

My Australia

Shiau-Peng Chen

What Is Australia?

In speaking about Australia objectively, Australia is geographically located in the Southern and Eastern Hemispheres, between the South Pacific and the India Ocean. It ranks sixth in area among the world's nations. Politically, Australia is a federal system, a constitutional monarchy with a cabinet of ministers. Economically, Australia is one of the world's most highly developed and affluent countries; her citizens enjoy a high standard of living. Culturally, Australia is a mixture of two centuries of British colonization, a baptism of Pan Pacific culture, as well as wave upon wave of Southern European and Asian immigrants.

If you were to ask, "What is Australia?" There would be a multitude of different interpretations and responses. To Australian Aboriginals, Australia is their land; to a white person born and bred in Australia, Australia is his country; to a surfer Australia a surfing Mecca to which one must make at least one pilgrimage in a lifetime; to a Taiwanese child who has never visited Australia, it may very well be a land where kangaroos roam rampant.

What is Australia to me? In February of 2007, I departed Taiwan's Taoyuan International Airport for doctoral studies in Melbourne, Australia. Before that time, I had never visited Australia. I remember the scene in Melbourne on the day I landed. Nothing was what I had imagined it would be. I was filled with curiosity about my new environment. I was a sponge soaking up nutrients in this vast container that is Australia. When I left Australia three years later, I had a new perspective on Australia. It was no longer just an "objective" label. On the contrary, it now held a substantial emotional significance to me. It had become my Australia.



"My Australia" Exhibition View I



"My Australia" Exhibition View II

My Australia

In the time I lived in Australia, my work went through a notable transformation. Discussions of my previous work, their forms and styles, no longer felt satisfying. They seemed too removed from reality, which is to say, the realities of my life. I began using my newly adopted city as a theme in my work, I used people, events and objects significant to the city to develop my work. The maps that appear in many of my works are a good example. My objective in these new works are not to represent the physical image of the city, rather, I wanted to express the link between myself and my living environment.

I use titles to strengthen the direct link between the work and myself. I use the possessive pronoun "my" in titles to reflect a specific observation about my life in that location; for instance, "My Melbourne" (2008), "My Brunswick" (2008), "My Batchelor" (2009), "Australian Art Circles I – My Circle" (2010), "Australian Art Circles II – Their Circle" (2010), "My Osborne" (2010), etc.

In the days since returning to Taiwan, I often think about the meaning of those three years of life in Australia, and felt that I could create a work to commemorate this past. I also thought about the fact that, as a doctoral student, with limited time (with pressures to complete my studies), and limited living space (required to reside close to school), the people, events and objects I encountered were necessarily limited. These experiences are naturally not of an "objective" Australia. I identify the three years I spent in Melbourne, and specifically, the human experience I encountered, as My Australia. As with the works I've listed above, this work expresses a link between my self and my life experiences, and so I've titled this work "My Australia."

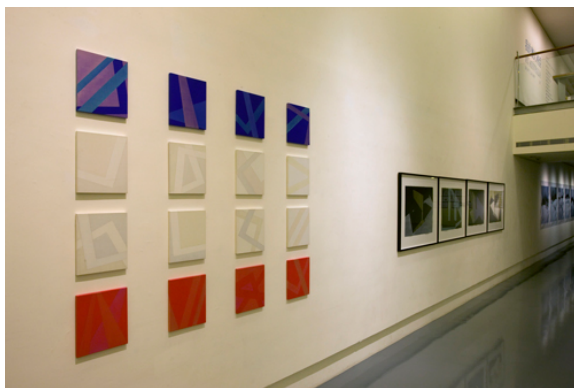
Curatorship as Creative Act

After the concept of “My Australia” came to me, I began contemplating how I would complete this work. I wanted to challenge myself to do something new. I contemplated whether I could create “My Australia” from the position of a curator. The word “curator” has a long history in the English language. Curators were present early on in the Western art tradition; they were usually professionals who worked at museums or galleries. However, in my personal experience of arts education, I was not aware of this term until after I graduated from university (1999), and the first curators I became aware of were specifically the independent curators of that era who planned and directed large-scale visual art exhibitions.¹

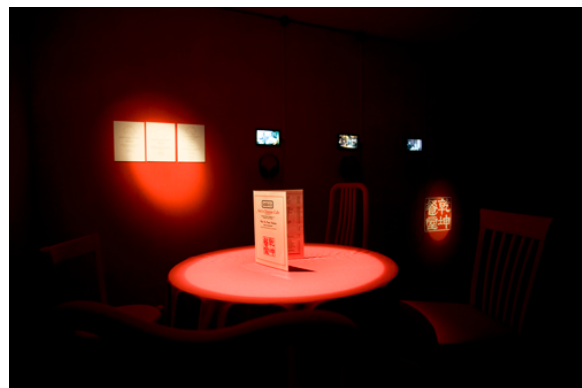
The conditions under which I noticed the emergence of curators on the scene reflect changes in the type of challenges confronting artists and indeed, changes in “art” itself. The issues could include: the tools of the trade – along with the changing times, the painting materials traditionally used by artists have given way to working with computer and other technological media; textual narrative – artists prior to contemporary times worked under the patronage of figures of religious, political, or financial elite, and as such, writing introductions about their work was not a necessity, contemporary artists cannot avoid such textual descriptions of their work (this phenomenon is a reflection of how contemporary art is a product of ideology rather than purely an expression of superior skill); where in the 18th century Kant questioned ideas about beauty and the essence of art, in the 20th century, Duchamp questioned how art itself could be defined.

What piques my curiosity is this: if a curator decides the theme and content of an exhibition, then what is the artist’ role? I believe that on the one hand, curators may have a different professional background and perspective on the interpretation of a work of art from that of an artist; and on the other hand, the emergence of the curator may be seen as a most extreme expression of Duchamp’s concept of the appropriation of ready-made objects. Today, artists no longer use concepts of the color wheel to mix colors, but instead, find readymade colors at the hardware store or on the computer screen. Neither do composers use the concept of the musical scale to write tunes on a score, but instead create and edit readymade sound products using recording devices and composing software. In the same way, a curator may very well use artists (and their works) as readymade objects, and become an artist themselves.

I decided to complete the work “My Australia” by usurping the role of a curator. I appropriated another curator and eleven artists. I met the other curator, another Taiwanese artist studying in Australia, when we both exhibited our work in Melbourne. The eleven artists were artist friends that we met while living in Australia. The exhibition includes works by these artists that best fit the theme of this exhibition, and the venue for the exhibition will be the Kuandu Museum of Fine Art, with which I am familiar from having exhibited there many times previously (one solo show and four group exhibitions). My curator, my artists, and my exhibition space: Everything here is “mine.”



“My Australia” Exhibition View III



“My Australia” Exhibition View IV

Whose Australia?

¹ The first person to translate the English term “curator” into Chinese as “策展人” (literally: exhibition planner) was Victoria Yung-Chi Lu in her essay “How does the Chinese curator internationalize” (中國策展人何以“國際”?), where Lu and four other curators discuss their view on the role of the independent curator and where she gives her reasons for translating the term such. See: <http://big5.china.com.cn/gate/big5/art.china.cn/huihua/2008-05/04/content_2201990.htm>.

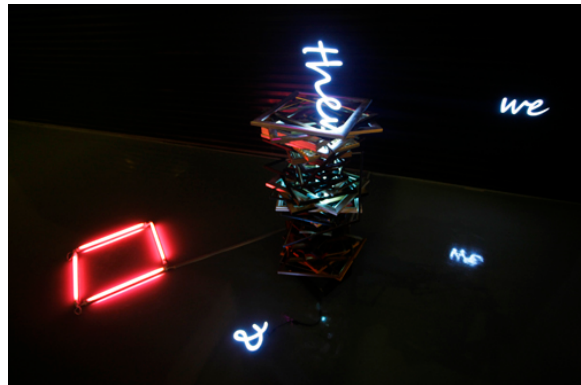
But ultimately, whose Australia is it? Judging from Australian history, and the appearance of the “Stolen Generation” and the “White Australia Policy”, this is obviously a serious question.² The use of a possessive pronoun in the exhibition “My Australia” provides a subtext – here are two Taiwanese curators who’ve lived in Australia for several years and eleven Australian artists of different ethnicities who attempt to provide a broad interpretative space that questions not only whether this Australia is that of the curator or of the artists, but also whether this ownership is foreign or indigenous. When we say “My Australia”, whose Australia is it?

Through painting, photography, installation, videography and textual work, artists in the exhibition interpret their individual relationship to cultural experiences, their concerns for specific social issues, their self-identity, and most importantly how they define “My Australia.” Each artist presents a different point of entry: through history, culture, social, geography, pure imagination, or personal experience – they express a broad spectrum. The two curators did not provide specific restrictions or requirements regarding the content with the aim that the artists will “objectively” present the image of Australia seen with their minds’ eye.

There are similarities between the question of “Whose Australia is it?” and the relationship between the artist and the work once it is completed, versus the subsequent relationship between the art work and its viewer – though the exhibition cannot provide a definitive answer to these questions, it can lead to meaningful discussion. Similarly, the exhibition “My Australia” does not attempt to answer the question of whose Australia it is, but rather, hopes to provide a starting point for contemplation both for the artists and for the audience.



“My Australia” Exhibition View V



“My Australia” Exhibition View VI

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My Australia

1 July - 7 August 2011

Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei National University of the Arts, Taipei, Taiwan

Curators:

Shiau-Peng Chen

Meng-Shu You

Artists:

Samara Adamson-Pinczewski

Juma Adi

Daniel Argyle

Clara Chow

Jayne Dyer

Joy Hirst

Shoshanna Jordan

Polixeni Papapetrou

Laurens Tan

David Thomas

Stephen Wickham

² The majority white Australian government instituted “Assimilation Policies” from 1869 to 1969, where aboriginal children were forcibly taken from their families and raised among Caucasian Australians. This generation of aboriginal children who have lost their cultural identity is often referred to as the “Stolen Generation.” “White Australia” is the common term for Australian government immigration policies between 1901 and 1973 which restricted the immigration of non-whites into Australia.