

Review the Gay Museum:

Extract from Bec Deans review of the Gay Museum in Realtime 14.3.2003

...Promotion of the rest of the visual arts festival, besides Patricia Piccinini's MCA Travelling Exhibition, Call of the Wild registered as mere blips in the Festival program. Yet the decline of high-profile international art stars this year allowed local work to shine through. Two curatorial projects that focussed on marginalised practices and histories in WA emerged as two of the most important exhibitions to be staged in recent years. These projects were The Gay Museum, curated by local artist and historian, Jo Darbyshire, and South West Central: Indigenous art from South Western Australia 1833 - 2002, curated by Brenda L Croft with Janda Gooding for the Art Gallery of WA.

In The Gay Museum, Darbyshire utilised the design logic of contemporary museums by splitting the exhibition into sub-headings including, STEREOTYPES, INVISIBILITY, UNNATURAL PASSIONS, AIDS, BEATS, WOMEN'S LIBERATION, VICE, DRAG and CHANGE. Street language, colloquialisms, slang and insults were intermingled with the language of taxonomy, of classification systems, provenance and arcane museum-speak to discuss the fluid histories of gay, lesbian and transgender activity in WA over the last hundred years. This borderless approach to language was carried through into the presentation of collected material in traditional museum cases. Darbyshire gathered costumes, photographs, quotes, magazines, videos, club and personal memorabilia from members of Perth's gay and lesbian community, and married these with clothing, artefacts, newspaper articles, wildlife and mineral specimens from museum and library collections. The relational placement of objects created often humorous (and painful) visual and symbolic narratives from these disparate and multiple sources. Through her appropriation and re-contextualisation, Darbyshire identified the absence of a strong material history, and the manifest tendency of a community towards "self-censorship" as a survival tactic.

The first vitrine, placed beneath the title SODOMY provided a bold and unflinching entrance statement to the exhibition. It contained a Squid and Arca floating in formaldehyde, and antiquated Spirit Level, a Police Truncheon c. 1842 - 77, a 2001 Letter from Peter Foss (then Shadow Attorney General), and two Mirror Balls, specimens of pyrite, iron disulphate. The letter, an official response to a community member lobbying the repeal of sodomy legislation contained two lines that were so unbelievable, I had to read them again (and again) to fully comprehend their meaning,

"We do have a duty to recognise vulnerability and take reasonable measures to protect it. We do not consider it appropriate that law should permit sodomising of our young people".

With the looming shadow of ignorance acknowledged as ever present within the exhibition, The Gay Museum was above all things celebratory and profoundly moving. I was particularly intrigued to read about the 1940's murder-suicide of two ill-fated lesbian lovers on Perth's foreshore, and their passion for motorbikes. These articles were presented alongside a 1920's bike, a loaned Harley Davidson and an enlarged photograph of one of Pride Festival's immensely popular Dykes on Bikes who lead the parade down the streets of Northbridge each year.