

E N J O I N



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**M e r l i n d a B o b i s**

with Virginia Hilyard, Jane and  
Phillip Ulman

**S e b a s t i a n D i M a u r o**

**F i o n a F o l e y**

**J u d i t h K e n t i s h**

**E d K o u m a n s**

curated by Ingrid Hoffmann

# Asialink

## PREFACE

*Enjoin* is an exhibition which began with a focus on specific environmental issues and has broadened in scope to explore many different types of environments. It began also with concerns specific to north eastern Australia but the ripples of the pond have now moved concentrically outwards to incorporate Queensland and beyond. Cairns is still the curatorial centre but other people, places and issues have been enjoined to take part.

Asialink is sympathetic to the aims of this exhibition. Based at the University of Melbourne, our mission seeks to foster Australians to live and work in partnership with other countries of the Asian region. The Arts Program encourages and facilitates greater exchange of cultural material and information between Australia and Asian countries by offering opportunities for Australians to enlarge their experience of working in Asia, encouraging personal contacts, on-going communication and further projects. We encourage partnerships between Australian and Asian individuals and organisations and we also enable people to see more art and craft made by artists working now in our region.

As a national body we are very pleased to be working in partnership with an organisation such as Cairns Regional Gallery to best represent contemporary art being made primarily in Queensland. Like many countries, our culture is not homogeneous and regional differences are apparent in exhibitions from different areas. Presenting an exhibition such as *Enjoin* to audiences overseas does not offer the definitive comment on Australian culture but adds another layer to a developing understanding of contemporary Australian life and issues today.

*Enjoin* begins its life as a part of All the Best from Australia, a festival of Australian culture, sport, technology and business taking place in the Philippines in November 1998. The festival is Australia's contribution to the

celebrations marking the Centenary of Philippines' Independence in 1998 and we are very pleased to be adding our voices to the festivities.

Jenny McGregor  
Director  
Asialink

# Cairns Regional Gallery

## FOREWORD

Cairns Regional Gallery is delighted to accept the invitation to partner Asialink in an exhibition exchange between the Philippines and Australia. *Enjoin* is the first stage of that project, an exhibition of contemporary art, constituting part of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's cultural contribution to the Philippines' Centenary Celebrations in 1998. Works by Filipino artists will be exhibited in 1999 at Cairns Regional Gallery to complete the exhibition exchange.

*Enjoin* travels from Australia to Manila fully aware of the radical changes this region has undergone in the last century. As the Philippines marks one hundred years of independence from Spanish rule, *Enjoin* embodies the kinds of inquiries now universally shared by leading artists of the Asia Pacific region. These include concerns about the environment, identity, transformation, the body and the spiritual.

The exhibition emanates from Cairns, the most northern city in the geographic zone of Queensland, demonstrating Australia's shift from perceiving 'peripheral' as 'less than'. In this technological age, a region previously regarded as remote from the concentrated centres of politics and culture can now be as much part of the mainstream of cultural production as our counterparts to the south, or equally in the northern hemisphere.

The selection of artists for *Enjoin* displays the vigour of contemporary art in this state and across the border in New South Wales. Judith Kentish and Sebastian Di Mauro are artists whose work reflects a rich and poignant sense of human interaction with environment through their treatment of pure, natural materials such as sugar and cotton.

Established Queensland artist Fiona Foley continues to interpret the language of the natural world as mediated by the cultural traditions of her Fraser Island forebears. Ed Koumans offers a sharp perspective on the impact of tourism and attendant detritus. Artists Merlinda Bobis and Virginia Hilyard bring to *Enjoin* a dynamic fusion of movement and filmic vision; their work is a potent examination of identity, urban environments and transcendence.

So named in the spirit of joining together, this exhibition seeks to further ties of friendship between the people of the Asia Pacific region and Australia. In curating *Enjoin*, Ingrid Hoffmann maintained creative and harmonious collaborations with colleagues in Australia and Asia. This bridge of friendship is already under construction and I look forward to the future crossings ahead.

Alice-Anne McRobbie

Director

Cairns Regional Gallery

## INTRODUCTION

*'The world is one thing, all joined'*

Hildegard von Bingen, twelfth century abbess, philosopher, composer

Exhibition concepts often turn on one word and for *Enjoin* the word was, at first, Environment. As projects evolve, other concepts arise and 'join into' the original idea. The conceptual bridge spanning an image of the world as one (exalted, holy) thing to a biological organism, governed by physical laws, spans almost one European millennium. Today, there seems again to be a greater openness to an experience of the earth's wholeness, than during the eight-century rise of proscribed ecclesiastic dictums and later rationalist views which replaced the ecstatic expressions of the visionary abbess, Hildegard von Bingen.

*Enjoin* proceeded on the assumption that the environment is increasingly the most telling issue dominating the consciousness and necessarily, the physical survival of humanity into the twenty-first century. For artists, both the natural environment and the social one in which we interact are subjects of scrutiny. Works of art can enjoin a viewer to experience the impassioned insights of their makers.

However, 'enjoiner' can have more forceful connotations, for instance the enjoiners of colonial rule were often severe impositions on pre-existing social, political and spiritual conditions which amounted to profound outcomes for the colonised. Having survived prolonged colonialism and developing from the experience hybridised – and thereby strengthened – national identities, many countries in Asia today have much to express about cultural displacement and/or renewal. Some artists further express a conviction about the use of only unprocessed indigenous materials (banana fibre, bamboo, plants and so on) as a philosophical position. This movement in the Philippines, for example, intrinsically speaks of a reverence for nature emanating from a strong spiritual and cultural core. Viewing the last two Asia Pacific Triennial exhibitions at the Queensland Art Gallery, I

was drawn to the work of those artists who translated such conviction into images of imagination and meaning.

Hybrid identity explored by artists can be as compelling as it is complex. Merlinda Bobis presents for *Enjoin* a re-working of her epic poem, *Kantada ng Babaing Mandirigma/CANTATA of the Warrior Woman Daragang Magayon*. Live performances occur on the opening days of the exhibition but on-going imagery of her work remains on exhibition via the film installation of Virginia Hilyard. A third artform has been joined into this collaboration, namely the soundscape of Jane and Phillip Ulman. The sound screen montage interprets Bobis' Filipina and Australian meshed identities, rendered potently through her verse and movement. Hilyard threads further meaning through metaphoric urban imagery spliced into Bobis' body: the seductive terrain of a psychological, visual and aural built environment.

The three installations of Sebastian Di Mauro are linked by his use of carpet underlay. This basic material is employed by an artist mindful of purity and minimal industrial processing; it appears in the work, *Respiro*, for instance, as the ground layer supporting conical mounds of raw sugar with wells in their central core containing olive oil. Di Mauro's metaphorical reference here is to his childhood in South Johnstone, far north Queensland, where the migrant-driven industry produced mountainous cones of soft brown sugar. The nurturing safety of a Sicilian family environment is symbolised by the olive oil. Similar mid-brown tones of the carpet underlay harmonise with the sugar whilst its jute fibres likewise imply a safety born of the earth. The artist's inquiry after philosophical wholeness through the simplicity of basic materials is echoed also in his works, *Nine Books of Silence* and *Manifestations* and also stated in his comment, 'Perhaps art can make a contribution to deepening our understanding of the interrelationship between ourselves and the natural world.'

In Fiona Foley's six works under the title *DULINGBARA - People of the Nautilus Shell*, reverence for nature is an aura

which, in a primal way, displaces the seeming omnipotence of materialism in the human world. Emblems of strength and gentleness, expressed in part as her ancestral heritage, are the dingo skull and nautilus shell. The figuratively rendered skulls against coloured horizon lines leave a haunting imprint long after viewing. There is a juxtaposition of Foley's two incarnations of the symbolic nautilus shell, one natural and the other – in non-indigenous museum terms – an artefact (neck piece), appearing at first sight as the central form of an abstracted painting. Diane Moon states of Foley in the following essay, 'Her work is characterised by her determination to register the persistence of cultural memory, while retaining her artistic integrity and her individual aesthetic sense.'

The initial sensory impression of Judith Kentish's piece, *blister/sac*, is of five delicately slumped cowls with gleaming white ribs. Rows of satin stitching creating the apparent ribbed structures are in fact dense lines of insistent embroidery, the ends of which trail down to the floor in silken threads. The directness of this work taps associations of collapsing sheaths, of swathed protection, wrought in the natural world by beings just beyond it. There is mystery in the work's pleasure which may arise from its engagement with metaphysical experience. The artist herself says of an earlier series, *Silent Infestation*, '...these skins of absence act as both trace and a mould for the positioning of the individual both within the vast ordering of civilisation, and within the rustling disorder of nature, slipping into a space where language fails to signify...'

Ed Koumans' *Personal Myth* figures offer layered readings around the marketing of north Queensland's reef and rainforest where population growth is gradually displacing the region's natural values. The figures' showy heads feature discarded manufactured items alongside found objects of nature and are assembled with a blend of irony and sheer pleasure in the mimicry of eccentric human personalities. *Environmental Figures: Personal Myth* is a work the artist dubs 'serious but funny.'

Not only highly accomplished as practitioners, all the artists represented in *Enjoin* bring added personal qualities of grace and goodwill to the show. Infused with these intangibles, the exhibition aspires to the wholeness implied by Hildegard von Bingen's twelfth century statement of principle, 'The world is one thing, all joined'. This may sound utopian, in a millennial phase described by Robert Hughes as, 'the agitated and directionless end of the twentieth century...'<sup>1</sup> Yet the exhibition stands in opposition to such a perception, with the gentle enjoiner to experience the synergy of the world as one thing.

Ingrid Hoffmann

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morrell and Jane Magon, *Between Material* published by Sebastian Di Mauro 1998, p.51

<sup>2</sup> Robert Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical, Selected essays on Art and Artists* Harvill 1995, p.23

## THE AUDIO ARTISTS: Jane and Philip Ulman

Sound and sense are intimately connected, the voice being just one of many instruments in radio composition. Sound may share the evocative power of poetry and performance for an audio medium which can be both intimate and direct.

The process of making the sound work for CANTATA was a rich and fascinating experience. Merlinda's confidence in both writing and performance makes her a generous collaborator, open to experimentation and quick to explore the potential of a different medium. Transposing her text into a sound piece was rewarding for us all. We developed a performance suited to the intimacy of radio, discovering new vocal tones. Merlinda's voice, her rhythmic dancing and layers of natural and manipulated sound, suggested by her original text, transform the whole work into an audio experience, lyrical, strong and resonant.

## THE SCREEN ARTIST Virginia Hilyard

I am drawn to an idiosyncratic style of filmmaking which challenges traditional forms of narrative. My practice is based on the process of collection and montage, focusing on an exploration of personal 'history'. Space and time, both personally symbolic and publicly iconic, become metaphors for memory.

In CANTATA, I explored forms of non-linear narrative through the interface of written poetry and visual montage. I was guided by the text, whilst responding to it with my own experience of conflict, protest, loss and empowerment. My approach was to find associations and differences within the text which might trigger these feelings. I began by working with a familiar landscape — Sydney, my home, the place I can map my life onto.

I also included images from Merlinda's Australian home, Wollongong, an industrial town south of Sydney. The steelworks at night. Belching steam, flying sparks and an unearthly red glow against the black sky. I played with contrasts. The city and industry — eerie journeys on underground trains, sleek freeways, gigantic

cauldrons of molten steel — are juxtaposed with nature — swaying kelp on the sea floor, caverns, tree tops lashed by howling winds. And amongst them, the perennial body — a woman summoning the elements through dance, to arm herself for battle.

But beyond the warrior dance, a new dance unfolds in the moment of juxtaposition —

A train, rushing with the sound of water poured into a jar, becomes as fluid as the mourning chant for the victims of war.

A lullaby, accompanying the warrior dance, transposes into a vigilant song.

Bird-calls, rippling through underwater coves, conjure a winged fish or a sea-forest, which is home to burial jars of earthtones —

*Pulang halos kayumanggi, Red almost brown almost black  
halos itim — wari'y iba't ibang like several skins flushed  
laman na nagpatung-patong... under each other*

... imagining / how to be all / yet none of each

This new skin, which is 'all yet none of each' of the original landscapes, can heal the perceived fault-line between them. But, perhaps, there is no need for healing, as the gap between disparate entities could only be a construct of the gaze. And when these entities meet and invent a new space, the viewing eye might also transform and grow an ear, a palate and all its other senses, and a sensibility more keen and exhilarated.

Merlinda Bobis, 1998

## Sebastian Di Mauro

Sebastian Di Mauro's 'manifestations' offer a new incarnation of his favourite medium, carpet underlay. In a previous work Di Mauro has used underlay as a metaphor for the revealed (the hidden now exposed) with sculptural pieces that sought to critique space but more specifically form. With these underlay forms Di Mauro develops the possibilities for this seemingly unassuming medium even further, and comes even closer to something we might call immaterial sculpture, or perhaps more precisely sculpture in transformation. Indeed, the underlay forms which sit on the floor and the wall would seem to be in the process of transforming, literally taking on their prescribed forms in the temporal relationship to the viewer. Di Mauro has caught these little creatures in the act of manifesting their shape. Some of the forms might be animal or human, hovering between a distinct anthropomorphism and a minimal abstraction. We might see these suggestive forms more clearly in comparison with the sculpture of the German artist Joseph Beuys, for whom everything, art included, was in a constant state of change. Beuys declared:

*My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture, of art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone:*

*Thinking forms – how we mould our thoughts or Spoken forms – how we mould and shape the world in which we live.*

*Social Structure – how we mould and shape the world in which we live: Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone as artist.*

*That is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay drying up. Everything is in a state of change.*

We could say that this Beuysian analogy for sculpture is given form in Di Mauro's monochromatic manifestations which offer similar thoughts on what sculpture might be. While we might also make analogies to minimalism, Di Mauro's underlay animal/plants have abandoned the gestalt in favour of randomness, and in favour of theatricality which was so frowned upon by the formalist critic of minimalism, Michael Fried. Di Mauro's works demand a phenomenological appreciation while their energy lies precisely in their power for a theatrical and seemingly alchemical transformation, in their ability to transcend sculpture. Infused with humour and wit, some of the underlay forms hover between phallic icons, and sinister, organic anomalies; others offer vulvic metaphors which echo the body in its absence. One of the most startling wall pieces resembles some kind of massive, extended tongue, which is at once the familiar furry tongue of a dreadful hangover, and a sexually threatening protrusion which begs to be touched. The familiarity/recognition is heightened by the musty smell of the underlay which evokes random memories. Inevitably, the viewer feels compelled to feel the softness of the cleft underneath, participating in the all too familiar abject ritual of attraction and repulsion, drawn by a desire to want to covert these seemingly innocuous, not so innocent objects. Yet another of the manifesting sculptures resembles a nurturing bird's nest waiting for an occupant.

At their heart, these objects exist in the space between the ludicrous and the embodiment of process art itself. We might see them as post-minimal in their rhetoric, thus reminiscent of not only Beuys, but the extremely tactile work of Eva Hesse. But where Hesse favoured repetition, seriality, and process over the gestalt, there is the sense that these objects are offering something even more ephemeral and random. Di Mauro's capable handling of the underlay itself lends it a particularly aesthetic appeal, evoking Beuys' own use of felt. Felt, along with fat, was privileged in his work as natural, energy giving materials, possessing of a life force, a material which might thus be used to suggest a state that was not 'fixed and finished'. In the same way, Di Mauro's





sculptures/manifestations offer undecided possibilities, existing as random accidents beautifully and painstakingly realised. Their monochromatic exteriors belie the complex structures which make up the sculptural framework.

In keeping with his interest in the visceral and the spiritual, Di Mauro has created a series of unique 'sculptures' which take the form of sugar 'mountains', containing wells of olive oil. The small sculptures in *Respiro* exist as part of a larger installation, but are entities within themselves. Installed as a group they relate to each other rhythmically, as a sculptural narrative of the artist's biography, or indeed, a memory. Di Mauro describes how these sculptures were inspired by his childhood memories of the sugar silos in North Queensland's Mourilyan Harbour: 'At the time it seemed that the cone of sugar was thousands of feet high.' For Di Mauro as a child this memory of such an important aspect of his childhood was set. Of course the passage of time distorts the most impressive of memories. *Respiro* resembles an inversion of this embedded memory: Di Mauro is now a grown man, and now the sugar piles are smaller, though still abundant.

The olive oil, so fragrant and 'virgin', references Di Mauro's Sicilian heritage and echoes the hopes and aspirations of so many migrant families who sought the harsh rural life for the promise of a new start. The oil has a special relevance as a metaphor for healing for Di Mauro, who remembers his mother using it as an ointment for dry skin. Of course olive oil has become central to the nouveau vogue "Australian" diet. As a nation we have adopted this and so many other aspects of Italian culture that olive oil occupies a place in the collective cultural consciousness.

It is tempting to describe his compelling installations as bordering on the revelatory. This term is perhaps not too emphatic, as Di Mauro's work has long investigated the realms of the metaphysical and spiritual world in relation to his own biography. With this installation piece, Di Mauro has returned to the place of his childhood, both literally and

metaphorically. The work in *Respiro*, in the same manner as that illustrated so beautifully in *Between Material*, explores the commonality of human emotional experience, and trades on a certain comfortable familiarity.

Di Mauro's *Nine Books of Silence* offer a meditation on the spirituality of silence. These books are without text, bar the word *silenzio*, which is printed on one page in each book. The absence of text, of visual noise, combined with the silencing carpet underlay renders these tomes mute, despite the weight of knowledge they portend. The knowledge they speak of is perhaps unspeakable, best understood through silence. These *Nine Books of Silence* are all about a reverence for the unspoken, and a celebration of a shared experience. Ceremoniously laid upon the floor, the silence they echo is almost deafening and one is compelled to tread lightly as though in observance of a ritual.

Alison Kubler, 1998

<sup>1</sup>Transcribed from an untitled statement by Joseph Beuys, c.1973



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