

Bi-Polar

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How did one know, how did one form the image of self and world if the possible were now impossible, if distance were nearness, length were breadth, heavy were light, cold were hot and light were dark? Perhaps the only answer lay in the birth of a new language from a new way of thought.

Janet Frame¹

For its debut at the Venice Biennale New Zealand presents two artists, Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson, in a combined project *Bi-Polar*. The exhibition title refers to ideas of duality and opposition. On one level it refers to global divide and the presentation of art from the Southern Hemisphere in a Northern Hemisphere artistic forum. The title also refers to distinctions between the two artists presented, such as the fact that one is male and one is female. Most particularly *Bi-Polar* echoes both artists' exploration of boundary conditions and binary oppositions that underpin the sense of self within contemporary culture. Both artists allude to aspects of psychological failure, absurdity and contradiction that are inherent within concepts of the modern world.

In his installation Robinson considers a number of philosophical and scientific dichotomies. He positions formally discrete objects and prints within the space. Included is a model of a stealth bomber, a stack of lacquered sheets formed from the negative space described by the numeral zero, wall prints written in computer code showing fields of ones and zeros and models of expanding universes that are in the process of begetting further parallel universes. These objects and coded texts refer to models of the universe and theories of existence expounded by Alighieri Dante, Jean-Paul Sartre and Stephen Hawking, amongst others, to provoke a meditation on the paradoxical relationship between 'being' and 'nothingness'.

By comparison Fraser transforms the space with an integrated array of fabrics, veils and canopies. Eleven discrete portraits are set within the space not unlike the way the Stations of the Cross are placed in church architecture. They variously depict the artist and an adolescent boy in progressive stages of a narrative. These portraits tell a multi-layered story of repression and reconciliation. The tableau alludes to issues concerned with sickness and health as well as social and psychological disorder. Yet, despite the low-life grittiness of her narrative, her characters are formed out of luxurious fabrics and dressed in the high style

¹ Janet Frame *The Carpathians* Vintage New Zealand, Random House New Zealand, 1988, p101

of leading fashion designers such as *Comme des Garçons*, *Prada* and *Moschino*. While their approaches are formally distinct, nevertheless, both artists activate the space as a theatre of unstable relationships.

Fraser and Robinson are two of New Zealand's most international artists. Both regularly exhibit in major international exhibitions and biennales of contemporary art. Robinson and Fraser also share ancestry. Of European descent, they are both also Maori. Their past work has referenced the indigenous Maori culture of New Zealand. Yet both have developed a layered international language, fully conversant with multivalent contexts of contemporary art. Maori references in their work have in the past led to both artists being included in exhibitions concerned with identity. Both artists have come to resist association with identity politics, which they see as limiting the understanding of the many contexts they address. The installations presented in Venice *A Demure Portrait of the artist strip searched* by Fraser and *Divine Comedy* by Robinson, draw on a wealth of European references from Marcel Duchamp to Albert Einstein. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect a Maori accent in their work. This tension and intermingling between Maori and international contexts is another layer of reference suggested by the title *Bi-Polar*.

Fraser and Robinson are distinctive because both draw on multiple cultural and philosophical contexts. Yet there are differences between the artists. The anxious interplay between contexts they explore has seemingly taken them in opposing directions in the installations produced for *Bi-Polar*. Fraser's installation is figurative, whereas Robinson's work is comparatively abstract. Fraser uses soft, malleable materials, while Robinson's materials are hard and hard-edged. Her elements are linked unlike Robinson's, which appear disconnected. These distinctions, nevertheless, are primarily formal and underscore contradictions and binary relations scrutinized by each artist.

Robinson uses the stealth bomber, which flies undetected by radar, to interrogate the opposition of something and nothing. Such oppositions inform Robinson's interest in evolution, primitivism, creationism and quantum physics. He pits constructs of culture and existence against each other, to ponder questions of universality. The result is a reflection on failure and the anxiety of existence, on meaning and non-meaning. Fraser too has an interest in failure. She links culture, science and fashion to meditate on personal violation and cultural repression. By reference to psychosis she interrogates the possibility that cultural trauma can result in inherited biological and psychological failure. Both artists link failure to the closed boundaries of contemporary art. Yet both explore opportunities for resistance. By eluding classification and engaging contradiction they open a new

horizon, the potential to speak meaningfully across the divide.