

Sub-divide and Concrete

James Deutscher and Christopher L G Hill

Joint Hassles

Melbourne

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Seeing things in Black and White

I arrived early at the opening of this exhibition, when the gallery was still almost empty. I was glad of this, because before people arrived and coloured it all up it was easy to believe, upon entering the room, that your vision had switched to black-and-white, until your eyes started picking out little daubs of colour here and there. It caused my brain to slip instinctively into a different mode of viewing; something in your environment has shifted to the unfamiliar: pay attention.

The use of black-and-white created a strong stylistic unity, and a conceptual underpinning for the whole show. With a layout like a trash and treasure market, televisions were dotted around the room on mats made from international newspapers, accompanied by brutalist concrete sculptures and bricolaged consumer goods. Deutscher and Hill have continued the Melbournian tradition of inviting other artists to present work within, or as a part of their show, straddling the artist/curator divide as well as making a foray into the ego/community relationship. Each television showed a video by a different artist, though all were of course in black-and-white. The use of newspapers fed into the conceptual rationale of the aesthetic, presenting for the binary spin-doctoring and simplistic manipulation of information which we have come to expect from the press in general. Here the newspapers surrendered their authority and became material platforms for other voices, unsyndicated thoughts.

Kain Picken and Rob McKenzie's work *Poor Execution Murders Strategy* was enjoyable for its word play, like a cryptic headline: The strategy for the execution murders of the poor? A poor strategy for execution murders? Strategy is murdered by poor execution? I think the latter is the intended meaning, but I liked sifting through the possibilities. The work called to mind the nonsensical bytes dished up throughout the war in Iraq – stabs of meaning presented with conviction, sutured together into an impact, yet ultimately without a referent, or in this case achieving the feat of obfuscating, whilst at the same time writing large, a fuck-up. At the opening this work was appropriately accompanied by a hammer, with all its potential as an immediate, destructive weapon.

The consensus among many women at the opening (myself included) was that Hao Guo's video could not be viewed for more than 30 seconds at a time – not because it was a poor work, but because it caused an overwhelming urge to clutch protectively at one's abdomen – it was a video of a birth, graphic, close-up. The footage, however, had been subtly manipulated, dragged slowly in and out of reverse to give the impression that the person delivering the baby was making a concerted effort to push it back in. For me this was the most impressive work in the show, not only because of its visceral impact, but because it became an absurdist suggestion for population control which illustrated the

chasm between ideas about the sustainability of the human race, and the biological impulse of the individual.

Daniel DuBurn's video added an unexpectedly reverential aspect to the opening, its darkness and silence erupting periodically in an explosion of wet, off-white noise, with the result that the opening crowd was obliged to pause, en masse, mid-conversation, and turn to gaze reflectively at DuBurn's work until it fell again into silence. It was like a 'minute of silence' that had been solarised.

Though Deutsher and Hill were also involved in producing some of the video works, most important in this context was their role as landscape-artists, making deft sculptural placements of heaviness, fragility, tenuousness and humour which read like spatial, visual conversations with the videos, and pointed to their possibilities.

Helen Johnson