

CRITERIA

Critical Response
by Yuna Lee

For the artists in *Undercurrent*, the path towards an abundant, just, and liberating future is, necessarily, paved with refusal. They enact strategies of resistance as it manifests in artistic practice, moving with, against, between, and beyond the dominant structures they collectively inhabit. The works in the exhibition—whilst drawn from individual, lived experiences—do not exist as singular, contained movements. Together, they illuminate a web of struggle that exists beneath what lies on the surface. What tethers each artist is a clear refusal to settle for the conditions which maintain broad social and economic inequities along race, gender, and class lines. Whether within colonial institutions, neoliberal infrastructures, or carceral systems, the exhibition reveals how these artists choose to exercise their agency in order to reshape their desires, reorient their hopes, and reimagine new possibilities.

Placed at Pari's entrance, *Bell's Theorem* is a staunch reminder to visitors of the perpetual violence of the colony on Indigenous peoples, whose sovereign lands we are standing on. Richard Bell has long used satire and humour as necessary devices for truth telling to reveal how the forces of erasure, appropriation, and exploitation are systematised well beyond the art industry. Reciting passages from his 2002 polemic [Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art—It's a white thing!](#), Bell observes direct parallels between ongoing white control of Aboriginal identity within a commodified 'Aboriginal Art' market, with the ongoing dispossession and paternalism faced by Indigenous communities

post-Native Title legislation. His presence in the exhibition is a crucial acknowledgement of the history of extractive practices which continue to be upheld and maintained by a nation state founded on Indigenous dispossession. Bell's practice can be located within a lineage of Indigenous activism as far back as 1938, and resistance to ongoing colonisation for the last 235 years in so-called Australia. It is this guiding and grounding politics of refusal through which we enter *Undercurrent*, and which threads together the works in the exhibition.

While *Bell's Theorem* relies on Bell's firm presence to unsettle the constructed imaginary of 'Australia', Carolyn Craig employs a much more discreet approach. The black-and-white footage captures the descending smoke of the 2019/20 bushfires from the windscreen of Craig's car as she evacuates Lithgow. Mesmerising in its haunting and hazy quality, Craig's sense of enclosure from the fires acknowledges her own history of detention while also considering the lack of bodily agency given to the incarcerated body. What remains in the absence of Craig's body is the ghostly trace of capitalism's excess.

Where Craig's body is deliberately subdued and made implicit to consider the lack of economic and social value relegated to the incarcerated body, the presence of a defiant body is critical for Leen Rieth. Six vignettes offer an embodied approach to the reconstruction and representation of self against cis-heteronormative structures that govern, commodify, and erase trans

and gender-nonconforming subjectivities. Where autotheory offers Rieth the tools for 'affirmation and futurity, autonomy and self-determination', the return to ancestral languages and knowledges offers Jasmine Greenwood the strength to build her resistance. Pre-colonial Pasifika navigators created maps out of natural materials using their memories of the stars, birds, ocean swells, wind patterns, and cloud formations. Using bamboo, twine, and sea shells to create a counter-map of her hometown Granville, Greenwood subverts colonial methods of cartography and its imposing of borders. Counter-mapping operates here as spatial and emotional tools that are inextricably tied to the identity and politics of Western Sydney.

This attempt to hold space to simultaneously be seen and deny a gaze, is a recurring thread in *Undercurrent*. Johanna Ng positions her photography on par with American photographer Saul Leiter, in a clever bid to claim ownership over established ways of seeing. Using methods of trickery to question the authority of the canon, Ng leaves viewers to decide who or what determines a photograph's perceived value. Bonnie Huang refers to neoclassical and baroque architectural and artistic styles to similarly dismantle idealised images of power. Using drag as a medium to deconstruct notions of masculinity, Huang inserts—and asserts—themselves as the central figure/s of historical portraits. Alongside spray-painted gold decor, dislodged trinkets and trophies, Huang attempts to find the languages—both materially and conceptually—for agency and self-representation within gendered hierarchies of power.

For Amber Hammad, subverting patriarchal modes of representation and misrepresentation of Muslim women's bodies is central to her practice. Hammad denies the satisfaction of a male or imperial gaze by using pixelation and the performance of stripping to contend with ideas surrounding the visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility of Muslim women's bodies.

Returning to *Bell's Theorem*, if we consider this a provocation, a call to action—to "hope less, **do** more" as Bell puts it—the Blue Mountains Shelter Artist Group Collective demonstrate how we might collectivise to envision more equitable futures. For the artists

in BMSAGC, art has provided a meaningful vehicle for building solidarity in shared experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity, and for raising community awareness on the growing housing crisis in the region. The formation of the Land Trust was a community-led initiative born out of a need to create a sustainable, affordable, and secure housing solution amid increasingly unaffordable housing with the surge of Airbnb investment properties. Community Land Trusts propose an alternative housing solution grounded in shared over private ownership. The terms of lease and ownership is determined entirely by the current and evolving needs of a particular community. In the face of continual government neglect and failure, BMSAGC signal towards grassroots organising as the key to sustained social and material change.

Far from settling—or what is deemed right or respectable—the artists in *Undercurrent* enact gestures of refusal to imposed order to ultimately pave way for new futures. For some, refusal means truth telling, institutional critique, counter-mapping, or parody. It manifests as performance or grassroots activism; in language, and in being together. Like undercurrents in bodies of water, they gather and flow furiously to reveal the truths that lie in between, above, and below the surface. They are forces to be reckoned with.

Published on the occasion of *Undercurrent*, exhibited at Pari from 18.06.23–13.08.23. *Undercurrent* was curated by Celine Cheung, Naomi Segal and Tian Zhang. The exhibition featured works from Richard Bell, Blue Mountains Shelter Artist Group Collective, Carolyn Craig, Jasmine Greenwood, Amber Hammad, Bonnie Huang, Johanna Ng and Leen Rieth. Designed by Celine Cheung.