

THE MEDIUM AS THE MESSAGE STICK
ERIK ROBERTS

Queensland's colonial history began in the 1820s, just prior to the invention of photography. Colonisation, like 19th century photographs, reduced the world to black and white, simplifying the complexity of reality. Decolonisation, then, could be seen as a gradual process of re-colourising the cultural landscape, restoring it to its true condition.

Now in its fifth incarnation, the Colourised Festival is dedicated reinvigorating the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities and forms of expression. Under the artistic direction of Christine Peacock over the last 3 years, this small, yet sophisticated cultural festival has become an established event, showcasing a range of recent local, national and international Indigenous visual and performing arts. More essentially, it provides a time and place for people to gather, watch and discuss works that both celebrate and confront reality from a multiplicity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

This year the festival spread out across the city to QUT Gardens Point Art Gallery and Theatre, the Queensland Museum Theatrette, the Jagera Arts Centre in Musgrave Park, Metro Arts Centre and in South Bank's Piazza. Taking Indigenous films literally to the streets, some of Brisbane's most popular bars and cafes in West End and South Brisbane participated in CINEMA alterNATIVE. Twice daily over 3 days during NAIDOC Week, unsuspecting diners were treated to an intimate viewing of 90 minutes of short documentaries and dramas by Ivan Sen, John Bell, Kyas Sheriff, Kelrick Martin, Steven McGregor and others.

Multiple media

Originally focussed on film as its primary medium of delivery, the emphasis this year was more broadly based, ranging across all the arts, from multimedia to visual art to music. Peacock explains: We're trying to take into account the broad base of screen culture now, in the sense that it has actually flowed over into most of the other arts. The reason we've taken the word 'film' out of the title of the festival is because essentially Indigenous cultures are holistic cultures, so we may be making film, but if you look at the actual discipline of film-making it involves a number of artists at various times. We wanted to get away from that idea of being producer and director driven and celebrate the idea that it is actually a collaboration of artists all coming together on celluloid or video tape... Film-makers are not centre stage anymore, I think. Film is becoming a language that everybody is using to speak with.

An intimate mixed media exhibition explored the relationship between the static and the moving image. Still-Moving by Archie Moore, Leah King-Smith, Ivan Sen and the late Michael Riley exemplified the festival's ability to cultivate aesthetic and cultural experiences for public consumption. A model of what could be a much larger exhibition of contemporary Australian Indigenous art, the single-room, multi-screen installation brought together 4 sophisticated image makers to question the concept of post-colonialism. Understated, yet confident in its subversive use of technology, multimedia is only rarely as concise and relevant as this. Peacock comments that, "We've used the work of what I would consider probably the most avant-garde of our film-makers, Ivan Sen and the late Michael Riley. They've dealt more specifically in film language than a lot of the other film-makers. This is only my own opinion, but I feel we've actually been caught within a sort of 'ethnographic' framework. A lot of Australian film has come out of a tradition of documentary, a great deal of which was about the relationship between the coloniser and colonised. And we were often the subject of those documentaries in the early days, like Pearls and Savages, and of course, that meant that the image of ourselves was defined by somebody else and we became 'other' within the society. If you are going to address that as (an Indigenous) film maker, I think that you have to have a very good grasp of film language and you probably have to depart from the traditions of documentary film-making that have an ethnographical approach."

Multimedia message stick

Vibrant Brisbane: A Festive Dialogue discussion circle convened in the large, open foyer of the Gardens Theatre located on QUT's Gardens Point Campus. Goori woman, Debra McLean eloquently summarised the need for festivals as a tool of social transformation: "For us the concept of festival is an imperative. Traditionally, we had festival. That's what corroboree was. We did that from the beginning of time. We came together; we were multi-disciplined, we sang, we talked, we told stories, we made art, we created craft, we designed, we acted, and, hey, we didn't have film camera but if we had it we would have been using it. (Laughter.) That's why we embraced the concept of multimedia so easily because it's our message stick and we will use it powerfully. So when we look at accessing what is currently a plethora of technology, we look at how we can do it our way. We want to use that technology because we are a very embracing culture, we embrace things." David Wilson provided a brief overview of Indigenous film-making in Australia and looked towards the establishment of a National Indigenous Television Network. Wilson described a developing Aboriginal film industry but queried the idea of a unique Indigenous film culture. Comparing film with other art-forms, Wilson declared, "I would say that in the film industry we still haven't got there yet in terms of Indigenous film-making. And that's not to say that what's been done already is not good—you know, there are a lot of good film-makers out there doing good things."

Out but Not Down

An installation by Karen Batten and Eddie Nona at the Queensland Museum, simulated a segregated movie theatre while slides of kitsch 'Aboriginal' tourist souvenirs illustrated the talk given by Olivia Robinson. An archival government documentary film, *The Aboriginal Problem in Queensland*, was screened as part of the talk on the paternalistic portrayals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities in the past. This was contrasted with the work of Murriimage/Uniikup Productions as an example of how stereotypical misrepresentations of Indigenous people are being eroded by a new generation of Indigenous filmmakers, performers, musicians and visual artists.

Next wave

Cross My Country at the Metro Arts Theatre included the public premieres of 2 writer-animator projects, this time addressed to younger audiences: *Boy and Moth* by John Graham and Rebecca Pitt, and *Murri Girl* by Ross Watson and Shane Togo. Also screened were 6 films by emerging Indigenous filmmakers, ranging from personal studies of the impact of systemic racism on the individual (Grant Saunders' *True Justice*, and *Too Little Justice* directed by Dean Francis based on a script by Marcus Waters) to short documentaries (*Endangered*, written and directed by Tracey Rigney for the National Indigenous Documentary Fund, and *The Ration Shed*, by Robyn Hofmeyr, Lesley Williams and Sandra Morgan as part of the QUT Cherbourg Digital Project) and first person narratives with an experimental edge (*Feel My Absence* by Kyas Sheriff and *Listen* by Paula Maling, both part of the Lester Bostock Screen Project 2004). The diversity of style and content of this 70-minute program bodes well for the future of Australian Aboriginal screen culture.

Understanding respect

The festival culminated at the end of NAIDOC Week with a picnic, live music jamboree and film screening. The fine weather brought many hundreds of people—a cross section of residents and visitors to the city—to the South Bank Piazza over the course of the 6-hour event. In between live music performances by Black Star DJ, the Glenala School Band, the Hot Sisters, Dizzi and Dubbs, a program of short films produced for the AFTRS Indigenous Program and the AFC's *Dreaming in Motion* and *Dramatically Black* screen initiatives, as well as music clips by Indigenous filmmaker Doug Watkin, was shown on the large daylight screen.

The purpose and validity of public festivals is keenly debated in arts administration circles. One side maintains that festivals are a form of artificial culture induced by governing bodies. The other side sees authentic local art arising spontaneously from within the community and the need for festivals to revitalise the relationship between the arts and local community on a regular

basis. The Colourised Festival sits between these 2 camps, balancing the unavoidable task of 'framing' Indigenous culture for public consumption, with an open-ended, experimental approach to engaging with the wider community. This allows a renegotiation of common values and beliefs to take place without fear of accusation or blame. Respect for another culture is not a given but has to be earned through participation, unless, of course, it is a form of superficial politeness. Perhaps one of the most positive things an Indigenous cultural festival can do is to help change social values in real and enduring ways.

Christine Peacock is cautiously optimistic about the future of the festival, which is inseparable from the changing relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians: "(You have to) understand what (respect) actually means, to understand what part it plays within society, amongst human beings. It's an essential value and if it's missing, then..."

Colourised Festival, June 28-July 9, Brisbane, www.colourisedfestival.com.au. Erik Roberts is a film-maker, curator and writer who has recently completed a series of documentary videos on the work of Torres Strait Islander artist Dennis Nona for his solo exhibition, Sesserae at the Dell Gallery, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. Contents RT 69 - October/November 05