

Charles Merewether: Director of the 15th Biennale of Sydney

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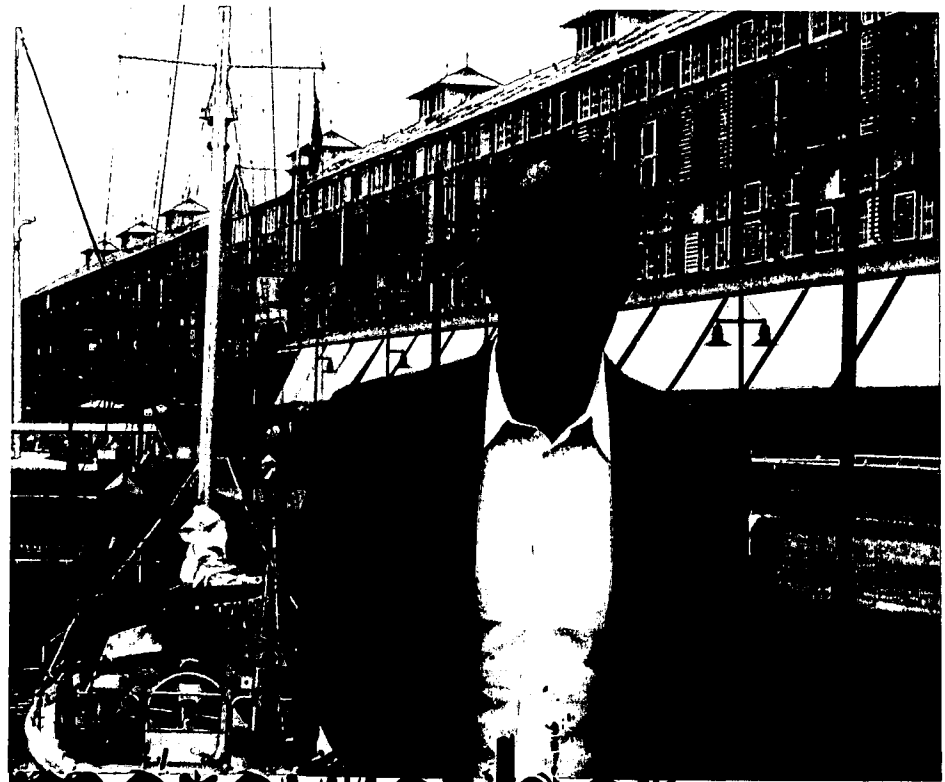
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Charles
Merewether
Director of the
Biennale of
Sydney 06



charles merewether

and the 2006
biennale of sydney

It is always hard to characterise an exhibition as vast and sprawling as the Biennale of Sydney as it takes over the city, but every time the Biennale has taken place, from the very first personal choice of Franco Belgiorno-Nettis in 1973, it has taken on the flavour of its artistic director.

›joanna mendelssohn

Last time, in 2004, Isabel Carlos produced a celebration of the interior life, something that was needed, but not appreciated by local burghers of art and taste. Now, Charles Merewether, art historian, writer, and curator, has produced what could be the most confronting Biennale for many years. His take is at first glance the external world of war and conflict, of cultural difference and exchange, but the way these are layered show a world ill at ease with itself.

The exhibition selectors may have seen Merewether, formerly of the Getty Museum, as a safe choice. His well-established interest in issues of art and social justice appear to be neutered by an apparently easy acceptance of life under the US hegemony. His long absence from Australia meant he was not a part of any local art faction. 'I think it's an advantage in not having lived here for 20 years that I can be inclusive,' he says. 'I really don't care. I don't owe any debts and that is very

useful.' The title, *Zones of Contact*, does not ring of immediate danger. 'Zones' have appeared before in exhibition titles, usually without scaring the horses. So why is there now more than a *frisson* of excitement from those who are used to being jaded by a surfeit of contemporary international art?

Because he is an art historian Merewether understands the potential impact of a well-considered survey. He wanted to do 'a show that tried to interfere in the way in which contemporary art was being seen.' And always he is aware that to exhibit art is to define it. 'As an art historian by training I'm of the belief that these kinds of shows can have a tremendous impact on the way the history of the present is written.'

Not all Biennales of Sydney have made that grade, but when the Biennale has seized the day, such as in Nick Waterlow's 1988 exhibition, it has helped set the local agenda. This time however the Biennale has a director who sees redefinitions on a larger scale.

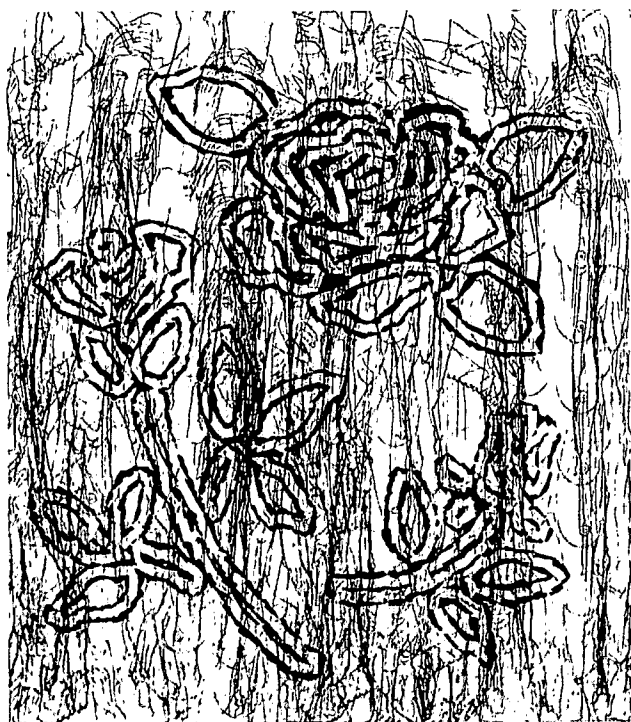


Zones of Contact does not describe a theme. It is not an update of Tony Bond's *Boundary Rider* of 1992, when he kept all those pesky zones under control with his stockman's whip. Rather it is a description of a conceptual framework, to demonstrate how so much art from 57 cities in 40 countries can possibly be organised and make a coherent exhibition. This is not an exhibition of pretty patterns but of a world consisting of fragments of emotional glass – razor sharp – where the unwary can be cut to the quick. The key word here is 'contact'.

'I'm thinking of a place of encounter,' he says. 'A place where a signal is something very specific. This is a place where either you don't go, or there's an element of danger or it's prohibited. There's something special about it, otherwise why call it a zone.'

It is not just the zones themselves, but the friction where they meet that causes the creative tension to make art.

'The zone may be within a domestic environment, the zone may be a border, the zone may be the city. The zone may be a territory. It may be the point between the land and the sea, or it may be a place that has been occupied, or a place where there was war, or still is war,' he says. 'It seems to me that increasingly spaces are being designated, defined, governed and there are places you can go, and transit zones and places you can't go and there's spaces for some people and spaces for other people. I'm interested in that, I'm interested in people's lives and that experience of contact which sometimes has to do with legacies of histories or legacies of contemporary conditions, what it means to live in Serbia or New York, or what it means to live in Tazikstan - or Moscow.'



If there is one dominant characteristic of the artists selected, it is that they are displaced and many have experienced too closely the follies of war. Akram Zaatari from Beirut remembers the attack of 6 June 1982, while Ruti Sela and Maayan Amir from Israel see a world beyond guilt.

Sejla Kamberic from Bosnia makes posters that confront the way her homeland was returned to ancient feuds after the death of Tito. She is joined, appropriately by Mladen Stilinovic, a conceptual artist born in Belgrade (now Serbia) but living in Zagreb (Croatia), and Milica Tomic, a Serbian video artist who, unlike many of the other artists in the Biennale, is one of the stars of the international exhibition circuit. Her work here is seen in the same context as Elena Kovylyina, a Russian performance artist who well understands the self-destructive impetus of her country's culture. The Eastern European artists living out the aftermath of the Cold War give a new context to the work of Imants Tillers, often simply thought of as the Great Appropriator. Tillers is the son of Latvian refugees from World War II. His father was a worker on the Snowy Mountain Scheme, near Cooma where he now lives, but Tillers grew up in working class Sydney suburbia. His never-ending painting *Outback: A*, displayed on a scale rarely seen, shows both connections and disconnections between Tillers and his European context.

The other Australians selected share Tillers' displaced origins. Savanhday Vongpoothorn, who came to Australia as a child from Laos has always indicated her Buddhist heritage in her art, while Julie Gough who is Indigenous, makes work that reflects her ambiguous relationship with ancestors and personal histories as they implode on descendants.

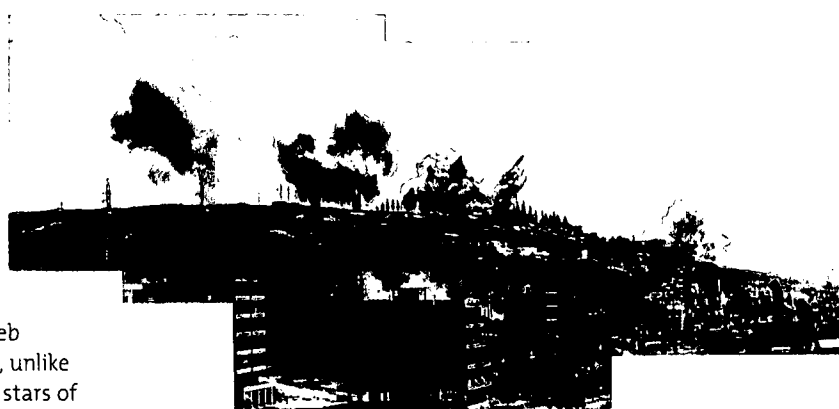
The beauty of Merewether's vision for this Biennale is that his zones both confront the political issues of the day, and then transcend them.

'I think that much of this Biennale ultimately ends up being about territory and land and the home,' he says. 'It seems to me that those things are constantly under siege and have been in different parts of the world.'

The sense of cultural disconnect is there in the work by Ghada Amer, where a stylised embroidery of a rose overlays a scramble of erotic drawings, and in the Albanian artist Adrian Paci whose magnificent giant chandelier *Noise of Light* shows the cost when Western grandeur comes to the Third World.

Perhaps the artist who more than any other encapsulates Merewether's concerns is the young Palestinian Raeda Saadeh. Her performance work is almost an exposition of that old 1960s mantra 'the personal is political' as she exhibits the constraints – domestic religious, and political, that frame the lives of women in the contested land.

Although there are some artists from the USA, including some from other countries who have emigrated, the bias is not towards New York. The two US-born artists, photographer Liza Ryan and filmmaker Sharon Lockhart, are both Los Angeles-based. More have associations with Berlin, but most of these are not German. Although there are three English artists, including the ubiquitous Antony Gormley, it looks as though



for two successive exhibitions, the Biennale has been liberated from the curse of the Anglophiles. Instead Merewether has roamed to Asia as well as the Balkans and the Middle East; to India, Indonesia and Cuba.

'There's 15 countries from which artists have never come, so that's substantial,' he says. 'That's a third of the countries represented, if represented is the right word, certainly. There are about 40 countries where artists are coming from, so frankly there aren't many artists in this show who are part of the international circuit, perhaps half a dozen.'

'I wanted to seize on the fact that there are a lot of artists in certain parts of the world like the Middle East and the Balkans and the larger Asian region that do really important work and they should be seen as part of the international art picture,' he says. 'So the public symposiums and everything else will also reflect that. I've gone to no end of lengths in making sure both in the publications and in the public programming that expertise is spread internationally. People are coming from the Middle East, from Turkey, from all over the globe and there's about 90 writers contributing to the catalogue. So I've tried to make sure the whole program has a certain coherence in terms of a fundamental mission to open up the Biennale, to open up the world to people. I think that Australia is in the privileged position of being able to do something like that.'

Joanna Mendelsohn is an art writer, cultural commentator and Associate Professor, art theory, College of Fine Arts, University of NSW.

ABOVE: Akram Zaatari *Saida*, June 6th 1982, 1982 - 2006, composite image, digital colour print, 118 x 260cm, courtesy of the artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut. FACING PAGE, TOP LEFT: Elena Kovylyina *Waltz*, 2001, photo documentation of a performance, C type photograph, 30 x 45cm, courtesy of the artist. Photo Nora Bibel. FACING PAGE, RIGHT: Raeda Saadeh *Basket*, 2003, performance, courtesy of the artist. FACING PAGE, BELOW: Ghada Amer *The Big Red Rose RFGA*, 2004, acrylic, embroidery and gel medium on canvas, 182.9 x 162.6cm, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York and London. Photo Robert McKeever.