

SYDNEY

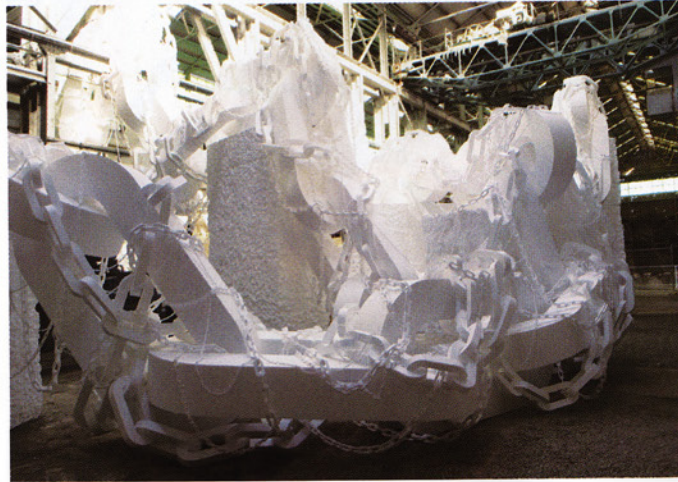
18th Biennale of Sydney

VARIOUS VENUES

Globalization and its consequences are standard biennial fare. What made the “18th Sydney Biennale: all our relations” different was its sheer optimism. Artistic directors Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster clearly wanted to give audiences an experience of shared communicative spaces largely unburdened by prevailing, doom-laden views of our current state. Critics have trashed their vision for being too big, too unfocused, too *cuddly*. All of which is true, but overlooks the show’s ambition. De Zegher and McMaster attempted a huge and risky piece of curatorial orchestration, with each venue funneling viewers from swooping, bird’s-eye examinations of globalization’s impact to intimate, sensorial encounters with individual works. As a result, Sydney itself—a city shaped by histories of crime, immigration, the colonial maltreatment of indigenous people, and ecological exploitation—became a central character in this extravagant piece of art-theater.

It worked, in pockets. But unfortunately, the journey was often disrupted by insistent reiteration: an ever-present agenda that kept getting in the way of the works themselves. This was clearest in the Art Gallery of New South Wales leg of the show, starting with the grating wordplay of its title, “In Finite Blue Planet,” and continuing with its reversion to obvious themes: migration, environmental degradation, displacement. The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia’s exhibition, “Possible Composition,” saw artists reflecting on fresher themes of cultural and material fragmentation, but it largely avoided tricky questions about the consequences of global fracturing and dislocation, favoring a delicate, oddly monochromatic approach (a lot of whites, creams, and yellows). As a result, the occasional dissonant moments stood out, such as Judith Wright’s installation *A Journey*, 2011, a creepy procession of figures constructed from ready-made materials—masked figures in canoes, mannequins wearing tutus, a child looking back from an ancient wheelchair—in a moving reflection on the death of the artist’s child when just a few days old.

Increasingly, though, the success of the Sydney Biennale is measured by what happens on Cockatoo Island rather than in the event’s institutional venues: Dotted with the dilapidated remains of prisons and factories, the setting ensures that any intervention can be infected by Sydney’s violent past. In New Zealander Peter Robinson’s *Gravitas Lite*, 2012, for instance, huge links of polystyrene chains were threaded over defunct machinery and through a dank industrial building. Familiar from previous works by Robinson, the chain motif drew new meanings from the context; nodding to the island’s former status as a prison, embodying the biennale’s theme of connectivity, and, strangest of all, somehow evoking a sublime mountainous landscape. Nina Canell and Robin Watkins’s *And So Entangled in Their Neighbour’s Boughs*, 2012, had a similarly alchemical capacity. Located in the island’s powerhouse, Canell’s fluorescent tubes were draped over old electricity generators, while Watkins’s low-frequency recordings of electricity and electrical equipment on the island hummed and clicked. The installation engaged the history of its venue even as it explored the Victorian conflation of electrical and supernatural activity, dancing with Cockatoo Island’s ghosts.



Peter Robinson,
Gravitas Lite, 2012,
polystyrene,
dimensions variable.
From the 18th
Biennale of Sydney.

Tucked away in a circular storage building, Bahar Behbahani and Almagul Menlibayeva’s *Ride the Caspian*, 2011, provided a more tangential connection with the island’s mottled past. It’s a surreal work shot in the desolate oil fields of the Kazakh Steppes, in which a woman with Central Asian features wearing a bikini, high heels, and a fox pelt on each arm performs a bizarre fertility ritual. The post-Soviet landscape created a parallel with Cockatoo Island, similarly scarred by cruelty and industry. The piece also pointed to one of the biennale’s strengths: that de Zegher and McMaster hadn’t fallen back on biennale stalwarts, but had found and commissioned new voices. Their overall view of globalization was far too sweet, but these rare moments of abrasion, in which past, present, and a precarious future were forced into uncomfortable conversations, gave the biennale much-needed bite: a kernel of promise, and a gentle disruption of the usual art-world order of things.

—Anthony Byrt