

A Third Place Ani O'Neill, Liyen Chong, Sangeeta Sandrasegar

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University of Canterbury
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at the Arts Centre

A Third Place

Perceptions of cultural difference are still subject to someone else's spin...

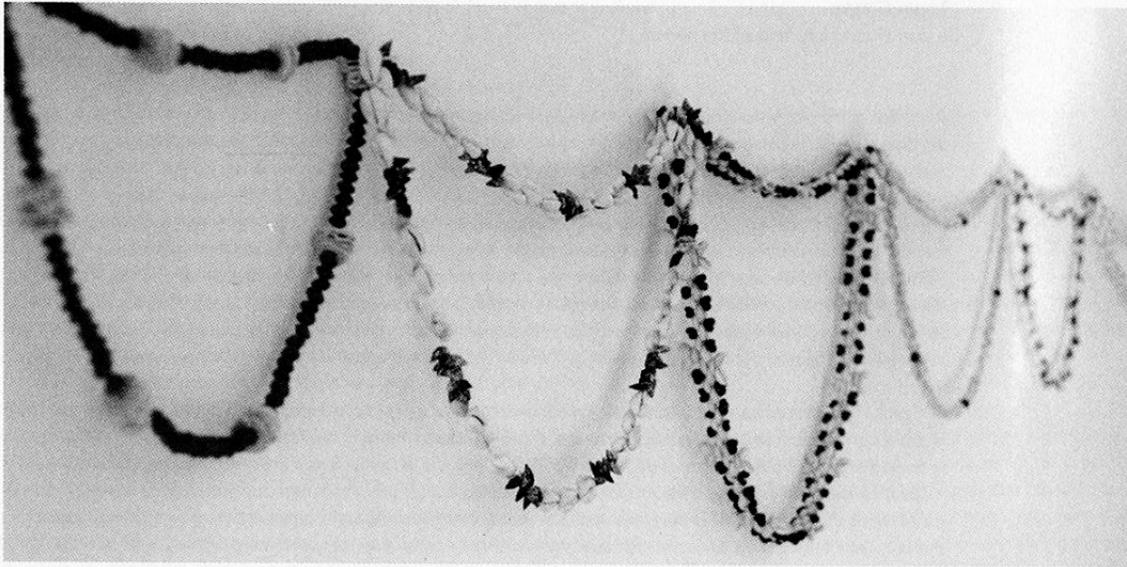
As a curatorial project, A Third Place aims to redress certain prejudices in the contemporary visual arts. Rather than being subject to 'someone else's spin' (to quote cultural theorist Kobena Mercer) the three installations that make up this exhibition represent a significant shift away from the *mélange* that politically correct multiculturalism has become. The projects echo a determined plea by Native American artist Jimmie Durham, who recently in a forum proclaimed it is high time the dominant western industrialised societies stopped 'anthropologising' the third/ 'post-colonial' world. It is now crucial, says Durham, for all humanity to undergo thorough self-scrutiny. This would suggest that all societies must come to terms with an increasingly exclusive global economic system and wake up to the harsh, often inhumane realities associated with the insidious forms of political, multi-national and corporate exploitation.

This exhibition reveals that diverse cross-cultural backgrounds can be a rich source for creative social solutions as much as they provide for distinct and idiosyncratic art practices. Inspired by the innovative approaches represented here, the exhibition title alludes to an important experiential factor—that 'third place', the viewer's, which becomes part of the contextual mix. Given the different ethnic heritages of the three artists, it can be suggested that if one place connects with one parent and a second (and different) with the other, then there is already in the work a fanning out of influences, experiences and familial relationships that embraces a wealth of knowledge and traditions. The third place then, is now—but not only our contemporary predicament but the present moment within the gallery walls where each artist shares with the audience her inherited legacy. And further: beneath this surface upon which one can trace certain socio-cultural connections there is as well, a strong political undertow. Each project suggests to the viewer ways of confronting challenging issues that relate to personal and cultural boundaries, to colonial pasts and now, to politically-motivated responses regarding national security—interestingly, dominant issues that seem to have taken root especially in those nations professing to be 'multicultural'.

A Third Place was timed to coincide with the 7th International Symposium of the Pacific Arts Association organised by the University of Canterbury, not only to augment the symposium programme, but to bring to the attention of forum participants and visitors the work of three young, dynamic artists. The installations encapsulate some of the significant developments that have occurred in the visual arts over the last decade—especially in New Zealand where the growing prominence of Polynesian artists and the work emerging from artists of Asian descent has become a vibrant and identifying force. The three distinct practices represented in this exhibition emphasise the need to reconsider the ideals of 'multiculturalism'—especially when border protection and immigration policies are becoming increasingly exclusive and less tolerant of cultural difference. The conceptual rigour and meticulous handiwork that characterises each of these practices is made all the more pertinent through humour and perspicacity—Ani O'Neill, Liyen Chong and Sangeeta Sandrasegar remind us how limited we become as social beings if we remain indifferent to difference.

Cultural theorist and writer Homi Bhabha put forward the view that cultural identity only grows out of conflicting and ambiguous situations, thereby challenging notions of 'cultural purity' and making all talk in the current climate about hierarchical 'purity' and cultural identity untenable. For Bhabha, recognising the ambivalence of cultural identity is a crucial step in getting beyond the exoticism of cultural diversity: he proposes instead, an increasingly potent hybrid quality within which cultural differences have room to manoeuvre. A Third Place is an exhibition project that reveals the richness of what Bhabha would consider an essential socio-cultural manoeuvrability.

One artist whose work epitomises socio-cultural manoeuvrability, whose installations can be considered a celebration of one's unique heritage, is Auckland-based Ani O'Neill. Since the early 1990s, O'Neill has combined elements, concepts and material aspects of her Rarotongan/ New Zealand background in ways that move beyond the usual framework of contemporary western art traditions. O'Neill's practice questions what has become for many artists a somewhat static, over-earnest and often moribund legacy of preferred media, styles and genre: she has replaced or updated western art history with a 'Polynesian funkiness' that is both a celebration of life and an acknowledgment of forgotten decorative/craft traditions. She reactivates that essential performative connection between creative expression, knowledge and the ceremonial traditions of former colonised cultures. Alongside this exuberance however, there is a certain poignancy... for loss as much as living is an underlying element in the work.



A significant aspect of O'Neill's practice is the high regard for women's handiwork in these cultures and, within the New Zealand art context, O'Neill's influence is seminal. The two emerging artists from two different cities who complete the exhibition, similarly draw attention to this hands-on materiality. Christchurch-based Liyen Chong (of Chinese/Malaysian background) and Melbourne-based Sangeeta Sandrasegar (of Indian/Malaysian-Australian parentage) reveal just how dynamic the contemporary visual arts has become. Like O'Neill, Chong and Sandrasegar have moved far beyond the awkward, self-conscious practices that once characterised the early days of feminism and the somewhat patronising forays of western art into areas considered 'exotic'—exploitations that ultimately seemed merely fashionable or were calculated attempts to resuscitate a dying 'arts industry'.

In bringing to the fore the significance of this third dimension, the exhibition neither collapses inherited ethnic backgrounds into some homogenised system or 'look' of contemporary art, nor does it ignore the value of personal experience and autobiographical aspects within the work. Rather O'Neill, Chong and Sandrasegar reveal through art the significance of their ethnic legacies, offering to the audience a vitality and strength that many of us can only wish we had for ourselves. The project is not about 'hybridity' either, a convenient term these days to describe and thereby assimilate difference. A Third Place is a celebration of cultural heritage: within each project diverse references have been juxtaposed and tenderly yoked together—the artists ensuring that difference is made conspicuously present.

Ewen McDonald
May 2003

Ani O'Neill
Ei Line, 2002
77 shell, seed, thread and
bead ei

Sangeeta Sandrasegar

April 2003

Liyen Chong

It was a warm day, and a little humid...

A book, a narrative thrown into disarray, made up of fragments, a jumble of moments of intense clarity, put together in my final year as a painting student, is now recontextualised into objects that one would come across in the space of a day. It is a visualised record of a person's train of thought presented in a staged setting where the viewer is invited to scrutinise the events of the day as they envelop the character.

As this character—a girl (as the predisposition to window shopping is often related to females)—pursues a relationship or interacts with objects, they become surfaces inscribed with her stream of consciousness. Ubiquitous consumer commodities become canvases upon which texts are written, where one set of meanings is replaced with another. As the day progresses, the exterior casings of the objects become for her the medium she talks through, talks to, and through which she is talked to. In this work I wanted to remind the audience of the poetic quality to be found in the mundane: the extraordinariness and absurdities of everyday life that are all too often overlooked, or passed over because to think of them would be to fall under the weight of sensory overload.

From sunrise to sunset, the aftermath of my subject's day is presented—each hour carefully embedded and embodied in a range of everyday products and activities. For instance, the hazy, sleepy morning is encapsulated in a box of toothpaste, where her mind begins to wander from narratives of 'creation' to the beginnings her life, foreshadowing the multi-layered experiences of the coming day. Her frustration with making art is chronicled in the tools she uses. Her bus trip tickets and the road signs she sees become a plane trip and a travel log of one of her journeys overseas. A dinner date conversation (but with a person who never shows) is carefully scripted as if following the courses on the restaurant's menu and, at the end of the day, an evening performance (manifested in a ticket stub and pages from the program) reveals that the story is both a mirror reflection of the girl's life and a revelation to her that it has been her day—her life—on display.

I wanted the documentation to be visually powerful but, at the same time, beneath the meticulously simulated effects, allusions and product packaging, I wanted it to be a poignant study based on personal responses to the realities of cultural dislocation. Yet with humour: the episodic journey I have asked viewers to follow is no different to the sort of everyday that any nine-to-five, city-based person would encounter.

Liyen Chong

May 2003

Ani O'Neill Born Auckland, New Zealand, 1971. Lives and works in Auckland.

Ani is of Rarotongan/ New Zealand and Irish descent. She has been exhibiting since the early 1990s and has had solo exhibitions throughout New Zealand as well as in Sydney and Los Angeles. She has been included in numerous group exhibitions including international surveys such as the Biennale of Sydney in 1998 and 2000; Close Quarters: Contemporary Art from Australia and New Zealand, Monash University and touring, 1998; Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996; and Bottled Ocean, a touring exhibition of Pacific Island Art, 1994. Ani O'Neill is represented by Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland.

Liyen Chong Born Malaysia, 1979. Lives and works in Christchurch This is her first exhibition since graduating with a Master of Fine Arts from the School of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury.

Liyen has been living in Christchurch since 1995, when she came to New Zealand (as did her parents) to study. She is of Chinese descent but has grown up in Malaysia and lived in both Australia and China. Her work explores the relationship between art and language, finding ways of working with differing perspectives that are cultural, theoretical and psychological in origin. "I am as much Chinese as I am Malaysian but at the same time I see Western history and its history of ideas (as in art, literature and cultural theory) as my own... I try to swallow the whole world. And I try to define my question despite the uncertainties of my own identity as a product of the many different countries I have experienced."



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Sangeeta Sandrasegar Born Brisbane, Australia, 1977. Lives and works in Melbourne, Australia. Studied painting at Victorian College of the Arts (BFA 1996-1998, and Graduate Diploma in Visual Art 1999) and is currently a candidate for Doctor of Philosophy, VCA, Melbourne.

Sangeeta draws on her mixed heritage: an Australian mother and an Indian-Malaysian father. She has been represented in group and solo exhibitions since 1996 and has been awarded numerous fellowships and prizes. Her work is primarily based around the intersection of cultures... investigating inherent similarities and socio-cultural disparities through research into recorded histories both literary and visual. Recent investigations have explored aspects of sexual iconography, eastern and western, and have been realised as paper cut-outs and wall-relief constructions. Sangeeta Sandrasegar is represented by Mori Gallery, Sydney.