

From Manila back to Cairns

Enjoin
Cairns Regional Gallery
Closes May 30

Review by Marina Muecke

THIS delightful exhibition of contemporary art was put together by Cairns-based artist Ingrid Hoffmann, the exhibitions development officer at Cairns Regional Gallery. It first appeared in Manila as part of Australia's contribution to the 1998 celebrations for the Philippines' centenary of independence.

While the carefully composed catalogue leaves no doubt about the depth of intelligence marking this milestone in a trail of innovative exhibitions by Hoffmann, the signature style of another Cairns-based artist stands out from the five Australian artists she selected for Enjoin. His name is Ed Koumans and his headless, bandaged, Barbie dolls have become so popular since their debut in 1994 that they are no longer sold individually.

One hundred and twenty have been set out for Enjoin, with found objects representing heads, indeed entire populations, preoccupied with consumerism and politics. Ironically, the animated figures are pinned to the wall in orderly lines but appear like people without direction, surrendering to someone else's choreography.

But these curious assemblages are not just about going-with-the-flow in contemporary society because they originate in Cairns and reflect specific things about our region and its culture. They have symbolic associations with this environment and wildlife and may seem threatening, as a mushroomy presence of unthinking people and their consumerism.

To further understand the artistic ingenuity in this artwork, find a figure that stands out for you and ask why it gets and keeps your attention. Try this exercise a second time. What does the next figure you've chosen say about you? There is such scope here to have fun seeing ourselves.



Personal myth by Ed Koumans.

Similarly, I find the sculptures in felt by Brisbane-based Sebastian Di Mauro to be hilarious.

But he is also no stranger to North Queensland since his *Respiro* art installation last year, with scoops of olive oil in raw sugar and carpet-felt underlay on the floor of Cairns Regional Gallery. *Respiro* recalled the prominence of the sugar industry and Sicilian heritage while Sebastian Di Mauro was growing up around Innisfail.

His felt objects for Enjoin are larger-than-life phallic parts and organic forms as simple as a bird's nest, tempting you to look more closely and consider more carefully. They seem innocent and attractive but are also repulsive in dry, musty-smelling and dirty-looking felt. As a consequence, they evoke strong feelings, memories and personal associations for people, thus demonstrating the process and meaning of sculpture itself.

The same material was used by Di Mauro

in *Nine Books of Silence*, evenly spaced across the floor, with felt-underlay pages open but without text. Only the word *silenzio* appears on one page of each soft sculpture, so noise seems irreverent and muteness seems highly intelligent, although books are supposed to communicate knowledge.

If you can tolerate the temporary confusion triggered by these extraordinary artforms, there's a great deal more knowledge to be gained by observation, as well as meditation on the spirituality of silence.

On the other hand, if the film of a performance and poetry by Filipino-Australian writer Melinda Bobis is silent, you need technical assistance. It should be a soundscape with spine-tingling vibrations and compatible images in a film montage.

The visual and aural sensations are set to a narrative by Bobis which is neither straightforward nor sensible. The story is based on a legend about a volcano and seems surreal but intimate and unable to be ignored. The fascination for moving images and sound in film transcends time, space and cultural boundaries, making this medium more direct and contemporary than it first appears.

Works on paper with single subjects by Fiona Foley are fixed and static by comparison but nevertheless fascinating. Perhaps because she imbues them with cultural and historical memories as a major Aboriginal Australian artist. After studying sculpture at Sydney College of the Arts, Foley was apparently drawn to the contemplative nature of conceptual art in drawings and paintings by Joseph Beuys. This explains her minimalist style but not her interest in material culture. Most of her work for Enjoin explores familiar and ceremonial objects so they appear as visual metaphors, simple but stacked with meaning.

This is not so for several pieces of slumped, squarish, voile strips with horizontal bands of satin stitch by Judith Kentish. The presence but not the meaning of her objects is paramount.