Transplantation: a sense of place and culture

Exhibition Review

Transplantation: a sense of place and culture
HR Gallop Gallery, 31st October – 22nd November, 2013
reviewed by Christopher Orchard

In a 1994 International Cultic Studies Association review of Robert Lifton's The Protean Self, Rev. Walter Debold lists six fundamental questions raised or hypothesised by Lifton, the most relevant to analysing Transplantations: A Sense of Place and Culture is that; ‘We are cultural animals for whom the resources of culture are ingredient and not merely accessory to human thought’ [1]. Since impermanence and knowledge of our own transience is one of the greatest factors influencing our psychological well being, the generation of complex cultural systems, experimental psychologist Robert Lifton argues is an obvious psychological response. The knowledge that we are to die is crucial to the sense of self and with this comes a need for acceptance or membership within a cultural institution, or institutions. Subsequently this need manifests in perpetuating a fundamental human requisite to maintain culture and the sense of the symbolic immortality. Rev. Walter Debold describes this by saying that; ‘Culture is inescapable from symbolization’ [2].

The generation of contemporary jewelry pieces in Transplantation: a Sense of Place and Culture is a necessary part of that basic human desire for durable artifacts that supports our perception of cultural longevity, and the longevity of the artist’s sensitivity of self. A core component in this artifact creation is the individual works capacity to borrow from, build upon and articulate complex biographical and autobiographical narratives in three dimensional design forms. These narratives are, contrary to the artifacts sense of permanence, in constant flux. As Debold articulates beautifully; ‘Our human thinking consists of a continual creation and re-creation of images and forms.... Our symbolization of self focuses on our own narrative, a life story that is constantly re-created’[3]. This constant re-creation is perhaps one of the nicer elements touched on in the exhibition in that all works, at all times, feel to be partly reflected of a carbon-copy European culture, yet seem perfectly and reservedly out of place. Rather than being works transplanted in to a body that accepts the forms willingly, the forms feel like a true cultural transplantation, out of the viewers field of normalcy, and perhaps then the titles use of the word ‘sense’ is the correct softening such transplantations require.

I want to pause on this word ‘sense’ for some time, as it is an important to differentiate we are not to see a complete transplantation, as such a thing would never work, but to feel a sensation of it. We are to understand that some nostalgia or shared culture might be innate, and that these are the aspects of self on exhibition. Blogger Ralph Moore once wrote that time afforded to us as humans is not enough to explain two mysteries: ‘the mystery of life’ and ‘the mystery of ourselves’, it is precisely these two questions that are raised during transplantation, as each work forces a look inwards to consider our own transplantations, be they successful or not in our own ongoing narratives. We should on all occasions consider the transitions in narrative between truth and fictions, grand-narratives and small movements in time.

Each work as a narrative construct becomes representative of singular accidental corollaries between maker and viewer, and between cultural narratives and symbolic systems. The act of authorship in any of these works is a kind of memento mori and a deliberate act of authorship and extension of our mortality. As viewer is again only presented disconnected emotional content due to its large detachment between author and observing groups we can also use the work to question authorship in transplanted cultural contexts, and like the protean self, the work of the cultural artefact and its meaning is continuously updated, changed, edited and selectively restructured. The work is an extension or externalization of the physical self, put on display to be considered, and this again is one of the exhibitions great successes. In all works a level of narrative consideration takes place, a level of self-fluidity and a degree of cultural reflectivity. It is in many ways, a microcosm for the transplanted British Empire, at once the same, and entirely different.

The work continues to tour and is well worth viewing if you have the opportunity.

About the reviewer

Christopher Orchard is a Lecturer in Photography and interdisciplinary researcher in the School of Communications and Creative Industries at Charles Sturt University. Christopher’s research draws from a wide field of discourse on landscape heath, natural resource management, trauma
studies, terror management theory and broad art theory and culture to generate transdisciplinary dialogue on landscape issues utilising practice-led research methodologies.

[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.