When the Nan Tien Institute invited local artists from the Illawarra Association for the Visual Arts to work with the theme of the Asian Century, it very soon became clear that the ideas were manifold about the way this could be approached. In this exhibition, artists explore the theme of *unfolding*—*Australian Artists in the Asian Century* in the light of economic relationships in the region, cultural hybridity, cultural multiplicity, spirituality, and mutual learning.

The artists and poets explore the Asian century as a lived experience rather than an anticipated phenomenon of the future; they provide perspectives on the global that are anchored in the local. The artworks by the twelve local visual artists, and the poems by the poets enter into a dialogue with each other and with the viewer, inviting us to reflect on our cultural ties and relationships in the region. Melissa Chiu, former director of Gallery 4a in Sydney, wrote over a decade ago that

> [a]n interesting aspect of the current situation is the way Australia 'imagines' itself within the region. By this I mean the way that Australia chooses to project and promote representations of itself within Asia. (2001)

She further points out how Asian-Australian artists have been increasingly contributing towards a cultural shift in Australia and that other Australian artists demonstrate a 'consistent interest [that] demonstrates a broader cultural shift that is central to Australian contemporary art,' including Indigenous art practice.

The curatorial concept of this show, to unfold intrinsic connections with Asian cultures (all the while keeping in mind that what is perceived as 'Asian' is continuously merging with main culture and has become part of our daily experience), aims to enter into this discourse of a cultural shift, by thinking about today and what the future may hold in this fascinating period in economic and social history. The selected works reflect the lived experience of Asian perspectives, teachings and knowledge in the artistic practice of artists working in the Illawarra.

While economic transformations have been taking place on a large scale globally, over recent decades Australia at large and the Illawarra in particular has been experiencing and acknowledging subtle cultural shifts that affect all areas of society. Federal politicians like Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard have been emphasising the common economic, political and cultural interests shared by the two continents, Australia and Asia, for years. 'We share a region of the world; we share an ocean' said Gillard during her trip to India in October 2012, a notion that has its impact on local culture as well.

Globalisation is a term that has become more widely used of late to demarcate the phenomenon of a shrinking world as it were, marked by technology and cyberspace, as well as transcultural citizenship. But globalisation did not start this century or even the last: the nineteenth century, dubbed the British Century marked the height of British colonialism, expanding over large parts of the world, feeding the engine of capitalist existence—industrialisation—that changed ways of life, not only in the so-called mother-country, but countries that the colonial endeavour touched alike. It was a time of great movement and exchange of goods and ideas in all directions, geographically, ideologically and artistically. Concepts and visual markers of culture changed their contexts, and were re-worked and re-thought continually.

These processes, while often forced and sometimes organically grown, melded existing visual cultures into new forged systems of knowledge – culture. When Jane Austen convinced her readers that what became to be known as the Paisley shawl was a must-have-fashion-item in Victorian England, nobody considered its original context. Named after a Scottish town, it belies its roots in Persia, and even its route via the Kashmir region of India to England. Its distinct pattern was so intricately woven and complex that direct imports from India could cost the equivalent of a house. Trade and commodification of cultural items of this kind from other countries became fundamental to the rise of the bourgeois establishment and changed local tradition and customs on either side of the oceans.
Following the British Century, the twentieth century was marked by American culture and politics which were seen as taking over local cultures with the clever marketing strategies and branding of products such as Levi’s blue-jeans, Coca-Cola and eventually McDonalds, using new visual technology and visual culture, such as film and television as the preferred mode of dissemination. Culturally, globalisation processes are those of adaptation, acculturation, assimilations and cultural appropriation that move both ways, geographically and ideologically. Economically, globalisation can be defined as the financial integration of economies around the world and as such trade and investment are crossing national and language barriers. In Australia, today’s visual culture carries these markers of political, social and economic shifts that in some ways reflect the heterogeneous nature of Asia as a geographical space with multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-lingual peoples.

Sue Smalkowski’s work *Blue Water Reflections* visually alludes to the shared seas between continents; at the same time, due to its anchorage in the Illawarra, the work creates a positive juxtaposition of the local and the global. The translucency of blue and green hues creates a shimmer effect, like light riding gently on the waves. The abstract shapes blur the lines between near and far and invite the viewer to step closer and be immersed.

In *Portions*, Flossie Peitsch investigates symbols and signs, such as the QR (Quick Response) Code, as aesthetic devices that can bridge language barriers. QR Codes are a kind of barcode that allows access to otherwise hidden information on a product. QR Codes were invented by a Japanese company in 1994, and seem to pop up like mushrooms after the rain, wherever we go. Peitsch’s installation can be seen as an exploration of cyberspace as a discovery zone, a space where we turn away from the local, and as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun suggests, ‘towards dreams of global connectivity and post-citizenship’ (2004). It also puts forward the idea that computer encoding may gesture towards a democracy built on disembodiment where physical difference and cultural diversity do not matter. Peitsch explores the QR code, not only as a symbol of modern accessibility and mobility to cross-over barriers between the everyday and art, but as a ‘common language’. She applies Western aestheticism in her use of appropriated symbols and technique, and allows the viewer to recognise a visual ‘language’ that replaces the vernacular. Lisa Nakamura discusses this in the context of Internet travel, where

> [...] the transnational language, the one designed to end all barriers between speakers, the speech that everyone can pronounce and that cannot be translated or incorporated into another tongue, turns out not to be Esperanto but rather IBM speak, the language of … technology. (2004)

Arguably, with this inter-spatiality and accessibility comes a set of limitations: narrowing the experience of the user to the retinal reception, where ‘common language’ does not go beyond opening doors, encountering the signifiers rather than entering the signified.

We discover a different approach to cultural convergence in Alena Kennedy’s work. Her work is deeply embedded in her all embracing spirituality and subtly layered in wafts of colour and abstracted form. While her works draw on the local landscape and nature, her paintings don’t depict country or the land itself; her life experience which saw her travel across the continents from a young age, her own family relations and her spirituality underpin every brushstroke – no realism or concrete shape distract from the ‘life force existing in all things’. There is a lightness in the misty, ethereal illumination present in her paintings that dissolves any perceived sharp lines and borders. That which is separate merges, folds into one harmonious existence. It is the space between these fading shapes and forms that open up to the gaze and invite the viewer to explore the relationship between spirituality and interconnectedness with nature. It is her gentle use of colour, both atmospheric and ethereal, that speaks to the senses from within, immersing the viewer into unseen spaces in the landscape.

The invisible in landscape has played an important part in Chinese art for centuries. Chinese landscape painting continues to this day a long history of cultural significance. From the escapism to nature in the late Tang Dynasty (680–906AD), to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) when landscape painting of waterfalls and mountains ceased to be descriptive of the visible world, the paintings rather conveyed the inner landscape of the artist’s mind.
Similarly, mountains become visual markers in Jennifer Jackson’s paintings. She finds her inspiration, like Kennedy, in the local landscape of the Illawarra. Visually however, they allude to the symbolic language firstly associated with Chinese Landscape painting. Jackson playfully inserts feathers and newspaper snippets instead of painting delicate birds and calligraphy, moving confidently through the conceptual landscape of postmodernism.

Another kind of conceptual landscape or nature painting is what Jennifer Portman illustrates through the borrowing of the Japanese concepts of nature in Motoori Norinaga’s (1730-1801) expression mono no aware - describing the ephemeral nature of things with a ‘sorrow at evanescence’. It made me notice the blooming cherry trees at the Nan Tien Temple flowering beautifully one day, and upon my return a few days later, the pink petals were replaced by green shoots to mark the coming of spring. No trace, but the memories of pink and gentle perfume remain. The cherry tree is metaphorical of all life and through its beauty we are made to stop – gasp – and reflect on the impermanency of our own existence. This knowledge carries on into contemporary culture; in the story-telling of manga artists and in anime we discover elements of mono no aware as a thread weaving through the story of passing moments of pain, sorrow and happiness, past and present – interwoven realities.

A commonly used phrase springs to mind reminding us to put all emotions into perspective: ‘This too shall pass’ is a proverb that re-occurs in many cultures; most famously adopted from the story about King Solomon’s fear of getting caught up in a moment of extreme emotions, he asked for a remedy and the phrase was presented to him inscribed in a ring. But stories travel and we hear the same tale in India. Here, the Maharajah spares the lives of three wise men after having received the gift of consolation carried in the phrase, and this phrase has lived on in Hebrew folktales, Turkish folktales and Persian Sufi poets and the modern vernacular in English-speaking countries to this day.

The idea of journeying stories is present in the title Kendal Heyes chose for his work, The Breeze at Dawn, which is borrowed from the Sufi poet Rumi, also known as Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207-1273), a Muslim poet, jurist, theologian, and Sufi mystic. Heyes’ anchors his work in reading and drawing, and explores spirituality and philosophy through poetic truths by paying attention to the artistic process and conceptualisation. By using pyrography – writing with fire – which is one of the oldest techniques used across all continents, he offers a metaphorical communication between cultural ideas, a visual translation of philosophical concepts found in cultures often conceived as ‘other’. His practice reflects an experimental approach to being in a particular place at a particular time and in the pyrographical drawings, referencing Rumi’s words of a specific place and time.

Of a more narrative character is the work Settling in by Garry Jones. His work enters into a dialogic interaction with fragments of past-present in relation to place that play into the way (local) identity is formed. A boat sailing in the background, a Macassan vessel or a ship of early European colonial endeavour, in the foreground an Adirondack chair, Jones connects past and present through landscape or Country, embodied by the cabbage trees and the sea and land animals on the flowery print of the fabric in the middle ground. The ambiguous male figure, which may look like a missionary haunting the grounds, like ghosts of unresolved issues in history that linger, is in fact a reference to the way Ulladulla Mickey represented himself in his self-portraits. Jones challenges stereotypical representations of and views on what an ‘authentic’ Aboriginal person looks like. His work re-evaluates cultural relationships, allowing for a polycentric vision where ‘the visual [is] located’, as Shohat and Stam identified, ‘between individuals and communities and cultures’. Drawing on Aboriginal artist Ulladulla Mickey who negotiated his identity in the face of the colonisers in the 19th Century, Jones emphasises the importance of open-mindedness towards a transcultural and transitive place that is the Illawarra, from which to look and to be seen by the world.

In Robert Reid’s A Garden from the Indus an overlapping of two artistic processes, poetry and painting takes place. He uses romantic elements of imagination and the reconciliation of perceived binary concepts behind black and white, ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’, by drawing black lines across a white canvas. Reid’s use of symbolism and myth, simultaneously suggesting many things, as the lines of black and shades of white, upon closer looking, quietly dissolve.
Two artists focus on aspects of mutual learning by drawing on visual familiarity in their paintings; Arja Välimäki in her work *The Joy* conveys shared experiences between people of diverse background, away from their country of birth, while Mary Wingrave’s visual appropriation of what would appear to the untrained eye as Chinese symbols cites the visual familiarity with cultural markers that are in constant flux in a multi-cultural community such as the Illawarra.

Symbols of spirituality across religions can become the tools to engage in making new connections and meanings. In the installation *Crossings*, Deborah Redwood encourages intercultural dialogue through the visual literacy propagated through religion and ritual through the suggestion of a bridge made of palm fronds.

Vyvian Wilson’s work *Hold the Sound (vessels)* embodies spiritual convergence through its allusion to the importance of sound and visualisation in Buddhist practice. The colour symbolism in Buddhist practice is a visual representation of the cyclical existence of life, the temporary re-birth represented in the wheel of life. The teapot’s vibrant colour, orange, is one of the six colours (the sixth colour being a combination of the five: blue, yellow, red, white and orange) of the aura which Buddhists believe emanated from the body of the Buddha when he attained Enlightenment, with orange – being the essence of Buddhist teachings – which is full of wisdom, strength and dignity. Wilson’s spiritual contemplation through the image of her grandmother’s Chinese teapot in her illuminated installation *Hold the Sound (vessels)* weaves personal memory into the colonial fabric of history, evoked by her practice of Mindfulness, maintaining constant awareness. Wilson beautifully pays homage to the truly inspiring space of the Nan Tien Temple and Nan Tien Institute for us all that allows us to reflect on our practice in context.

*Unfolding* alludes to the concepts of discovery and revelation, as well as meaning transported in time and space. In that sense, the art by IAVA artists and poetry by SCWC writers in *unfolding* peels back the layers of experiences in an intercultural and transcultural environment that have shaped history before and after the arrival of colonialism in Australia. It acknowledges the ongoing relationships and merging of cultures within the Asia-Pacific region by unfolding the many relationships and connections that have grown over centuries with the merging of peoples and ideas into contemporary culture in the Illawarra and beyond.

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References


