

STRANGERS IN THE LAND

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Outside Mildura there is a bare hillside scarred by a deep crack that runs vertically up towards the horizon line. This is the work of nature, in its down cycle of drought, disintegration and erosion, but it has prompted a counterwork. Across the serpentine line of the rift, polished wooden rails have been set at regular intervals, like sutures. Or the rungs of a ladder. And balanced at right angles to these rails, as if in the process of climbing them, are a series of animal bones, their stark whiteness catching the glare of the sun. '*Terra Infirma*,' a site-specific installation created by Sue Kneebone in 2001, is an example of how an artist can capture metaphorical associations without consciously setting out to do so.

One of the legacies of colonization is a deep psychological rift in the settlers' relationship to the land. Possession might be nine tenths of the law in European tradition, but occupying the country in military, economical and political terms proves, over time, to be only a minor aspect of entitlement. As an introduced species, settlers inherit a compromised relationship to the earth and the beings it has supported through a deeper time scheme. Colonists and their descendants are, quite literally, not fully naturalized citizens, and the question of when they – or we – might become so passes from one generation to the next with a slow burn. Some questions call for investigation and answer, leading towards resolution. Others haunt, defying the impulse to resolve them and unraveling whatever logic we try to apply in the process.

Questions of the first kind were to the fore in the initial phase of colonization, as explorers and scientists set out to expand the terrain of European knowledge. Arriving in Australia, they saw themselves not as strangers, but as travellers in a strange land filled with alien species requiring investigation. One of the first tasks was to gather specimens and classify them to determine their placement in an extended cognitive map of the known world. Much of Sue Kneebone's work is derived from a view of this project as itself a curious ethnographic phenomenon. The images and installations in *Dark Manners* are informed by a 2012 trip to the UK to study nineteenth century collections of anatomical specimens at the Hunterian Museum in London and the Anatomy Museum at Edinburgh University. Having spent some time in such places myself, I remember being disconcerted by the mismatch of form and texture: the geometry of the display cases with their polished wood and glass, against the matted fur and porous bone of the objects inside. In *Dark Manners*, fur, feather and bone are released from containment, and set in relationship to highly crafted items of mahogany and brass. The works are combinations of objects belonging to incommensurate orders of reality, marked out in visual terms as the rough and the smooth, the jagged and the straight, the frayed edge and the curvilinear outline.

To the colonial eye, what made sense of this incongruity was a hierarchical schema that supported processes of aesthetic and cognitive evaluation. When all that sense-making apparatus is stripped away, leaving the objects no context but each other, they acquire a strange equilibrium through physical interdependencies. Balance and equilibrium are subtle visual themes in Kneebone's work. This is overt in '*Oeconomy of Nature*' through the presence of a brass scale bearing segments of animal skeleton as counterweights, and in '*Overtones*,' where leg bones prop up the polished lids of two finely carved display tables.

The orders of logic belonging to function and display are also confused, especially in the works involving wall mounts. '*Harmful Benefits*' has the silhouette of an Edwardian gentleman with a length of three dimensional metal pipe extending from his mouth, curling like a hookah and with a set of levers half way along, but instead of leading to a tobacco bowl, the pipe is attached to a brass disc on the wall.

Such games of anomaly and dissociation are reminiscent of Surrealism, as is the sense of objects leading the way in the composition of a work, but the exhibits in *Dark Matters* offer more restrained exercises in estrangement. The transition towards an aftermath of colonialism is not to be brought about through aesthetic revolution. It is rather about a process of unraveling towards the uncanny.

Ideas of the Colonial and Post-colonial uncanny have been circulating since around the turn of the millennium, with varying lines of interpretation. In the Australian context, an anthology of essays edited by Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs explores the post-colonial condition as a state of ambivalence and contradiction in which 'a certain unboundedness' is making itself evident in the settler relationship to the land.

It is the settlers who are strangers, and whatever the vast spiritual and psychic potencies of the land, the vestiges of colonial presence have their own uncanny resonances. Sue Kneebone's awareness of this is intensified by the knowledge that her ancestors were amongst the first free settlers to arrive in Adelaide in 1836. In one of the many reversals of perspective that characterize her work, she shows European figures

and forms invaded by native species. *'For Better For Worse,'* a photomontage work created in 2010, is based on the wedding photograph of her great grandparents, whose heads are morphed into bestial anonymity. The groom is encumbered with massive curling rams horns, and the bride in her exquisite white lace gown has horns rising, mantilla style, above her head.

'Judicious Manners,' included in the present exhibition, is a figure dressed in a black tail coat and waistcoat, with emu feathers sprouting around the collar and cuffs and an emu claw reaching across the breast to grasp a lace handkerchief. Two or three generations ago, a gallery visitor might automatically have read the intrusion of emu presence as bizarre and uncanny; now perhaps it is the other way about, and the European costume strikes us as a freakish excrescence. Gelder and Jacobs do not see any realistic prospect of synthesis between aboriginal and settler lines of cultural heritage, and synthesis is not what is presented in Kneebone's figure. At the same time, there is the suggestion that these different orders of being cannot be kept apart, and the suited colonial presence is not strong enough to hold its own in a potent natural world. European dreams of individual identity are left to float like the pale heads in Kneebone's *'The Nervous Art of Science,'* hauntings from another life.

Non-indigenous Australians are more porous, less definite in outline than they have imagined themselves to be, though artists and writers in previous generations have seen through the illusion of definition to the pathos of the white man's alien figure in the landscape. Sydney Nolan paints Ned Kelly as a hollow puppet, almost dissolving into the surrounding elements of earth and sky. The explorers in Patrick White's *Voss* lose their lifeline to the civilized world as they move beyond the point of no return into the great outback, where they are reduced to nothing but skin and bone.

The works in *Dark Manners* are also born of this kind of insight. They are the bearers of questions that refuse to be answered, and as such are part of a trend in the visual arts that has been growing unobtrusively over the past decade. In asking again what it means to be 'post colonial,' Kneebone is moving away from the polemics of late twentieth century theoretical debate towards forms of enquiry that are less verbally controlled, less deliberate and less willful. Voluntary disavowal of colonial presumptions is only one aspect of a transitional process which involves recognizing that will and intention – the driving principles of colonial outreach – are themselves no longer determining factors in Australian identity. There has been too much polemic about the post-colonial condition, too much verbiage, too much accusation and counter-accusation. What is signaled in this exhibition is a change of mood and mode, towards a poetics of the colonial aftermath.

¹K.D.Gelder and J.M.Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: sacredness and identity in a postcolonial nation* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 138.