

VISUAL ART



John McDonald

JOHNMCDONALD.NET.AU

Matters of the mind

Science and satire engage and challenge in two contrasting shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

There are many exhibitions that must have been fun for the artist but leave viewers in a state of mild perplexity. The Museum of Contemporary Art has two such shows at the moment – shows that can be broadly appreciated, but not loved.

Energies, the survey by David Haines and Joyce Hinterding, is almost over, but it would be a shame to let such a unique event escape comment. There are few areas where contemporary art can actually progress any further, which is why we see so many variations on the same old stuff. Technology provides one of the only pathways, and for the past 20 years Haines and Hinterding have explored everything from capturing Very Low Frequency radio signals to finding ways to photograph the sun; to making artificial odours by manipulating molecules.

In the very good catalogue that accompanies this show, one becomes aware of the range of ideas and metaphors that underpins Haines and Hinterding's work, but in the gallery it comes across as a series of science projects.

So what are we to take away from all this? Curator Anna Davis puts it succinctly: "a sense of wonder".

The artists' enthusiasm and curiosity are palpable, with each piece laying the groundwork for a new departure. The scope of their investigations goes from the minerals found in the earth's crust, to the cosmos itself. There's probably no comparable body of work anywhere in the world, although it's an art that impresses upon reflection, not in the immediate experience.

There is another form of ambiguity in the MCA's other survey, Aleks Danko's *My Fellow Aus-tra-aliens*. On the one hand, it's good to find an artist who refuses to buy into the superficial



ENERGIES: HAINES & HINTERDING
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART UNTIL SEPTEMBER 6

aspirations were broadly materialistic. Coming from a non-English speaking background, Danko was intensely conscious of the homogenising nature of Australian society at that time, as

Hinterding, is almost over, but it would be a shame to let such a unique event escape comment. There are few areas where contemporary art can actually progress any further, which is why we see so many variations on the same old stuff. Technology provides one of the only pathways, and for the past 20 years Haines and Hinterding have explored everything from capturing Very Low Frequency radio signals to finding ways to photograph the sun; to making artificial odours by manipulating molecules.

In addition, they have an ongoing interest in the occult (another form of "unseen energy") and have built an energy gun called a "cloudbuster" by following the instructions of rogue psychologist Wilhelm Reich.

It's an impressive body of work but virtually the only piece that has a strong visual presence is a massive, wall-sized projection called *Geology* (2015). This is a realistic-looking landscape created entirely on the computer. Viewers can manipulate this panorama and even explore two subterranean levels. It's based on gaming software, but in Haines and Hinterding's imaginary world nobody gets killed.

There are many opportunities for audiences to interact with these works. Touch one of Hinterding's drawings that look like large circuit diagrams, and you will hear a scratchy, static noise in your headphones. Sniff Haines' homemade fragrances and you may get a hint of the seaside, or of damp earth. It's fascinating in a rather nerdy way, but often seems more engaging in theory than realisation.

wonder".

The artists' enthusiasm and curiosity are palpable, with each piece laying the groundwork for a new departure. The scope of their investigations goes from the minerals found in the earth's crust, to the cosmos itself. There's probably no comparable body of work anywhere in the world, although it's an art that impresses upon reflection, not in the immediate experience.

There is another form of ambiguity in the MCA's other survey, Aleks Danko's *My Fellow Aus-tra-aliens*. On the one hand, it's good to find an artist who refuses to buy into the superficial celebration of the suburbs found in so much Australian art of the past two decades. On the other, there is a fine line between a critique and an unpleasant sense of superiority.

For people who have spent much of their lives in suburbia there can be nothing especially thrilling about one of Howard Arkley's lurid pictures of a brick bungalow painted with an airbrush, but it's another matter to sit in judgment of the spiritual and intellectual complacency of such an environment. Is this haven of the lower middle-class lifestyle a blight on our nation or the preserver of civilised values? Danko has chosen to highlight the negative aspects, and has found no shortage of material to support his viewpoint.

The artist was born into a family of Ukrainian refugees who settled on a quarter-acre block in Adelaide in the 1950s. Like Jeffrey Smart at an even earlier period, he grew up with an appreciation of the insular nature of the Adelaide suburbs – a culture-free zone in which all



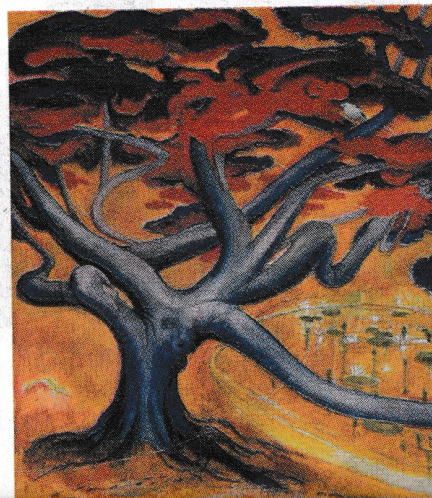
ENERGIES: HAINES & HINTERDING
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UNTIL SEPTEMBER 6

ALEKS DANKO: MY FELLOW AUS-TRA-ALIENS
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UNTIL OCTOBER 18

aspirations were broadly materialistic. Coming from a non-English speaking background, Danko was intensely conscious of the homogenising nature of Australian society at that time, as celebrated and satirised in the novel, *They're a Weird Mob* (1957), and Michael Powell's film adaptation of 1966.

Danko's early work, heavily influenced by Marcel Duchamp, consisted of visual gags – notably a series of hessian bags emblazoned with the words "Art Stuffing"; and tombstones or bronze paperweights carrying the label: "Heavy Aesthetic Quality". The implication is that so much of what is written and said about a work of art is produced by words, not the object itself. Once a piece enters the world, whether it be a painting of a kitten or a hard-edged abstraction, it is at the mercy of any interpretation.

These works are typical of the early 1970s, when the art object was under assault from all sides. In the following decade Danko would produce quirky sculptures out of clay that resemble maquettes for a surrealist architecture, presenting their own titles like the framed words in a Magritte composition. There is an amateurish, homemade aspect to these works,



VIEWING & AUCTION
IN SYDNEY THIS WEEKEND

The Peter Elliott Collection

Viewing: Friday 28 August –
Sunday 30 August, 10am-5pm
Byron Kennedy Hall
Auction: 30 August, 6pm, MCA
31 August, 11am & 2pm
1 September, 10.30am & 2pm
Byron Kennedy Hall

Enquiries: Deanna Baxter 0488 187 717
deanna.baxter@mossgreen.com.au
www.thepeterelliottcollection.com.au

kate owen gallery
contemporary aboriginal art



Trevor 'Turbo' Brown '3 Kookuburras in the Sun' 91 x 122cm

aboriginal art - much more than just dots!
visit us this weekend
explore the diversity

Stockroom Sale
Last Weekend!

Coleman Pugh Shead
Boyd Bacon Olsen
Whiteley & many more

www.badgerandfoxgallery.com

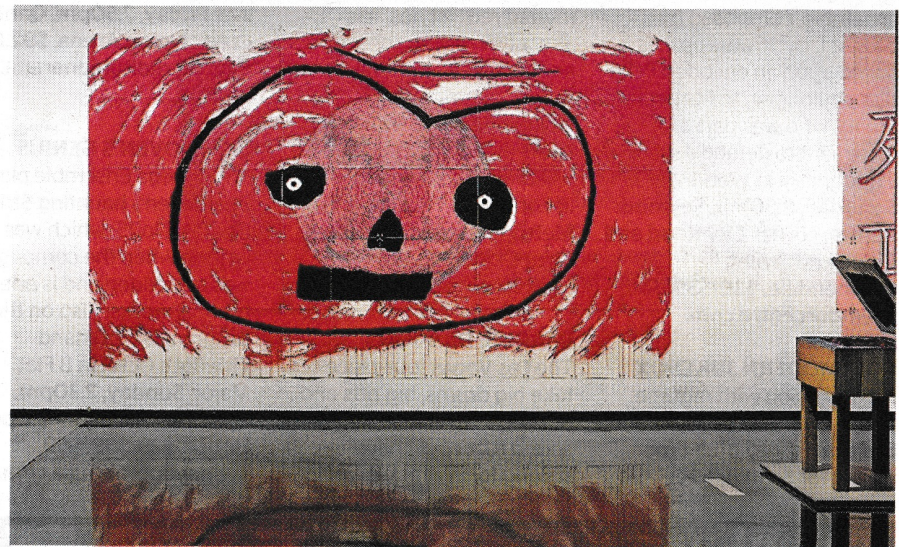
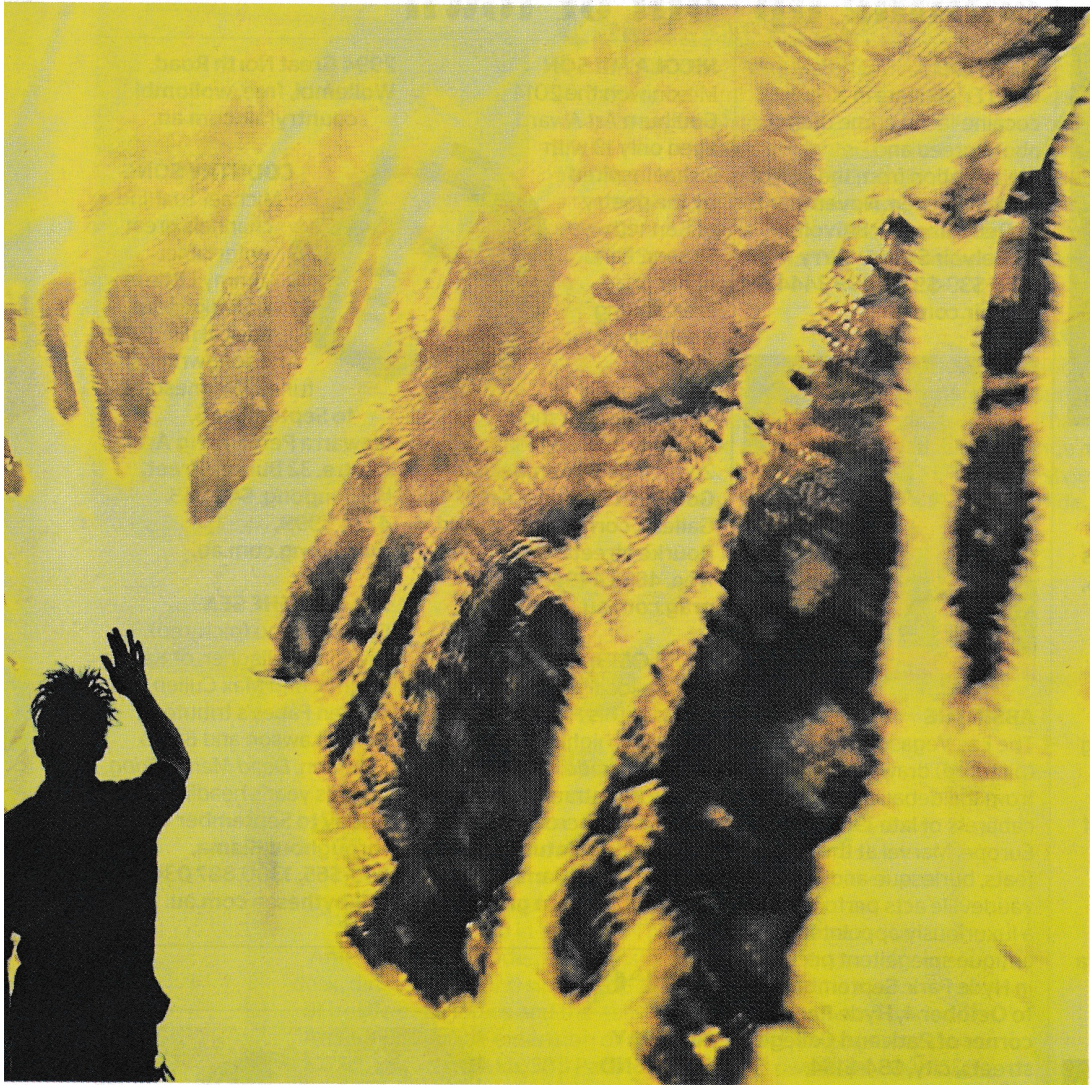
201 Albion Street Surry Hills NSW 2010 | T: (02) 8007 3690
Saturday & Sunday 11am - 6pm



DAVID BOYD
1972

EXHIBITION AND SALE
ALLCOT, BRYANT, FULLWOOD,
HEYSEN, JACKSON, JOHNSON,
LOUDON ST. HILL, LINDSAY,
MINNS, OLLEY, OLSEN,
STORRIER, TOWNSEND

VIEW
cdavgallery.com.au



but they are too wry and self-conscious to be attributed to anyone but a highly sophisticated artist.

Country", "The Arts Can Be Fun", or "In the National Interest". Most of these statements are empty, some are mere bigotry. The title of the

Clockwise from main: *Geology* by David Haines and Joyce Hinterding is an interactive

anger in this installation, no matter how routinely each statement is re-presented. "Chatter" – a word that recurs in Danko's work – has replaced

but they are too wry and self-conscious to be attributed to anyone but a highly sophisticated artist.

This was also the time Danko made a short film in collaboration with Joan Grounds, *We Should Call It a Living Room...* (1974-75), which has become a classic. It shows, by means of time-lapse photography, an armchair and its surrounds being gradually overrun with rampant vegetation. It's a vision of entropy, as nature reclaims the throne room of the suburban castle.

In his works from the mid-1980s to the present, Danko creates large-scale installations with repetitive forms and a concentrated use of text. He is as deadpan as any minimalist in *Day in Day Out* (1991) which consists of rows of tiny houses that resemble the pieces on a monopoly board. Each house is a fortress with blank doors and windows. Their repetition produces a deadening sense of conformity and regimentation.

Perhaps even more deadening are his collections of banal expressions, fragments of received wisdom or banner headlines. In *Songs of Australia Volume 16 - Shhh, Go Back to Sleep* (2004), the walls are lined with red house silhouettes overlaid with lines such as "Clever

Country", "The Arts Can Be Fun", or "In the National Interest". Most of these statements are empty, some are mere bigotry. The title of the show, *My Fellow Aus-tra-aliens*, harks back to John Howard's trademark way of beginning a speech. It's probably the only thing most of us can remember from 11 years of public addresses.

By teasing the word "aliens" out of "Australians", Danko mocks the simplistic nationalism that was such a large part of the Howard platform, reminding us that all Australians, apart from the Indigenous variety, are of immigrant stock.

He must have been busy gathering slogans over the past few years. He might consider Julia Gillard's "Going Forward" to Tony Abbott's "Stop the Boats", or lately "Death Cult". Joe Hockey would be a particularly fertile source of embarrassing one-liners - "Lifters and Leaners", "The End of the Age of Entitlement", "Poor People Don't Drive", and so on.

From drawing attention to the way works of art can be etched in people's minds by words, Danko seems to be saying our entire mental universe is in danger of being shaped by cliches, slogans and headlines. There is a simmering

Clockwise from main: *Geology* by David Haines and Joyce Hinterding is an interactive experience based on gaming software; Aleks Danko's *My Fellow Aus-tra-aliens* at the Museum of Contemporary Art is a sharp critique of Australian suburbia including the work *Dilly-Dally / So-So / Shippy-Shippy? / Ho-Ho / Hanky-Panky? / Bye-Bye*.

PHOTOS: JESSICA MAURER, ALEKS DANKO

anger in this installation, no matter how routinely each statement is re-presented. "Chatter" - a word that recurs in Danko's work - has replaced thinking.

"You're talking a lot, but you're not saying anything," as David Byrne once sang, in lines that apply to the current state of political discourse. It is the people who live in those little suburban houses who have the power to force some sense out of our politicians. Instead, it seems that suburban complacency and paranoia are the two fundamental forces upon which political parties have come to depend.

Despite the best efforts of generations of radical artists, it is almost impossible to find instances in which art has helped to bring about political change. Danko's brand of consciousness-raising acts like a mirror reflecting the mediocrity of Australian public life. The difficulty is that by staging these installations inside an art institution, he is chiefly addressing those who hold the same views. This means the work may be seen as an aloof commentary on the benighted masses. It becomes a matter of "us and them", when it may be more productive to accept that we're all in this mess together.

Orient House

Australia's source for antique Chinese furniture, Africa and S.E. Asia decorative pieces

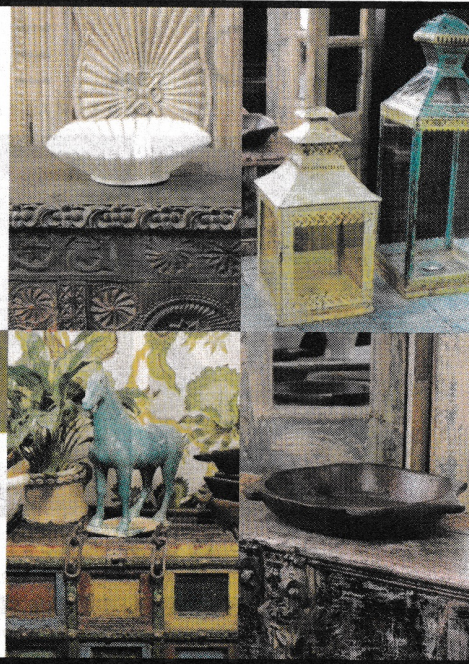
Interiors through adventure

NEW CONTAINERS FROM INDIA AND CHINA - JUST ARRIVED

Open 9am-5pm Mon to Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 12pm-4pm Sun • Ph (02) 9660 3895

Explore our website
www.orienthouse.com.au

VISIT US AT 45 BRIDGE ROAD, GLEBE



WILLIAM EDGAR (WORKING 1900s-1920s)
Andorinha
oil on canvas
55 x 75cm
Sold for \$3,660, October 2013

mossgreen
AUCTIONS

VALUATIONS IN SYDNEY THIS WEEK

Australian & Colonial, Antique & Historical

Charles Leski, Deputy Chairman will be in Sydney Saturday 29 August - Wednesday 2 September to offer complimentary auction valuations. Please contact him to make an appointment:
charles.leski@mossgreen.com.au
0412 053 692

926-930 High Street
Armadale VIC 3143
www.mossgreen.com.au