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Postcard from Melbourne

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By Eleanor Ivory Weber

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Kate Meakin, a crust of bread, 2015, steel, tape, rabbit fur. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Christo Crocker

Locals revel in sardonically reminding outsiders who mention the infamous unpredictable weather: 'that's Melbourne'. Melburnians are proud of their city – it's tempting to say there is an inward-looking tendency. However, more generously, it's conviction and dedication to their place that's perhaps less observable in more chaotic or unplanned cities. 'It's hard to leave Melbourne, you know', I was warned by artist Sarah Rodigari, who lived there for ten years before returning to Sydney on foot on a six-week, 880 kilometre journey, 'Strategies for leaving and arriving home' (2011).

Melbourne – which is the capital of the Australian state, Victoria – has been deemed the world's 'most liveable city' by The Economist Intelligence Unit five years in a row now. This perhaps explains the lure of the place, though strangely eight of the top 10 on this 'liveable' list last year were British colonies, or 'Britain's former dominions' as *The Economist* magazine put it. It's notable that the head of state in Australia, Canada and New Zealand remains Queen Elizabeth II, and that the English language is not native to any of these lands, which begs the question: liveable for who?

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Natasha Havir Smith, *wine gum tarpaulin*, 2015, patch worked satin, masking tape. Courtesy: the artist
The decolonizing processes initiated by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's Labor government in the 1970s –

that included Aboriginal Land Rights, replacement of the British honours system with the Order of Australia, and the creation of the Australia Council for the Arts – have since been progressively eroded. The right-wing government of the recently deposed Prime Minister Tony Abbott reintroduced knighthoods and cut federal funding for services to Indigenous communities, handing this responsibility over to the states and territories. This facilitated the Western Australian government's decision earlier this year to close remote Aboriginal communities (which are, not incidentally, mining hotspots). His government also took over AU\$100 million from the Australia Council budget to create the National Program for Excellence in the Arts, whose procedure for assessment is at the discretion of the Minister's office (I direct you to the online, collectively authored artist project npea.org.au for more information). It remains to be seen how the new Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull's approach will differ, and whether his supposed love for the arts is sincere or simply in line with his self-image as cultivated and charming – his primary point of departure from Abbott.

Still today, the majority of migrants to Melbourne (and Australia) are born in the UK, a rich Western democracy. Meanwhile, the federal government's asylum seeker policy means people from troubled Asian and Middle Eastern countries, such as Afghanistan, are put in indefinite offshore detention on island-nations like Nauru, east of Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific Ocean. The conditions at the detention-centres contravene international human rights, yet these crimes are met with impunity (see *The Saturday Paper*, 22 August 2015: 'Nauru rapes: "there is a war on women"'). On Friday 28 August 2015, a spontaneous rally erupted in Melbourne CBD within one hour of the announcement of 'Operation Fortitude', a plan by the new Australian Border Force (ABF) intended to commence that evening. ABF were to patrol the city to check visas, targeting those suspected of overstaying or of anti-social behaviour. With almost no information provided as to what grounds people would be stopped and checked, many could only assume that it would be via racial, ethnic and religious profiling. The terrifying thought of hundreds of police, state officers and federal border forces swarming the city generated outcry from Melburnians, and the protest resulted in the operation's cancellation.

Cutting across traditional lands of the Kulin nation, Melbourne's local identity, as with all cities in Australia, is not straightforward. In this free-settled town, many Aboriginals were killed or died of imported illness in the 19th century, and waves of migration from Europe and Asia have further complexified things. The question of who is 'foreign' in Australia is a loaded one.

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Lachlan Petras, *Gala Day*, 2015, terazzo vitrine, CRT monitors, carpet. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Christian Capurro

Lachlan Petras's recent solo show 'Gala Day', held at West Space, captured some of the questions of culture, ethnicity, origin and race that weave through this country. The installation was loosely modelled on a sports club, with deep red carpet underfoot. One of two box Pivottelli's suspended from the roof corners featured rolling text describing the story of Serbian-Australian former National Soccer League player Bobby Despotovski. During a match in 2001 he gave his predominantly Croatian-Australian opponents the three finger victory salute (used by Serbian soldiers in the Balkan wars). The second TV showed footage of this year's 'Sports Without Borders' conference, where the artist asked a question and filmed the response of former Australian Football League (AFL) star Dermott Brereton about racist language in the media. The ex-footballer has forged a successful career as a commentator, only apologising in 2011 for racially taunting an Aboriginal opponent, Chris Lewis, 20 years earlier. Petras's timing was spot on; in recent months the debate on institutionalized racism in AFL has intensified around indigenous player and 2014 Australian of the Year,

Adam Goodes, who called out a racist slur made towards him in 2013 and has since been consistently booed during games.

Petras implicates himself via paraphernalia displayed in a concrete vitrine positioned in the centre of the gallery: two jerseys, 'Petras' and 'Despotovski', incorporate a logo designed for the exhibition. Souvenirs, a newspaper clipping, team photographs, identity documents written in Cyrillic from his days playing at Despotovski's former club in Belgrade, with the artist in soccer uniform throughout, all find themselves arranged as artefacts or memorabilia. These documents' veracity is left to hang in the air, unresolved but potent.

West Space is known for its support of younger and experimental practices through a combination open-call and curated program of exhibitions, events, publications and lectures – Danny Butt and Rachel O'Reilly's recently presented paper 'Indentured aesthetic autonomy on the professional frontier' is excellent and worth looking up. Recently, artist Georgina Criddle took over one of the galleries for a period of twelve weeks. Her durational and site-sensitive project 'Before too long' unfolds in the physical exhibition space as well as online via a newsletter: before-too-long.com

Artist-Run Initiatives (ARIs) play a vital role in providing opportunities for artists to exhibit, receive feedback, understand their practice and build community. Mostly run by volunteers, many ARIs charge exhibition fees to cover their building rent. In response to the increasing costs of showing work, many Melbourne artists have been self-organising in domestic or non-conventional art spaces.

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Noriko Nakamura, *For Adam John Cullen's Chooks*, 2015, limestone. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Christo Crocker

In August, artist Adam John Cullen hosted a one-day group show in his suburban corner house, Kia Ora (which literally means 'be well/happy' or 'hi' in Maori language). Works replaced coffee tables, tablecloths, outdoor wall features and hen feeders. In the garden, Noriko Nakamura's brilliant 'interactive' piece, a totem-like rooster carved into limestone, incorporated recesses filled with feed to encourage the house hens to eat from the sculpture – which they did. The very same day, Zac Segbedzi hosted a show in his one-bedroom, 24th floor apartment in the CBD. Titled 'Death Box 24', the tone was markedly different.

Segbedzi's own video featured a scythe-bearing Death marching down Melbourne streets in broad daylight, past shops and consumers, mashed up with footage of internal organs being violently shaken amongst an array of colour. Natasha Havir Smith's large patchwork satin piece hung from the corner of the open window, draping extravagantly out onto the floor, evoking a curtain implicated in a dramatic suicide. Lewis Fidock's moulding concrete puppy moping at foot-level suggested an entropy also found in Liam Osborne's window installation of twine, rusting metal and small empty sanitiser sachets, clinging to the glass with suction caps.

Artists Isabelle Sully and Simon McGlenn initiated the roaming curatorial project Salon, which organizes exhibitions in various non-gallery locations, recently showing works by Luigi Fusinato in a barrister's office in the CBD. Pansy is an intermittent project space run out of the suburban home of artists Lauren Burrow and David Egan, with the latest show hosting band Human Pesticide. Punk Café, a small gallery attached to a studio complex, opened earlier this year. Kate Meakin's recent solo show there, 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow', expanded on the artist's interest in textiles and low-lying floor compositions. The predominant palette of white and grey unified the group of sculptural assemblages, drawing together their incongruous

materials: steel, tape and rabbit fur (*a crust of bread*), steel dish racks and cow horn bangles (*score*), and *cinderella* (all 2015), whose moulded plaster over an umbrella frame, resting on two thin pieces of polystyrene, curved up from the floor like a breast.

Operating nomadically, Matthew Linde's Centre for Style is a good example of an independent space that works to place Melbourne art and fashion in a broader context, not only showing the work of his peers to audiences in Europe and the States but, more importantly, putting international artists in an Australian context.

The scene described above does seem to be highly focused around sculpture, painting and installation, and domestic or semi-private settings do beg the question of accessibility and diversity. Yet these young artists seem to know only too well their audience and purpose: first of all their community of peers, then sharing documentation via online platforms and, thirdly, another line on the CV. More broadly speaking, progressive public arts festivals such as Dance Massive, Next Wave, Channels and Liquid Architecture are notable for producing new work and supporting local talent alongside interstate and international peers.

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Karrabing Film Collective, *Windjerrameru (The Stealing C*nt\$)*, 2015, film still. Courtesy: Karrabing Film Collective

A highlight of the recent Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) was Karrabing Film Collective's two short films, *When the Dogs Talked* (2014) and *Windjarrameru, The Stealing C*nt\$* (2015). Collectively written, directed and performed by members of Karrabing and shot around the coastal regions of the Wadyiginy and Larrakia nations, in the Northern Territory, the films animate the contemporary struggle of Aboriginal peoples. Humorously and critically, using improvised narratives, they vocalise and image lives caught between Dreaming, traditional knowledge and family, and the realities of ongoing colonialism, socio-economic marginalisation and the contemporary market economy.

After the screening, Karrabing member Elizabeth A. Povinelli attempted to transmit the Collective's voices from Country to Melbourne via microphone and crackly cell phone. As she did so, the physical and conceptual distance between the lives of the Karrabing actors and the metropolitan MIFF audience became tangible, problematizing Melbourne's status as the supposed 'cultural capital' of Australia. 'Whose culture?' and 'Liveable for who?' should be ongoing questions for any city who cares for its inhabitants, and for any inhabitants truly invested in culture.



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