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Uncertain Positions NGV Access Gallery, catalogue essay, and reflection 30 years on

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QUERIES

#1 (September 2024)



Angels, Doors & Irigaray

QMERiES

**academic writing old and new, by or about Australian artists
identifying as gay, lesbian or queer**

Issue #1 (September 2024)

Angels, Doors & Irigaray

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**QUeriEs is seeking any of the following:
reviews of current exhibitions,
extracts of recent postgraduate exegeses,
recent essays on queer theory or art history,
old catalogue essays from the 1990s and 2000s,
profiles on (or interviews with) contemporary artists.**

Acknowledgements:

**QUeriEs acknowledges the Traditional
Custodians of the different lands on which we work,
and pay respect to their Elders and Ancestors.
Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.**

**Thank you to all the contributors for their generosity,
to Ben Bannan for prompting Rex Butler's piece,
and Melissa Ratliff for recommending Jade Muratore.
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Cover Image: Mel Deerson/Briony Galligan, *angel biccies #3*, 2024.

About *QMeRiEs*

QMeRiEs #1 hopes to kick start an open forum for academic writing old and new, by or about Australian artists identifying as gay, lesbian or queer. There seems a new and peculiar interest in queer art and queer writing about art at the moment, but in truth that interest is not peculiar—it has a long (if hidden) history in Australia. One particular aim of *QMeRiEs* is to establish a dialogue between old and new gay, lesbian or queer artists and arts writers.

To this end, alongside texts such as those discussing queer contemporaries (e.g., Spiros Panigirakis, or Nik Pantazopolous in the issue) *QMeRiEs* also hopes to regularly reprint forgotten catalogue essays or reviews from the past accompanied by the original author's reflection in hindsight. Issue #1 presents the catalogue essay for Marcus O'Donnell's *Dislocations* exhibition at the NGV in 1993 alongside his thoughts in retrospect, and, a text by Rob Schubert from almost thirty years ago when the AIDS epidemic created an arts environment sympathetic to gay (and to a lesser extent lesbian) art practises and voices.

When comparing queer art practises old and new, one clear change over the last few decades is that practise-led research has taken hold within postgraduate Fine Art studies. This has led to a wealth of exegetical material by queer artists which unfortunately rarely finds publication elsewhere. *QMeRiEs* is keen to work with current or recent postgraduates to create stand-alone essays which tempt readers to find their full exegesis online. To this end *QMeRiEs* #1 presents Jade Muratore's *Angelic Rebels* which unearths the work of Tessa Boffin.

QMeRiEs hopes to provide opportunity for both airing and discussing work-in-progress through artists' pages (see that by Mathew Jones, and the extracts from Ben Woods' *Wetland Lovers* in this issue) and interview (e.g., with Briony Galligan and Mel Deerson about their collaborative *angels project*). It hopes also to air the work of those exploring alternative exhibition sites, be that online, in broadcast, or on the street. This issue draws attention to activist group the Queer Killjoys by lifting pages from their Instagram account.

QMeRiEs encourages contributions from artists, established academics, early career and higher degree researchers, or just anyone out there with an interest in queer art, or an interested in queering art. This first issue of *QMeRiEs* is dominated by gay white middle-class men. But that will change, and must change, if *QMeRiEs* is to reflect the queer zeitgeist of the 2020s. This issue is also very Melbourne and very Monash. That too must change. But it's a start. Issue #1 is just a start.

Is queer art just another passing fad, like gay art in the 1990s? I guess that is up to you—contribute to *QMeRiEs* #2 and help build a self-sustaining environment for queer artists.

Contents

Front Matter

1. **Angelic Rebels:** Jade Muratore.
13. **From Instagram:** activist group Queer Killjoys.
16. **Then & Now:** Marcus O'Donnell's 1993 NGV gay show.
26. **Artist's Page:** Mathew Jones.
27. **Spiros Panigirakis:** Rex Butler.
31. **Wetland Lovers:** Benjamin Woods.
37. **Interview:** Mel Deerson & Briony Galligan.
48. **Nik Pantazopoulos:** Helen Back.
52. **Inviolate Sexes:** Rob Schubert.

Contributors.

Uncertain Positions NGV Access Gallery, catalogue essay, 1993

Marcus O'Donnell

This exhibition explores the work of ten gay male artists. Although it deals with a cluster of specific thematic issues it is predicated on showing the diversity of their work rather than the somewhat arbitrary tendency to seek a unifying sensibility amongst gay artists.

Gay men present an interesting anomaly in the construction of sexuality and gender in society. We are *visible* as men and thus linked to dominant systems of patriarchal power but only in so far as our sexuality is kept *invisible*. Once seen as gay we quickly become identified with the marginalised, the other. This complex dynamic of both incorporation by and alienation from society frames the development of a gay man's world view.

This ambiguous position is reflected in the art world's reaction to the work of the artists gathered here. Although a number of the artists are well known and well regarded in the canon of contemporary art there has been little attempt to explore the collective body of their work or the relevance of homosexual identity to their art practice. This is in marked contrast to the proliferation of exhibitions and critical writing regarding gender and sexuality in women's art, for example. Even the recent Erotic Issue of *Art and Australia* dealt only cursorily with homo-eroticism preferring to deal with it in a deflected form

through the Anzac myth rather than engage with its expression in the work of contemporary artists.

For many gay men the body is often perceived as a site of conflict. Particularly as a child and consequently as an adult through the prism of memory, the desiring of other men's bodies is experienced as both energising and problematic. This sense of awkwardness, fear, alienation or dislocation of the body from its desires has often expressed itself in the motif of the wounded or fractured body in gay men's art. The wounded body has more recently become a particularly poignant symbol for a devastating reality in this age of AIDS and escalating violence against gay men.

However, the history of homosexuality as "other," as marginalised categorized and displaced can lead not just to an awkward or troublesome dislocation from society but an active and creative disengagement from prevalent patterns of thought. Simon Watney's delineation of an AIDS activist aesthetic as a "guerilla semiotics on all fronts, threatening 'normality' with a long sustained deliberate derangement of its 'common sense'" could also be applied to the development of a radical gay aesthetic.¹

Interestingly, but not untypically in terms of contemporary art practice, many of the artists in this exhibition are concerned with questioning the certainty of received traditions. This is particularly noticeable in a number of pieces where the iconic certainty of religious art is subverted or undercut in some way. In their position as outsider, the dislocated, or marginal observer is aware that there is not just one perspective on the world, but that truth is intrinsically plural.

¹ Simon Watney, "Representing AIDS," in Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta (eds.), *Ecstatic Antibodies* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990) 165–192.



Figures 1 & 2: *Dislocations: Body Memory, Place*. National Gallery of Victoria, Access Gallery, 1993.
Photo: Ross T Smith.

Juan Davila is well known for his strong and provocative statements about homosexuality, but constant attention to the shock value of Davila's images prevents an understanding of the complexity of his compositions with their multi-layered referencing of different cultures and art traditions. *Ex Votto* refers to a tradition of votive or invocational painting most common in the religious art of Latin America but also known in Europe. In times of personal sickness or national disaster a painting was commissioned which in its narrative displayed both the nature of the pestilence and the religious figure (usually the virgin) whose assistance was being invoked. In *Ex Votto*, the virgin has become an unflattering self portrait as a middle-aged, mutilated, transvestite Ganymede, as if to suggest that relief from the present disaster is in the power not of an external deity but in a confrontation with the shadow self. For Davila the power of the Ganymede figure in traditional myth and art history suggests a certain continuity across time of the young, well proportioned white male as an exclusionary paradigm of homo-erotic desire. Such images which abound in current gay commercial publishing and some HIV/AIDS campaigns are seen as "totalitarian" images which have the hegemonic power of religious icons.

Ex Votto shifts constantly between its invocation of high and pop culture, between the world of pornography and the world of classical myth between commerce and spirituality, between the modernist and classical traditions of art history, between the interior and the landscape, between the cultures of Latin America, Australia and Europe and between masculine and feminine identities. Davila's refusal to define a unifying perspective from which to view the painting is modernist cliché but powerful statement about the fluid nature of sexual and cultural identity.

Mathew Jones' work draws on both the strategies of conceptual minimalism and of activist art. Although Jones work resembles activist sloganeering, he eschews the didacticism of the rhetorical for a more fluid view of sexual identities and a more complex understanding of the polyvalent nature of visual/verbal sign systems. The name scrawled on the wall will be known to some and not to other viewers. Murley was acquitted in a recent trial which raised many questions about gay identity and codes of visibility and invisibility used, or thought to be used, by gay men. But the piece works irrespective of whether the story of the trial is known or unknown because in the context of this show the graffiti becomes an ambiguous mark, a sexualised invitation which is as much about the entrancing anonymity of the subject as it is about his identity.

Luke Roberts' extravagant canvases with their campy metaphysics and many attachments are visually luscious and full of ironic humour. Roberts grew up in the tiny outback Queensland town of Alpha. The Australian landscape and a search for an Australian myth are strong elements in his work—the deep organic orange of "Alpha dust" and rich desert sky blues are his characteristic colours. His alter-egos Pope Alice and St Luke of Alpha reflect his transformation of the Catholicism of his childhood into a series of uniquely personal emblems. *Exorcism 1: Sky Painting/Inventing Infinity/The Festival Of Light* expresses Robert's characteristic tension between a search for absolute values and a fascination with the kitsch and temporal nature of the contemporary. For all its extravagance the painting has a sombre, almost funereal quality. The dismembered dolls act as signs of isolation within the vastness of the architectural, environmental grid of the painting, but the doll is also a perverse shamanistic accessory in Roberts' compute

of spirituality. For Roberts the isolation of childhood is the crucible of an alchemic transformation which unleashes an adulthood in which transgressive behaviours become normative and secure because they have been so obsessively rehearsed in the privacy of the child's world.

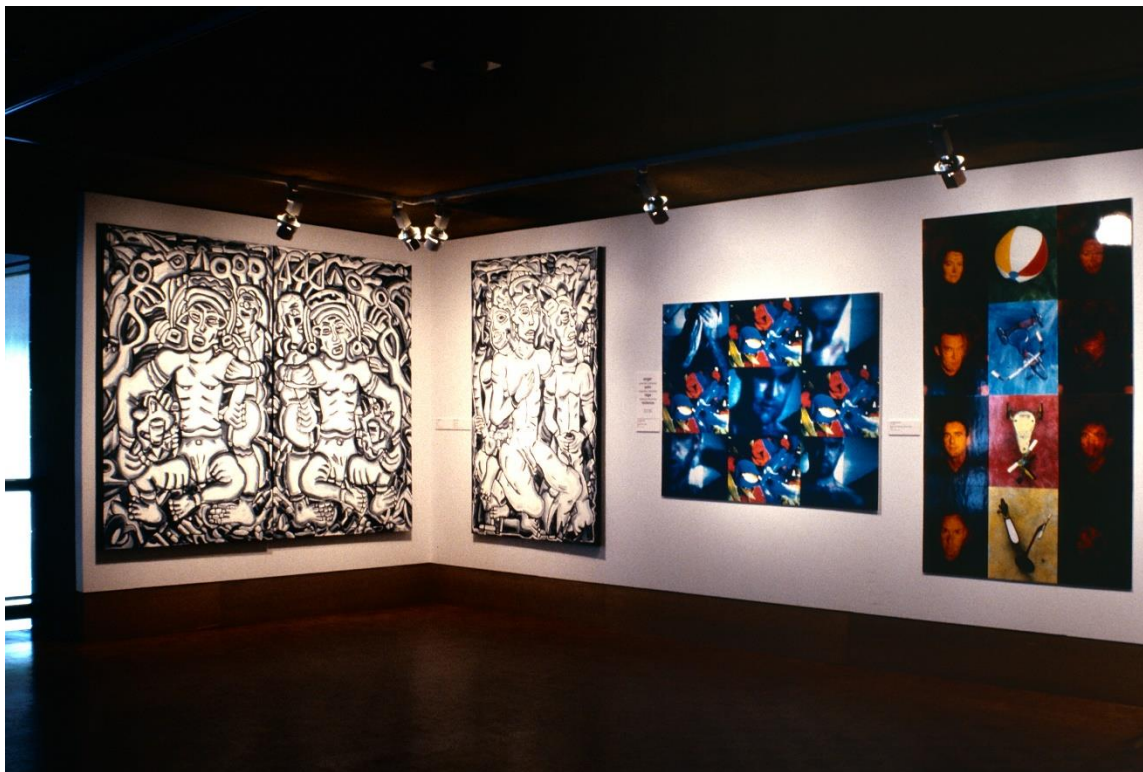
Like Roberts, Rod McLiesh is concerned to articulate a postmodern position about the contemporary absence of certainty. By the casual unframed placement of the simply drawn segments of *A Fall From Place* McLiesh draws attention to our unanchored position in an age which has outgrown any purely metaphysical understanding of reality. The computer-generated figure, whose pixilated form also reminds us of the viral micro-organisms (dis)covered but not controlled nor fully explained by science, tumbles through a scene dominated by the icons of ancient Egyptian certainty.

Ross Moore's exploration of sexual and cultural traditions is complex. An interest in the body is explored through an individualistic adaptation of tribal iconography. In Moore's personal cosmology traditional divisions between the heavens and the underworld, between the body and the earth, between the modern and the primordial, between the conscious and the unconscious are disturbed. The distorted figures in *The Royal Tombs of Ur* can be read as embryonic or mummified forms, the jigsaw of interlocking shapes is at once a clutter of limbs and organs and an inert landscape of stone, the central ominous tower has the ancient resonance of the phallus as well as the contemporaneity of science fiction.

At first the strong silent abstractions of Brent Harris seem only to celebrate the beauty of a minimalist aesthetic with little overt content let alone any gay content. Once identified with a metaphysical abstraction concerned

with the transcendent he prefers now to talk of the psychological rather than the sacred. For Harris each form has psychological as well as material shape, and a particular emotional resonance. His *Another Dead Bunny* can be read as an interesting contrast of organic and geometric shapes or as reference to the prevalence of death in the gay community as we confront AIDS. The series of silk screen prints, *Otherness*, are equivocal and may be read as either positive or negative shapes or as mercurial outlines whose contours constantly invert. These prints celebrate the oddity of their forms and here as in much of his work Harris seductively poses the question of difference.

Ross Watson's ability as a photo realist painter with a strong interest in the male figure and classical form has made his work popular amongst gay men. Although he is associated with a realist style Watson has always demonstrated an interest in surrealist imagery with unusual juxtapositioning of isolated objects creating a strong sense of the mysterious in his work. In this most recent work Watson gives us a realist detail through the viewfinder of a silhouette set against a simple underworked backdrop. The richness of the regal and ecclesiastical imagery is framed by the shadow of the sexual. The intensity of that captured moment, that singular view, is contrasted with the decorative motifs and icons of the everyday which occupy the pale backgrounds. In this instance the isolation of a detail is not about objectification or limitation of the image it is about the distillation of its essential emotional power. This work speaks of the complexity of representing the body and how details can wake us to a deeper understanding of the whole—a phenomena on which both philosophers and fetishists would agree.



Figures 3 & 4: *Dislocations: Body Memory, Place*. National Gallery of Victoria, Access Gallery, 1993.
Photo: Ross T Smith.

Ross T. Smith's fragile forms emerge out of a dense velvety surface of black and are subtly, almost subliminally toned in blues and purples. Like many post-modern photographers there is a tension in Smith's work between an aesthetic of beauty (obvious in the lush quality of the prints). and ideas of temporality and fragility (equally obvious in the assemblage and the treatment of the image). At first sight his image of the pregnant female body may seem to have little to do with the stated concerns of this show however it serves as a potent symbol of the way the mother has been problematised and co-opted as part of the gay male body in the psychoanalytic discourse of homosexuality. In broad psychological terms he reminds us that our primary sense of dislocation is our displacement from the mother. The work as a whole deals with questions of mortality and has a melancholic air as it struggles to come to terms with the tenuousness of our grip on life.

Lex Middleton often uses re-photographed original video images in his multi-paneled pieces. Video style is used generally as a metaphor for the contemporary but in particular as a symbol of the way sexuality is constructed by advertising and the electronic media. *Homage to the Quilt* takes its cue from the AIDS memorial quilt but unlike the quaint original panels with their roots in domestic and community art this highly technologically mediated statement has an emotive power which is at once sinister and sincere. The shadowy images of a shielded face are combined with the vibrancy of the floral motif which reminds us of the traditional wreath but in its saturated colour and pixelation also strongly references the viral.

Simon Carver's *Is the Anus a Grave* is a simple but evocative statement about the pathologising of the gay male body in the

age of AIDS. The raw earth, heaped anus like and red lipped amidst the clinically white cotton sheet and ceramic tiles, makes obvious reference to the current medicalisation of gay sexuality, however it also speak more generally of the tensions between the chaotic and the ordering aspects of desire.

Through a variety of formal structures each of the artists in the exhibition make individual but complementary statements about the body and a gay sense of otherness. The work shows a tentative mapping of a psychological space which is secure because it is claimed as one's own but is gladly without the assurance of certainty which stems from adherence to an absolute moral order.

Almost 30 years before the NGV's high profile Queer exhibition, Marcus O'Donnell curated the much less heavily advertised Dislocations: Body, Memory, Place, in the NGV's Access Gallery, 9 January – 2 February 1993 as part of the Midsumma Festival. Surprisingly the lineage of this show is not mentioned in the Queer catalogue even though several artists are included in both shows (Davila, Harris, Roberts, Watson). Equally surprisingly, other Dislocations artists (Jones, MacLeish, Moore) were not included in Queer even though pieces of theirs are held by the NGV.

In the following text O'Donnell looks back on his own exhibition.

The Quotidian and the Other: Reflections Thirty Years on.

Marcus O'Donnell

The essay *Uncertain Positions* was written to accompany *Dislocations: Body, Memory Place*, an exhibition I curated at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) Access Gallery as part of the Midsumma Festival in early 1993.

1993 marked a period of renewed activism and visibility for queer communities but at a time in which our lives and identities were still very much contested. Homosexuality had been decriminalised in Victoria thirteen years previously, yet it wasn't until a year later, in 1994, that Tasmania became the last Australian state to decriminalise gay male sex. This was not through local legislation but through Federal government intervention following an assessment by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, and years of local and international activism.

In 1993 HIV/AIDS was more than a decade old but we were still two years away from effective antiretroviral treatment. Throughout the late eighties and early nineties ACTUP chapters throughout the world—including in Melbourne—employed a variety of aesthetic and activist strategies to signal the urgency we felt as gay men fighting for our lives. Two years earlier in the gardens across the road from the NGV, ACTUP Melbourne, in one of their most memorable actions, had removed all the flowers in the large outdoor floral clock and replaced them with white crosses.

This mix of art meets activism had grown as a strong tradition in Sydney throughout 1980s due to the Mardi Gras and its evolving festival program. In contrast, Melbourne's Midsumma Festival was still young and this exhibition was an important part of its fourth incarnation. Midsumma's visual arts program boasted two major art exhibitions that year. As well as *Dislocations*, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art hosted a significant show featuring twelve gay male artists. *You are Here*, curated by Luke Roberts and Scott Redford, was a particularly important moment in the history of queer art in Australia as it travelled from a first iteration in Brisbane, to Sydney for Mardi Gras, and then on to Melbourne. Four artists—Juan Davila, Mathew Jones, Brent Harris and Luke Roberts were included in both exhibitions.

In a review of *Dislocations* and *You are Here* published at the time Robert Schubert suggested that I relied too heavily and uncritically on the trope of otherness in discussing both the themes of the exhibition, and, the possibility of a "radical gay aesthetic."² He suggests that a number of the works in *You are Here*, by contrast, celebrate the emergence of the queer from the quotidian, as not other but "same." This is an astute observation and one that resonates with me more over time. However, I don't believe these two postures are at odds and although our context has changed both remain relevant.

In a post-same-sex marriage, post-PrEP world, surely the other has been brought into the centre? Yet as I write the Federal Labor Government (elected with a well-defined set of pro-LGBTIQ+ policies) are backing away from their promise to include questions about sexuality and gender in the

² Robert Schubert, "You are Here, Dislocations," *Agenda: Contemporary Art Magazine*, no. 30/31 (1993)

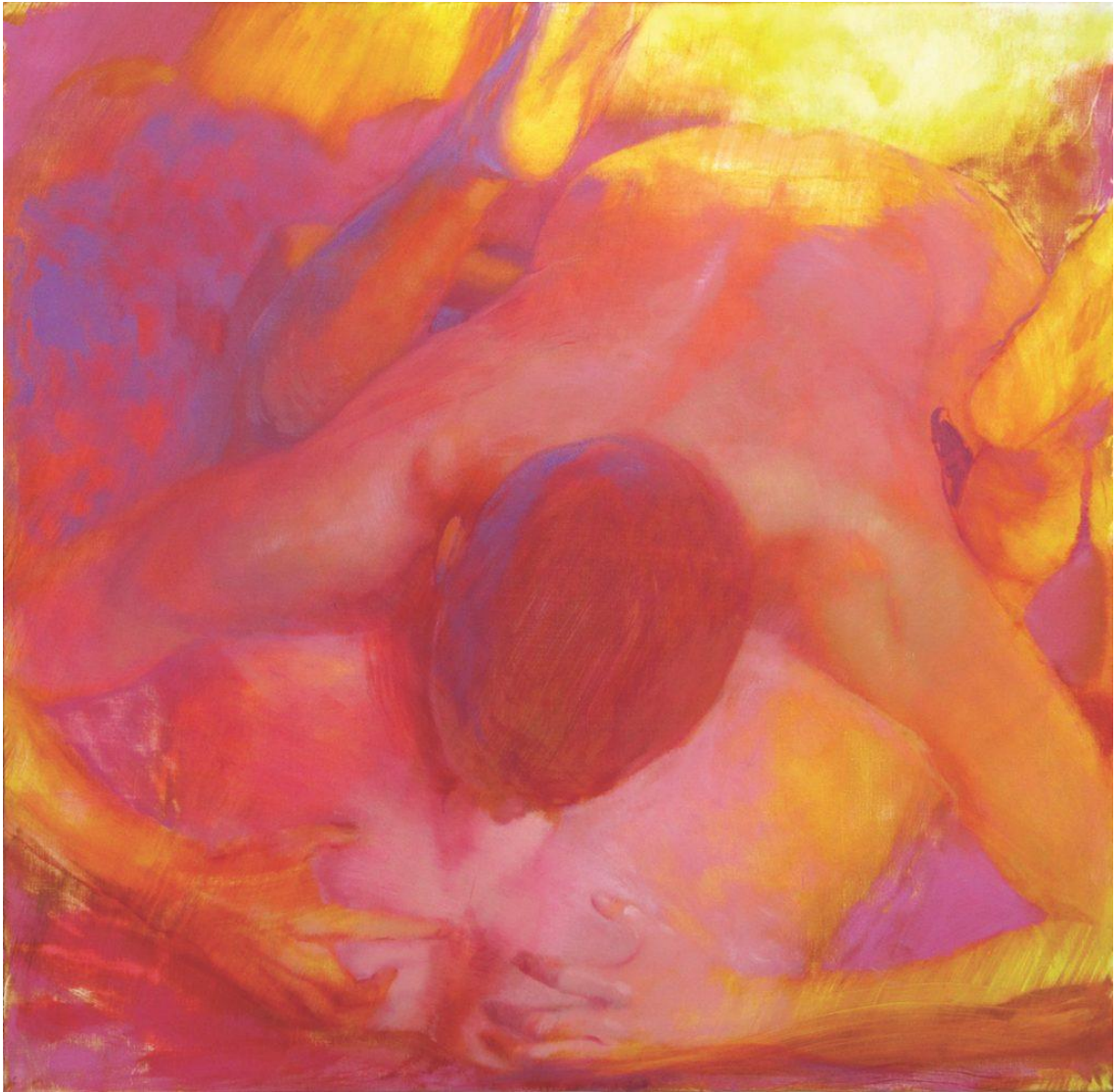


Figure 1: Doron Langberg, *Zachary*, 2018, oil on linen, 112 x 112cm, courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York.

upcoming census. When questioned, their response has been that this is for our own good, and they are trying to protect queer people from “divisive debates.” This seems like a case of othering us again to avoid us being othered!

Schubert himself notes that the works by Juan Davila in each exhibition are contrasting, with his work in *Dislocations* a vintage challenge to the status quo while his work in *You Are Here—Interior with Built in Bar*—presents a domestic scene “mundane to the point of absurdity.” But rather than favouring one approach over the other as somehow more significant or more revealing I would say that Davila’s ability to move back and forth between the decorative and the pornographic, the personal and the political, the abject and quotidian is exactly what makes him one of Australia’s most significant artists.

In 1993 *Dislocations* and *You are Here* were part of opening-up conversations about queer art in traditional gallery contexts, but today queer art is a mainstay of national and international art events.³ The 2024 editions of the Sydney and the Venice Biennales both featured deep streams of historic and contemporary queer art, and it is interesting to note the curatorial framing of these events. Both subvert the narrative of otherness while retaining a dialogue with it.

Artistic directors of the Biennale of Sydney Cosmin Costinaş and Inti Guerrero explained their choice of the theme *Ten Thousand Suns* as:

³ See also, *Queer* at NGV, 10 March -20 August 2022.

⁴ Biennale of Sydney, “Biennale of Sydney announces artists, locations and initial programming for 2024 edition: *Ten Thousand Suns*,” *Media Release 31 October 2023*, [https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/biennale-of-sydney-announces-artists-locations-and-initial-](https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/biennale-of-sydney-announces-artists-locations-and-initial-programming-for-2024-edition-ten-thousand-suns/)

an acknowledgement of a multiplicity of perspectives, cosmologies, and ways of life that have always woven together the world under the sun. A multiplicity of suns conveys ambiguous images. It evokes a scorching world, both in several cosmological visions and very much in our moment of climate emergency. But it also conveys the joy of cultural multiplicities affirmed, of First Nations understandings of the cosmos brought to the fore, and of carnivals as forms of resistance in contexts that have surpassed colonial oppression.⁴

Here the celebration of multiplicities and lineages of resistance takes us beyond a boundary/periphery, other/mainstream, outsider/insider perspective while still situating art practice as radical practice with the ability to queer current realities.

Adriano Pedrosa, the first openly queer curator of the Venice Biennale, and the first based in the global south, framed his exhibition around the theme *Stranieri Ovunque* (Foreigners Everywhere).

“The expression *Stranieri Ovunque* has several meanings,” he explains in the official introduction to the Biennale. “First of all, that wherever you go and wherever you are you will always encounter foreigners—they/we are everywhere. Secondly, that no matter where you find yourself, you are always truly, and deep down inside, a foreigner.”⁵

programming-for-2024-edition-ten-thousand-suns/

⁵ La Biennale Di Venezia, “Biennale Arte 2024: *Stranieri Ovunque* - Foreigners Everywhere,” *Media Release 18 July 2024*, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2024-stranieri-ovunque-foreigners-everywhere>

In this way he positions otherness and sameness together—everyone is somehow estranged, but some people externalise and represent the strangeness of others. He notes that etymologically in Latin languages there are direct connections between foreigner, stranger, strangeness, the uncanny and the queer. Within this context he has curated the central contemporary section of the Biennale around four marginal figures: the queer artist; the outsider artist, the folk artist and the indigenous artist.

The queer Biennale artists demonstrate a diversity of artistic strategies. Peruvian artist Violetta Quispe mines the Andean traditions of Quechua culture to present new perspectives on gender and sexuality, while Seoul-born, Los Angeles-based artist Kang Seung Lee, draws together multiple international threads of early HIV/AIDS art in his installation.

“Histories are very often transnational,” Lee told *ARTnews*. “By talking about the legacy of these artists, who are from different continents, cities, and locations, I wanted [to] create a queer genealogy that has not been recognized enough by mainstream history.”⁶

In both these instances the otherness/forgottenness of queer culture is being recontextualised and celebrated. But they seem like more than simple reclamation projects. They are charged with a vitality that allows for something new to emerge that connects with our lives now.

At Venice the quotidian queer is represented by US artists like Salman Toor and Louis

Fratino who both paint expressionist scenes of contemporary queer life, often in domestic settings, often including explicit but everyday scenes of queer lovemaking. They are part of a broader group of US queer artists dubbed by Tyler Malone as the “new queer intimists.”⁷ These artists are, he explains, forging a new “radical queer aesthetic” precisely through inhabiting this new intimate domesticity of queerness.

“The work of these artists feels subversive not because it depicts what might have previously been called a ‘transgressive’ sexuality, nor because it employs an aesthetic that earlier critics might have denigrated as ‘pornographic.’ ... But the truly radical aspect of these artists’ paintings is their tender depiction of quotidian queer life.... New Queer Intimists are breaking down the traditional barriers that denied queer existence a chance to embody the universal.”⁸

Any claim to embody the universal inevitably collapses the specificity of experiences, and runs the risk of reenacting past erasures, so while I appreciate the intent of Malone’s claim, I would prefer to celebrate the ten thousand suns of Costinaş and Guerrero, that allows queer life to shimmer alongside other traditions. What is evident in the work being done today by queer artists is the many different ways that they inhabit and queer both marginal and mainstream positions finding ways to make the quotidian strange and the strange quotidian.

⁶ Chris Erik Thomas, “Queer Artists Brought Pain, History, and Hope to the 60th Venice Biennale,” *ArtNews*, 28 June 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/queer-lgbtq-artists-60th-venice-biennale-1234711049/>

⁷ Tyler Malone, “Doron Langberg and the New Queer Intimism,” *Jewish Currents*, 9 December 2019, <https://jewishcurrents.org/doron-langberg-and-the-new-queer-intimism>

⁸ Malone, “Doron Langberg.”