

Frontier Imaginaries (No.1 Frontier Brisbane)
No Longer at Ease
 Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
The Life of Lines
 QUT Art Museum, Brisbane

Frontier Imaginaries has the scope, breadth of ideas, and ambition of a Biennale. This does not relate to the exhibition's size *per se* (although it is unusual in that it spans two institutional venues in Brisbane), but more the breadth of its historical and geographical conceptual reach. The 'frontier' is a concept that curator Vivian Zihel has pursued in her work for some years, and she expects to occupy at least another three, with further 'editions' to be exhibited in Jerusalem and the Netherlands in late 2016, and into 2017.

Her understanding of the term frontier extends beyond its dictionary definition (which spans the fairly prosaic 'border') to encompass 'extreme limit'.¹ The frontier has particular meaning that Zihel identifies in the 'new' 19th century horizons of the United States (and the Wild West) and Australia, where the incoming white colonisers wreaked violence on lands, peoples, ecologies and existing cultural systems, such that devastating consequences continue. What is new is her extension of the frontier's impact into economic relationships. She said, 'The idea of the frontier can dramatise basically six hundred years of the development of cash/money relations, and what that has meant for the lives of people and ecologies in many places in the world'.²

Zihel is Brisbane-born, but has pursued overseas curatorial interests in recent years. The opportunity to develop Frontier Imaginaries emerged from the Institute of Modern Art's (IMA's) Curatorial Fellowship (funded by the Australia Council) and allowed her to 'bridge the spaces of my professional worlds'.³ There is a breadth of collaboration in this project, and the sharing of her own interests with the participating artists is one she acknowledges early. Its holistic ambition was extended into exhibition design and branding. Collaborations with architects Kevin O'Brien and Claire Humphreys see the IMA spaces perforated, with the 'clearing' of the white gallery spaces opened through holes in the walls, to the outside.

At the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Art Museum, where such transparency was not possible (in an historic building), the monumentality of the pillars was made overt through the closeness and juxtapositioning of art work. Seating and plinths constructed from sandbags, a stairway to the ceiling (*Common Assembly*, 2011-16 by Decolonising Architecture Art Residency), and at the IMA, Gordon Hookey painting 'in residence', also served to blur the edges of traditional exhibition practice. The exhibition graphic design developed by Slovenian designer Žiga Testen, and introductory posters by DinéYahzi (at both venues) that 'confront the queer constructions of frontier relations',⁴ displayed in 'threshold' areas, highlighted the exclusion experienced by first nations' peoples and other groups marginalised by difference.

The two venues were differentiated by work that spoke to aspects of the frontier, with QUT designated, 'The Life of Lines' to explore the linear nature of borders and the sovereign state, while the IMA's, 'No Longer at Ease' focussed on the internal, the psychological, personal and intimate structural relationships.



clockwise from top left: Gordon Hookey *MURRILAND!* 2015-ongoing Oil on canvas, 210 x 1000cm Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery. Megan Cope *RE FORMATION* 2016. Installation view, QUT Art Museum. Cast concrete, treated used beer cans, white sand and black (ironite) sand, 880 hours studio labour with assistants and volunteers, with thanks to Hannah Evans, Dusty Anastassiou, Leilani Turner, Sophie Allan, Paul Gorrie, Akiko Yamasaki and Supina Bytol. A Frontier Imaginaries Commission with the support of Arts Queensland; DAAR (Decolonising Architecture Art Residency). *Common Assembly*, 2011-16 Installation view, QUT Art Museum. MDF, steel supports. Courtesy of Decolonising Architecture Art Residency. Photographs Sam Cranston

Artists were paired in twos and threes such that the frontier and its significance could be shared across cultures, continents and concepts. It was through this that the multiplicity of voices and international concerns, ranging from the microcosm of land subdivision in Brisbane in the 1950s (QUT Art Museum), to international disenfranchisement (IMA), gave it such potent force.

Strong examples of these pairings include the production of a major new ten metre painting titled *Murriland!* (2015-ongoing) by Gordon Hookey with Zairian artist Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu (1947-1981). Hookey's visual exploration of the history of Queensland was developed in situ at the IMA during the exhibition season, created in the context of the paintings by Matulu of 1973-74. Hookey's work responded to viewing the 101 daily canvases made by Matulu to narrate the history of the area of Katanga (where copper was mined).

Also at the IMA, the triumvirate of Juan Davila with Martin Munz; a selection of work from the North Stradbroke Island Historical Museum (NSIHM); and Ryan Presley's new work became a pithy exploration of the archetypal hero. Davila and Munz's video work, *Ned Kelly* (1983), is an abrasive depiction of the failure of the Australian republic campaign, with Davila cast as a homo-erotic Kelly. The NSIHM archival display notes the role of the Moreton Bay Oyster Company, its protected status under the auspices of the Queensland 1897 Protection of Aborigines and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, that led directly to the current depletion of oyster stocks. Presley's new work *Crown Land (To the Ends of the Earth)* (2016) continues his interest in the cash value system and its undermining of Australian efforts toward Indigenous recognition. Each of these works explored the nature of the hero in ways that unsettle national myths, power relations and the inherently unstable basis of the economic versus social balance sheets, particularly within historical shifts.

Other highlights (at QUT) were Megan Cope's *Re-Formation* (2016), middens created with concrete,

used beer cans and sand, with a backdrop created with a 'socio-economic tide-line' of real estate maps from the John Oxley Library, juxtaposed with Sawangwongse Yawngwhwe's paintings recording the experience of ethnic conflict in Burma. Together these works forced open the cultural cracks that exist in the demarcation between the personal and the state.

There is a multiplicity of ideas to unpack in this exhibition, with their scope, global reach and lack of familiarity both discomfiting and stimulating. Zihel will return to Brisbane to launch a book about the project, which will extend and crystallise her ideas and their intersections. She said the exhibition itself was akin to, 'The project of an essay, that takes an idea and tries to pursue it and interrogate it and elaborate it through the means of artistic and aesthetic work'.⁵

What emerges with strength from the Frontier Imaginaries experience (Ed. No.1, Brisbane) is the identification through visual means of the reach of the frontier, its influence and destructive force which continues to impact economic, environmental and cultural diversity across the globe. Its persistence and the growing disaffection with this particular paradigm of social and human development is evident in increasing international political instability. Its aesthetic exploration in artwork given this social context is powerfully experimental, and will continue to be probed as Frontier Imaginaries travels on into further 'editions', and have a shape-shifting potential in the development of the concepts of frontier.

Louise Martin-Chew

Notes

- 1 *The Concise Macquarie Dictionary*, Doubleday, 1982.
- 2 Skype interview with the author, 21 July 2016
- 3 Skype interview with the author, 21 July 2016.
- 4 Exhibition material for *Frontier Imaginaries* Ed. No.1 Frontier Brisbane, 2016
5. Skype interview with the author, 21 July 2016.

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