

Pat Hoffie: A take on life.

Alison Carroll

At the end of the nineteenth century, the revolutionary leader Jose Rizal wrote at length of the condition of the Philippines and the importance of self-awareness to gain liberty:

In order to read the destiny of a people, it is necessary to open the book of its past ...Scarcely had they been attached to the Spanish crown than they had to sustain with their blood and the efforts of their sons the wars and ambitions, the conquest of the Spanish people, and in these struggles, in that terrible crisis when a people changes its form of government, its laws, usages, customs, religion and beliefs, the Philippines was depopulated, impoverished and retarded... caught in their metamorphosis without confidence in their past, without faith in their present, with no fond hope for the years to come.¹

The Filipino revolution was understood by others of the region who were not so advanced in their own independence movements. There is a poignant passage in Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Awakenings*, following the issues of colonial power and looking to the example of the Philippines in overturning this in the Dutch East Indies:

The Philippines cannot be forgotten, can they? Even if they were deceived by Spain and America? It is inevitable that other conquered people will follow in their footsteps. Yes, even in the Indies. If not now, then later...²

Pat Hoffie is an unusual Australian artist in her awareness of the history, flux and disparity of cultural power in our own region, conscious, as was Pramoedya, that the conditions of near neighbours are both relevant and encumbering to us as well. She has investigated these disparities of existence through thirty years of practice, travelling the world unceasingly, seeking out experiences and understanding. Her focus has been on Asia and in the last decade on the Philippines. An outsider, she has increasingly teased the boundaries of belonging and acceptance, forever uncomfortable about her place in easeful Brisbane knowing the circumstances of her friends, family and colleagues in the archipelago. It makes for a specific tension in her work that, as she says, begs numerous questions.

She has moved from figurative painting to interleaving the hands of other people, or machines, into the process of her work,

distancing and complicating her personal involvement. This distancing is at odds with the literal messages of her art: an involvement on a visceral level with the (usually) disadvantaged members of our global world; a cry for justice; a plea for understanding.

Fifteen years ago Hoffie depersonalised generic 'other' images, like the 'blue/green Asian' women of Tretiakov's popular prints, through colour photocopying, emphasizing their being forever reproducible. The series *Hotel Paradise* of 1989-90 was, of necessity, little images made large by multiples. Her work in this exhibition is made large by the hands of others, the Galicia family in Manila. This is another form of reproduction, very powerful in its size, and more complex in its politics. Its overt subject is the 'children overboard' affair, when refugee children were claimed by the Australian government to have been thrown into the sea by their families, evidence of unacceptable behaviour for future citizens of the country. The claim was subsequently shown to be untrue.

Hoffie first commissioned large banners from Filipino billboard painters for the Adelaide Festival in 1994, choosing to place a nineteenth century image of an Aboriginal cricketer, overlaid with the message 'No such thing as a level playing field', above the Adelaide cricket oval's main gate, with similar relevant sitings of killing wildlife at the Museum, questionable cultural exchange at the Art Gallery and hypocritical piety at the Cathedral. A later return to the 2002 Adelaide Festival included Russian Revolutionary imagery woven into mats by Filipino weavers as a critique of cultural accumulation and translated meaning.

Hoffie lives in Brisbane, a town of complicated political heritage. Known to southern Australians (increasingly wrongly) as the capital of the 'deep North', a city of the new rich and of little cultural depth – and where in relatively recent memory political protest was banned – she maintains a fairly lonely place amidst her fellow citizens and art community. She is notable for her stand, however, even in Australia as a whole. There are few artists in Australia who for so long and with such unstinting commitment have continued to find creative ways to articulate their position on the world and its affairs.

For some, Hoffie's works and art are too extreme. They want to question her bravado

and her passion. But doing that cuts down what she offers – this take on life. It also quibbles in the face of injustice, worrying about words while deeds go unquestioned; seeing both sides when one is but a shadow of the other.

Pat HOFFIE is a warrior-woman: feisty, funny, performative and clever. The dramatic scale and baroque gesture of *The Children Overboard* work, alternatively altar painting and stage set, are performative; insisting on being seen amidst meeker offerings, remaining in our mind's eye, transformed by HOFFIE's decisions and the Galicia family's hands into a *memento mori* of human despair.

An Interview, May-June 2003

Alison Carroll and Pat HOFFIE

AC: *What is your motivation for making the works in this exhibition?*

PH: The works are part of an ongoing series entitled *Fully Exploited Labour*. Each of the exhibitions that are part of this series has dealt with the inequalities of labour that underpin international trade. This includes the art world, and my own role within that world. I have tended to reiterate the fact that my role is inevitably one of complicity – one where the links between production and presentation have become less visible.

In terms of this particular body of work, I wanted to produce some of those icons of very recent history that form part of the contemporary landscape of who we are as Australians. They are images that reflect back to us a particular moment.

AC: *How were they made?*

PH: Each of the original images was lifted from the ABC TV *Four Corners* programs and worked through the computer. The print-outs were sent to a family in Manila - the Galicia family – who used to paint billboards for a living. (Since I started working with them, printed billboards have taken over the hand-painted ones). They grid them up, paint them and send them back to me.

AC: *How does this impact on their political motivation?*

PH: Of course I could have had the images enlarged by technological means or I might have painted them myself or they could have been retained as bytes of film and re-worked. But the fact that they have been outsourced offshore is part of the kind of global trading that makes entire communities – entire nations –

leave their place of birth in search of more equitable possibilities. That is, the manufacture of the work is both the subject of the work as it is the means.

AC: *Art can change people's minds, as the Farm Security Administration photographs in the 1930s in America did. How do you see your work in this scenario?*

PH: I had a surprise the other day when a curator offhandedly referred to my work as protest art. I guess I see this particular body of work as merely and openly factual. These images are reporting a particular moment in Australia. They say just as much about our values at the moment as a Streeton view of unpeopled paddocks might say about the national aspirations of the time.

My sense is that all art is political, and if you choose to say that your art has nothing to do with politics, then that's a political position too. It means you are happy with the status quo as it is.

AC: *The image of the sinking refugee boat has become an icon for a number of Australian artists – Jon Cattapan and Charles Green & Lyndell Brown for example have also used it. We Australians know and understand what it means. But I was interested in the story of how the Galicia family didn't know about the image and turned it into an image of 'Christ on the Sea of Galilee', in accord with their own store of iconography. So, how much do people need to know about the image?*

PH: The act of translation is always embroidered with little glitches and approximations – the Chinese whispers phenomenon. It's often very telling and I suspect that in many instances the mistranslations are willing ones. Perhaps it is not surprising that the images of the Siev X breaking up and the children overboard image ended up so biblical. The Philippines is saturated with Christian imagery and the very airwaves are permeated with the possibilities of apparitions, miracles and magic every day.

AC: *This complexity of making has been a cause of some emotion in the art world globally – about what is seen as exploitation, versus a commercial commissioning of a tradesperson, versus collaboration. What happens in this instance?*

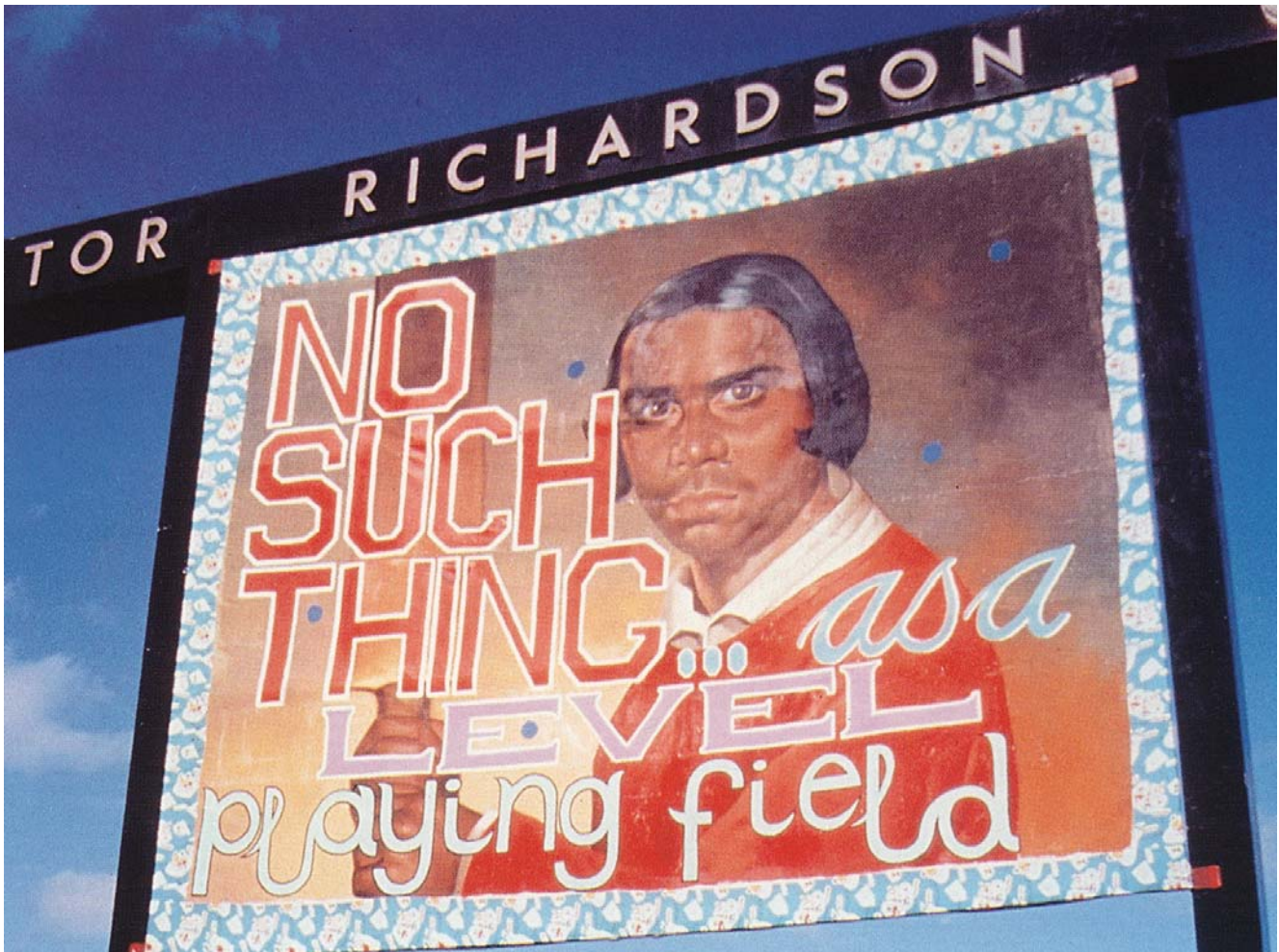
PH: I guess it might be the middle option, and I could fool myself that there might be elements of the third option if I felt 'honky' enough, but in the end it can only ever be the first option because any exchange of trade or ideas or even relationships across such uneven territories cannot but end in exploitation.

Everyone who pulls a t-shirt over their heads in the morning starts feeling uncomfortable when they start getting conscious of the real costs and conditions of labour in a global economy. How do you walk that fine line between being a bleeding heart and just thinking it's all too big to solve? This series has always mentioned the names of those who produced it, where it was done and the costs. It's not called the Fully Exploited Labour series for nothing.

Alison Carroll is Director, Asialink Arts, Asialink, University of Melbourne.

¹ Jose Rizal, 'The Philippines a Century Hence', 1889-90, in *Selected Writings of Rizal*, Technology Supply Inc., Manila, 1978, p. 5.

² Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Awakenings* (1975), Penguin, 1990, p. 342.



Pat HOFFIE, *No such thing as a level playing field*, 1994, acrylic on fabric. Image courtesy the artist.