

Information Sheet for 'Thresholds of Tolerance'

Dates: 9 May to 5 June 2007

Venue: ANU School of Art Gallery

Curators: Caroline Turner and David Williams

Introduction: Thresholds of Tolerance: History, Human Rights and Art

This exhibition, *Thresholds of Tolerance* at the Australian National University's School of Art Gallery, is a joint project of the School of Art and the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) within the newly created Research School of Humanities (RSH) at ANU. It is part of a long term research project on 'Art and Human Rights' within RSH.

There have been two previous exhibitions: 'Witnessing to Silence: Art and Human Rights' in 2003 and 'Future Tense: Security and Human Rights' in 2005. Nearly forty artists from sixteen countries have so far participated in the three exhibitions. Website: <http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/research/ahr.php>.

'Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human...Tolerance is, above all, an active attitude prompted by recognition of the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others. In no circumstance can it be used to justify infringements of these fundamental values. Tolerance is to be exercised by individuals, groups and States' UNESCO's Declaration of Principles on Tolerance 1995

The question of human rights underlies the challenges of our contemporary society and world, as well defining the limits likely to be set on humanity in the coming centuries. And 'tolerance', as the UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (1995) suggests, is fundamental to human rights.

We have chosen tolerance as a theme for this third exhibition in the series on 'Art and Human Rights', in part, to suggest the limitations and challenges to human rights in our time and also to emphasise how much definitions of humanity depend on and are limited by the 'tolerance' of others.

Jon Cattapan's drawings from the 'Carbon' series are allusive and mysterious, but immediately bring to mind long histories of oppression, even torture; and their most frightening aspect is that they are set in our times but have no clear reference points.

The Australian artists in the exhibition point to the obvious fact that we cannot continue to believe that human rights abuses occur only somewhere else and not in this country.

The group **proppaNOW** (Jennifer Herd, Tony Albert, Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell) confront questions of race and identity for Aboriginal people in Australia today through history and still existing and unresolved issues such as land rights.

Julie Gough also looks to history in the present in her installation referencing her Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestor. She has said: 'A different national focus with a properly embraced Indigenous culture and a shared history with all its bad intentions

and outcomes – would construct the idea and place of Australia as less of an invention overlaid upon silenced pasts’.

Pat Hoffie takes up another strand of Australian history, that of the estimated 62 000 Pacific Islanders brought as indentured servants in the nineteenth century, many by violence, to work on the cane fields of Northern Queensland in a practice known as ‘blackbirding’. The banner ‘NO SUCH THING as a LEVEL PLAYING FIELD’ is a reproduction by Hoffie and the Galicia family in Manila on a huge scale of a nineteenth century painting by J.M. Crossland showing a young Aboriginal boy, Nannultera, raised by missionaries at the Poonindie Natives’ Training Institution, where Aboriginal people were to be ‘reclaimed from barbarism and trained to the duties of social Christian life’.

The ultimate limit of tolerance must be that between life and death. Thai artist **Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’s** allusive communication with unclaimed bodies in a Thai morgue tests Western ideas of tolerance but falls within Buddhist concepts of death and rebirth.

The artists from Indonesia, East Timor and Australia forming the groups **Taring Padi**, **Gembel** and **Culture Kitchen**, who declare ‘We Refuse to Become Victims’, bring to this exhibition the immediacy of street art: They include many architects of the radical art activities of **Taring Padi** that highlighted the Yogyakarta protest movements of 1998 that led to the fall of President Suharto. Many of the East Timorese **Gembel** artists are living in refugee camps today in East Timor, responding to very current issues of violence and resistance. The imagery in their jointly worked banner refers to the social, political and economic issues linking Australia, Indonesia and East Timor, including East Timorese anger over Australia’s role in the exploitation of offshore gas and oil reserves.

For **Dadang Christanto**, an Indonesian artist now living in Australia, whose work is about memorialising injustice, trauma and violence, the human head is the site of memory and intelligent thought. Trauma caused by violence can only be cured and reconciliation achieved, the artist believes, by recollection. The artist endures the memory of his father’s murder in the officially sanctioned mass killings in Indonesia 1965. Yet his own suffering has given him an extreme empathy with the personal suffering of others. There is a special poignancy in these works which serve both as memorials to victims of violence and an evocation of the need to remember and to reflect on our common humanity.

The artists who have been included in this exhibition all exemplify the importance of art to communities and they all raise critical issues of common humanity for the twenty-first century. In selecting the artists for this exhibition we have not focussed on ‘political’ artists although some of them have argued all art is political, but on artists who, in their lives and work, have confronted human rights as an imperative of their art.

(Extract from Caroline Turner, ‘Limiting Tolerance’, in catalogue)

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