

Why Corregio Jones is not the Hero of the 2004 Biennale of Sydney

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Why Correggio Jones is not the hero of the 2004 Biennale of Sydney.

Joanna Mendelssohn

In 1979 the late Ian Burn wrote of the archetypal derivative Australian artist as 'Correggio Jones: The Hero of the Sydney Biennale.' Burn's critique was one of many as the arts community noted the many self-serving echoes of international practice that typified the way that old dishes from successive Venice Biennales were served up afresh in the Sydney events. Much of Burn's criticism rang true for the Biennales that came to Sydney throughout the 1980s, 90s and into the new century.

Some have been adventurous in a shambolic way, like Tony Bond's *The Boundary Rider* of 1992, which dragged in every conceivable flavour of popular avant-gardism in an exhibition that did not know how to end. Others had a mixed success, and then there was the total disaster in 1996 when Lynne Cooke presented a tired rework of New York taste with the bizarre title *Jurassic Technologies Revenant*.

There has been one remarkable success in Biennales of the past — Nick Waterlow's *From the Southern Cross* of 1988, an exhibition which encapsulated the rhythms of a country that seemed on the verge of critically examining its own sense of self. But until now no Biennale has looked beyond the arts community in the terms that Burn so eloquently argued:

We have to value our experiences over these abstracted experiences with which we are constantly encouraged to identify. We have to learn to express our experiences in terms of the real conditions in which they occur. That is, we have to acknowledge the actual circumstances and contradictions which our experiences embody, on both a personal and a social level.

Isabel Carlos, as Artistic Director of the 2004 exhibition, is establishing a model that both addresses Burn's plea and at the same time brings a new intellectual rigour to public displays of contemporary art. Carlos is aware that she is different from previous directors in that she is female and Portuguese. As with previous directors she has cultural links with the New World, but in her case it is South America, rather than North, and her closest cultural connection is with Brazil, not the USA. In stating her intellectual position Carlos goes straight to the nub. For her art is about perception, understanding, empathy — and all the paradoxes that create truth.

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The title of the *Biennale Of Reason and Emotion* appears at first to be about opposites, and one of the ideas that Carlos wishes to explore is the concept of 'south' in a world dominated by the culture of the 'north'.

'You know we always connect the emotions with the South? You know the South is always the emotional, the personable, the lazy too,' she says.'

But here is the paradox. Australia is physically located in the counter-cultural, supposedly emotional, south, but has taken to itself the ethos of the harsh, apparently rational, north.

'So it's really playing with geography, and what I really want is to create a *Biennale* that works on the borders of the perception and on artworks that change our way of seeing the world around us.'

This is where she has broken ranks with all her predecessors and why Isabel Carlos' *Biennale of Sydney* looks like being an exhibition like no other.

Those words, 'reason' and 'emotion' are not about opposites, but connections. The title of the exhibition, and indeed much of its content is a homage to the Portuguese-born neurologist and philosopher, Antonio Damasio. His book, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, has radically changed the discourse on perception and brain damage'.

'When there is damage in the emotional part of the brain you are not able any more to distinguish for example, the pleasures or the pain, the fear or so on,' Carlos says. 'You are unable to be choosing, and thinking is about choosing. So *Reason and Emotion* is therefore one unity and not two separate things. The error of Descartes was to say: 'I think therefore I am'. You know what every one learns in school about Descartes? And in fact what we'll say, we must say, is: 'I feel therefore I am'. Because the emotional is like the first step of our intelligence, and we have an emotional brain.'

Much of the art therefore explores the very question of the nature of reality. This too is a reason for looking beyond the usual suspects of international exhibitions and choosing instead artists with a more introspective sensibility. One of the key figures in the exhibition is fellow Portuguese artist, Helena Almeida, whose photographs question the very nature of reality and illusion, and show the connections between the two.

With Carlos, a sense of connectedness is essential to the experience of art. Reason must dwell with emotion in order to make sense, and theory cannot be disconnected from art. For those who remember the disastrous *Biennale of Ideas* from the mid-1990s, there is relief in hearing Carlos' belief in the interconnectedness between art and writing about it.

'What I feel is that many times there is a missing link of a direct contact with artwork and that is because of the distance. What I see many times is that I read beautiful essays about an artwork and I feel in fact that the writer has never in fact spent enough time watching. So you know one

of the things that I really want for the *Southern Biennale* is that many artists come to Sydney, create links with the Australian art scene, so there will be a lot of artists being here, some doing residencies during the month.'

The questions Carlos chooses to investigate through her choice of artists are on first sight almost banal. The Native American artist Jimmie Durham explores what it means to make art when all art he makes will be appropriated into a debate about race. Yet some questions are bigger than race. The very nature of humanity has yet to be decided.

'We don't yet know what sort of animal we [the human race] are yet,' he told an audience at the Art Gallery of New South Wales last May. 'We're some sort of strange killer ape.'

Carlos is using her selection of artists and a narrower selection of venues to argue that 'connections between persons, between cultures', is the most important issue for art, and for people. Connectedness starts with geography. The traditional venue of the Art Gallery of New South Wales is joined to the more recently popular Museum of Contemporary Art by way of open air experiences in the Botanical Gardens, via the Museum of Sydney. It is in essence a *Biennale* made for walking, of both indoor and outdoor experiences. The Botanical Gardens have the magic space of the Palm Pavilion, which makes most art look good, but the open air of the gardens is there to act as a counterpoint to the enclosed polished interiors of the three museums.

'The good thing about having the Biennale in a museum is that we will not spend money on walls, but will spend money on artwork and the artists coming.'

There is one 'out of town' venue, Sydney College of the Arts, at Rozelle. But this too has a connection with its neighbour, Rozelle Psychiatric Hospital. The patients and the art school will both work with the South African artist Javier Tellez. This is doubly appropriate as SCA is located in the historic Callan Park Lunatic Asylum and Tellez' practice links architecture and psychiatric illness. He is working in the tradition of Lygia Clark, the Brazilian artist of the 1950s who used art to liberate psychiatric patients.

'She had created objects and had done workshops with people with mental problems and it was, they are real basic objects,' Carlos explains. 'Something like a bag of sand she would put on the belly, or a bag of water. Those experiences with autistic people, they will wake up their own bodies.'

Because of the profound influence of Lygia Clark on art therapy, Carlos has asked Tellez to create work with psychiatric patients in the tradition of Clark.

Lygia Clark will not be visiting Australia for the *Biennale*, but there is a very real chance that Antonio Damasio will.

He has accepted in principle the invitation to open the public programs of the *Biennale*. If this happens then there will yet another legacy of Carlos' *Biennale*. We have in the past seen exhibitions where science shows off its flash technology to art. But never before have we seen an exhibition where the ideas behind science and art work together to create both new art and a broader understanding of the nature of life. Last century was a time of intellectual divorce, when science and the humanities tried to lead separate lives — chaos ensued. Carlos, in taking as her art text a work of science, is showing both aesthetes and scientists that reason and emotion exist in both disciplines, and that there is much to gain from exploring the other side of being. ☪

1 Ian Burn 1979 'Correggio Jones: The Hero of the Sydney Biennale' *Sydney Biennale White Elephant or Red Herring? Comments from the art community* Student Representative Council Alexander Mackie C.A.E. Sydney p11-15

2 *ibid.*

3 Interview with Isabel Carlos 1 May 2003.

4 Antonio R. Damasio 1994 *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* NY

5 Jimmie Durham 'Art as a Part: Trying to Connect' Art Gallery of New South Wales 3 May 2003

6 Interview with Isabel Carlos

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Isabel Carlos, photo:
Brendan Read, courtesy
Biennale of Sydney.