematic. Like one of the scientists in Tarkovsky’s film *Solaris* says “We don’t want to conquer space at all. We want to expand Earth endlessly. We don’t want other worlds; we want a mirror.” As early as the 1850s New Zealand Company literature was assuring potential emigrants that there would be nothing in the landscape to remind them they were in a foreign country.

People take their biota with them: Maori took kumara to Aotearoa, English colonists in New Zealand and Australia had their oak trees and gorse, their cabbages. It’s entirely understandable on a practical and an emotional level, but in Aotearoa, as in Australia, the ad-hoc introduction of species has caused some utter ecological disasters. It’s particularly pertinent here, just around the point from Farm Cove, site of the first,





unsuccessful, European agriculture in Australia. The Sydney Botanic Gardens have a colonial vegetable garden full of didactic panels with tales of agrarian misadventure.

There's this strain of colonial writing where the very shapes of the trees and the colour of the foliage is seen to emanate some kind of alien threat. On the other hand, appreciation of native species seems to come when the strangeness has worn away, with later generations. I've been to flats around Sydney from the early part of last century that make a decorative point of using motifs like warratahs and other native flowers. A regard for the value of indigenous species has a lot to do with nascent nationalist feelings.

But these plants don't partake of any of that – they're international corporate citizens, available almost anywhere. At the supermarket, the hardware store. Instant colour, ubiquitous, non-specific and available for rent. They're already space travellers.

What's the connection between the hired plants and the magnified laptop packaging?

Well, you have this crawlspace mutely, whitely encircling the gallery, and

these enclosures for valued commodities, so there is a purely formal link; and then there's the supposed functionality of plants as corporate lungs.

My obsession with packaging led me to do some research into Christo. I was surprised to learn that he did his first big outdoor project in Sydney. In 1969 he wrapped a huge chunk of the coast up in Botany Bay. He also did smaller works here, wrapping a couple of young eucalypts. This work worried me for some reason, particularly the tree wrapping – it seemed sadistic. I imagined the plants inside slowly drying and dying inside the plastic. He did some wrapping works with women that are similarly alarming. It's a two-edged act, this enclosure, this swaddling – both protective and pernicious. The notion of suffocation is implicit. Breath becomes an arbiter between subject and object, between animate and inanimate.

Stella Brennan

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2000
MFA, Elam School of Fine Art
Auckland University

2000 – 2001
Creative New Zealand
New Work Grant

Curatorial Projects

1999
Nostalgia for the Future
Artspace, Auckland
Fiona Amundsen, Stella Brennan,
Julian Dashper, Mikala Dwyer,
Guy Ngan, Ann Shelton, Jim Speers

Selected Exhibitions

Solo

2001
Dell
Lightbox Exhibition Space, Auckland

2000
The Fountain City
The Physics Room, Christchurch
Fedex
The Blue Oyster Gallery, Dunedin

1999
Anima
Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North

1998
Loom
Auckland Art Gallery

Group

2001
Fuse
Curated by Justin Paton
Dunedin Public Art Gallery

2000
Sister Spaces
Southern Exposure, San Francisco
In Glorious Dreams
Curated by Gregory Burke and
Hanna Scott
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery,
New Plymouth

1999
The Body Inscribed
George Fraser Gallery, Auckland
Scale
Artstation, Auckland

1998
Parallel
With Christopher Barker
The Honeymoon Suite, Dunedin

1999
Switched On
Manawatu Art Gallery

Quiet Desperation
Fiat Lux, Auckland
Polar
With Fiona Amundsen
The High Street Project,
Christchurch

1996
Much enough happened easily or has
become vast decor
With Jacob Faull and Jan Fris
23a Gallery, Auckland

1995
Pilot Error
Curated by George Hubbard
23a Gallery, Auckland
Reaction
Curated by Richard Dale
Artspace, Auckland

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