

Rapport



The rather ambitious hope behind the exhibition 'Rapport' was to set up a critical dialogue between the art practices of Singapore and Australia. Exhibited in both countries and co-curated by Tay Swee Lin of the Singapore Art Museum and Natalie King of Monash University Gallery, 'Rapport' featured four Australians: Hany Armanious, Carolyn Eskdale, Christopher Langton and Nicola Loder, and four Singaporeans: Salleh Japar, Baet Yeok Kuan, Matthew Ngui and Amanda Heng. While the title 'Rapport' connotes a process of collaboration between the two different art environments, the resulting cultural liaison suggested rather that different cultures produce different approaches, even when dealing with similar themes. The show raised some questions: what exactly is the dialogue between the eight artists? How are the three themes singled out by the curators – synthetic materials, memory and ephemerality – explored by the juxtaposition of Singaporean and Australian artists? And, on the whole, how do the separate works interrelate?

Of the Australians, Armanious and Langton dealt with synthetic materials, while Eskdale and Loder explored the issue of memory through installation, drawing and photography. Armanious covered the mid-section of the white walls in one of the Singapore Art Museum's galleries with thin black parallel lines made of vinyl adhesive sheeting. The slightly wavy shape of the lines created a visual intensity that was heightened by their repetition and density. They reminded one of barcodes or electrical waves, as if they were a kind of digital language understood visually. In contrast, in his work *Brat Pack* Langton used PVC to create huge plastic inflatables as a commentary on Australian commercialism and conformity. Colour-

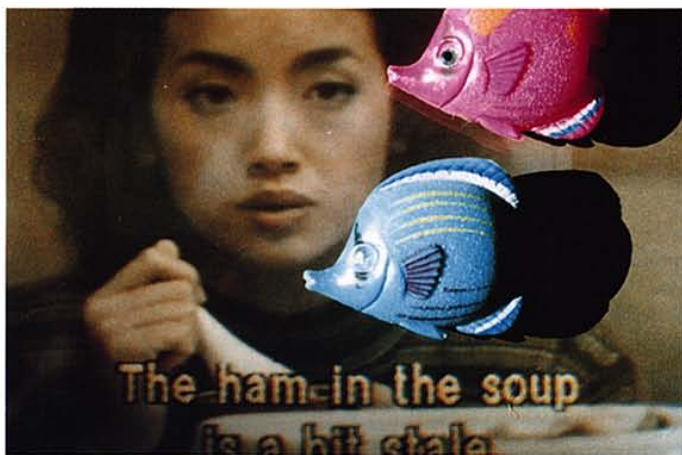
ful and cartoonish, the huge kitsch Pop-art-like inflatable figures were eye-catching, yet while they first struck one as fun and playful, there was a slight menace to them.

On a more sombre note, Loder's large silver gelatin prints of expressionless, staring children evoked the capture of childhood in a timeless box. In *Child 1–24* the ghostly effect created by the scratches and cloudy tonal shades of grey played on the feeling of melancholy one might have over his or her lost childhood. *Aerial 1–15* continued in this 'lost' vein, with non-descript aerial shots of 'nowhere'. Also dealing with the haunting of memory, Eskdale created an installation of a muslin room with furniture wrapped like mummies in muslin. Her *Untitled Room* alluded to Freud's thoughts on obsessional neurosis: everything conscious is subject to a wearing away, but the unconscious, like an entombed object, is preserved by its burial.

The theme of ephemerality was explored by Singaporeans Japar and Baet; the former dealing with the development and decay of society in his installation of cradles made of cloth and sand, the latter exploring various themes such as modernity and tradition, cultural difference and ways of looking at the body. As Japar's cradles were labelled with Malay words, his installation lent itself readily to the interpretation that the work was a meditation on his Malay 'roots', culture and tradition. In comparison, Baet's installation offered no quick categorisation and appeared subtler,

CHRISTOPHER LANGTON, *Brat Pack*, 1996, (detail) mixed media, four parts, each 310 x 160 x 84 cm, courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

MATTHEW NGUI, *Food, Toys and Sculpture*, 1996, (detail) time-based installation, fish, toys and still from the film *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, courtesy the artist.





Australians' approach was individualistic and demonstrated no clear intention to work as part of a whole. So where was the 'rapport'? The display of works, their juxtaposition, only made more obvious their individual approaches, their differences. While there was an attempt to bring together Ngui's and Armanious's works by placing the former's video screening within a space created by the latter's parallel strips, this seemed only to work at a physical level. On a more conceptual or spiritual level, there didn't

NICOLA LODER, *Child 1-24, 1996*, (detail) silver gelatin print, twenty-four parts, each 66 x 56 cm, courtesy the artist.

but unfortunately the many themes broached in the work did not seem to fuse together clearly.

Heng's *Another Woman* fitted into the thematic schema of the show as a detour down memory lane. Dealing with the issue of the bond between mother and daughter, her installation included a series of striking photographs of her and her mother, some cloth-wrapped objects, and the clothes worn by herself and her mother in the photographs. The intimacy shown between artist and mother in the large colour photographs communicated a sense of reflection over the past, of tension over their difference, yet at the same time also a sense of respect. Like Japar's cradles, Heng's installation suggested that it is the artist's contemplation of her own cultural identity – in this case, on being Chinese and a woman – that is being explored.

Ngui, who is based in both Perth and Singapore, created a multimedia installation using toys, slides and video. In *Food, Toys and Sculpture* food became an icon of culture. Compared to his fellow Singaporeans, Heng and Japar, Ngui's evocation of his 'culture' was perhaps the most ironic. Not that the former two took everything at face value – certainly their works are investigations into culture – but their approach was arguably less humorous than Ngui's. As Ngui himself argued in his remarks in the 'Rapport' catalogue; meaning, identity and culture have no inherent or singular positive value, but are negotiated and contextualised. And for him, humour is precisely the tool to lay bare such negotiations.

Although all the artists could be grouped under similar themes, what was generally notable was that the Singaporeans dealt with issues on a slightly more personal level, while the Australians portrayed their ideas at a more societal and universal level. Moreover, both the Singaporeans' and the

seem to be much of a connection. If the show was less successful in establishing such connections, it did nevertheless raise some important questions, and one cannot fault its ambition, its hope, for rapport.

Rapport: Eight Artists from Singapore and Australia, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, 11 June – 21 July 1996; Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, 3 September – 12 October 1996; Canberra School of Art Gallery, Canberra, 18 April – 18 May 1997; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, June 1997.

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AMANDA HENG, *Another Woman, 1996*, (installation detail) mixed media, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist.

