



## AUSTRALIA?

AUSTRALIA? is an exhibition of contemporary Australian video art curated by Brendan Lee and Kristian Haggblom that presents differing perspectives of 'Australianness' from around the country. Four contemporary Australian artists have responded to the theme through an analysis of Australia's history, location and unique set of circumstances, bringing forms of representation into question and the ever-changing face of nationality identity.

The exhibition was originally conceived to address a lack of curatorial emphasis on artworks questioning what the term 'Australian' has come to represent in an internationalist environment. It took the propaganda machine behind Baz Luhrmann's film *Australia* and Kevin Rudd's apology to the stolen generation for Australians in significant numbers to even consider their place in the world let alone all the remote corners of the large continent we call home.

2009 is shaping up to be the beginning of a very interesting period in Australian history. A recession is looming, local brands are once again evaporating and the extremities of the Australian climate are taking their toll on the population and landscape. After a decade of embracing the international community, Australia is being forced to take care of itself once again. The tourists may be staying away in droves (sorry Baz) although what they might find on their eventual return is an Australia more Australian than before; an identity forged by circumstance.

Midura Arts Centre Presents

# AUSTRALIA?

John A Douglas  
Angelica Mesiti  
Lane Cormick  
James Newitt

Curated by Kristian Haggblom & Brendan Lee

above

Angelica Mesiti  
*The Line of Lode and Death of Charlie Day*  
Duration 18 minutes  
2009

Only time will tell if our current situation will unify and strengthen the Aussie spirit as promised by so many previous leaders in uncertain economic times. Bob Hawke was a leader who took advantage of what was seen as a perpetual recession to unify the city and country voters by employing a shared Australian mythology and archetype-enforcing program. Even though Hawke was well educated (he was a Rhodes scholar and studied at Oxford University), what he projected was the concept that hard work and a fair go were quintessentially Australian. It seemed that any old tradie (or ACTU leader) had a chance to be the next Prime minister if you worked hard enough for it.



Hawke appealed to a broad demographic; from those who admired his skill at beer drinking to the political pundits who'd read his masters paper on wage fixing. It was Hawke's upbringing in Bordertown, South Australia, that gave him the insight into the Australian archetype of the hard drinking knockabout bloke: one which relies on the harsh, inland landscape as much as the individual to define the national character. In Lane Cormick's performance piece *'Unearthing the Hawke'* Cormick reduces the legacy of Bob Hawke and his spirited public speaking to an Australia represented via alcoholism; an unfair, yet accurate depiction of a stage in Australia's attempt at national identity.

**right & above**

Lane Cormick

*Unearthing the Hawke* (video)

Performance at Hell gallery, Melbourne

Photographer Paul Philipson

Duration 14.11 minutes (excerpt)

Courtesy of Neon Parc

2008



The uniqueness of the Australian landscape plays a significant part in defining what Australia is. Harsh, dry and isolating, the Australian landscape can be as unforgiving as it is extreme. In much the same way as I've been idealizing the forging of Bob Hawke's mythology through his upbringing in Bordertown, Australia associates and locates itself through latching onto the romantic notions of the extreme environment. There's nothing more Australian than working hard only to fail through inexplicable circumstances dealt by the forces of nature.

**above**  
John A. Douglas  
Screen Test (Australiana) - Suicidal Synthesis  
Duration 4:30 minutes  
Courtesy Chalkhorse  
2006

The onset of another year of drought and the end of the global demand for our commodities puts the remote issues back into the spotlight as it has in previous generations. Farmers have been encouraged to accept a government exit grant and walk off the land rather than attempt to alter the Goyder's line of sustainable agriculture, whilst the resource rich areas of Australia have scaled back operations seeing the end of the decade long gold rush.

Just as terrorism has given the world a fear of cities and crowds, Australia has a deeply residing fear of isolation. Films such as *Wake in Fright* (as referenced by John A Douglas) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* play upon the fear of the inland by creating a divide between the us and them of the urban and the remote that fuels a kind of out-of-the-way exoticism. Places such as King Island act as a microcosmic projection of the isolation first experienced by the initial European settlers. Clinging to the seaboard (and escape back aboard the tall ships we arrived on) gives Australians the necessity to go inland for that Australian experience which is constantly reinforced through the tourist campaigns and films - or both in Baz Luhrmann's Australia.



**left & below**  
James Newitt  
Suspended in Place  
Duration  
2008



The perceived isolation of regional communities and towns is a draw card for artists such as James Newitt and Angelica Mesiti. Both artists have taken locations loaded with histories of exploitation and created intertwining narratives focusing on the extremities of locality. The stories and general weirdness that manages to escape from the inland or from far-flung island communities enralls and captivates us as it continues to develop our sense of a real Australia. Archetypal figures and landscape don't just appear out of nowhere, their existence relies on our enforcement of them and a shared history, extreme circumstances and locations.

So as we enter 'The Great Recession' the world has offered us the chance to hit pause and reflect upon what 'Australianess' is by allowing differing perspectives to float to the surface and be integrated into the national identity. 2009 will be seen as a year of reflection - an opportunity - that will become a defining year and possibly assist in enforcing the archetypes we've found ourselves championing.

Brendan Lee April 2009



**above**  
Kristian Haggblom  
Australia? (detail)  
2009

Mildura Arts Centre Thursday April 23rd – Wednesday May 27th 2009

**ARTS  
VICTORIA**

