

## Paradise...a hell of a place

In a recent search on Google, 'Paradise' was listed as a hotel, and 'paradise lost' was a dark rock band. On further perusal there were brothels and chat sites, oh, and a poem also as it happens. Unlike other mythical constructs Paradise was once a place on earth. We were there but we blew it; so now it's the job queue or else. For a long time hence Paradise was a place to dream about, we'd like to go there one day, for sure. For the secular folk amongst us the idea, so besmirched by religious repression, might have lost its discursive cache. But in an era when affluence and misery are bedfellows, the well-heeled but angst-ridden period right now, there might be something to the tale after all. What is Paradise exactly? If attitude is the answer then all that's required is focus, a little shift in perception and everything's nicely nirvana. But Paradise is material, substantial and fleshy. Get what you want and you might find yourself embroiled. Too little and the same appears to be true. This of course is the question that 'Paradise....a hell of a place' both poses and variously ponders; a thematic point of reference that eleven artists are here invited to consider. Neither pessimistic nor optimistic their responses are largely existential. Indeed the rub of the 'Paradise' dilemma looms large in their divergent approaches - without a bit of struggle it might as well be hell.

**Sarah Berners** has a freaky take on paradise. In her photographic series *Object-Appendage* the construct is surprisingly re-jigged. Though a girl is there, naked and generally anonymous, her companion is not what might be expected. No fleshy consort but rather a truncated air-conditioning duct; a plasticized fetish that appears to have taken the lady's fancy. In this contemporary notion of ecstasy, flesh and nature no longer are paired. As the artist suggests, *in our modern era, worship of the synthetic has taken precedence. For those of us who secretly relish a smack of petroleum at the bowser, or the acrid scent of a freshly bleached floor, there is a quality to the noxious that is both ambiguous and beckoning.*

Equally leery about nature, **Andy Hutson's** *Another Day in Paradise*, 2011 appears to revel in the fabricated world of today. The raft that features seems to have drifted from the set of a low-budget film. An ironic piece whose materials, papier mache and cardboard for instance, cast doubt on the authenticity of what we see. Though suggestive of the *Raft of the Medusa*, high tragedy here gives way to merchandising,

booze and CDs. *Part time-capsule, part survival kit*, suggests Hutson, *this impossible vessel is adrift on a sea of cultural detritus, a laid-back reminder that it's important to keep cool in times of crisis.*

From the vantage point of **Bonnie Lane's** new installation Hutson's raft might seem benignly part of the scene. Her *People's Paradise* is a terrarium bedecked with googled and downloaded photos in which the ideal place is depicted. Coconut palms, blue skies, the perfect pad. Not for us however, but a pair of domestic and dolefully ignorant mice. Oblivious to the space they inhabit they nibble and shit and do mouseish things, seemingly mocking the fact of existence. The artist's rationale is wry: *I have a morbid curiosity in human banality and I am keen to reinterpret observations of the melancholic, humorous, repetitive and relentless human condition emanating from the banal actions and experiences of everyday life.* In the absence of nothing to kick against paradise seems nothing if not quietly demeaning.

The world of the plastic fantastic courses through the aforementioned artists works but the possibilities of paradise are infinite and cannot be contained by one culture alone. Secularists may have their fantasies but for others it remains a tenet of religious belief. This is apparent in **Christopher Koller's** *Soldier Boy*, 2011, a photographic montage in which the Islamic martyr is brought sharply into focus. Regarding this the artist's perspective is bleak: *Paradise has been used as a lure to get the young to engage in holy wars, to inflict violence against others, destroy their property, murder and even to stage their own deaths. Dom de Lillo writes of the boy soldiers of Iran, given up by their mothers to the State in the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, the 'mine jumpers' were given plastic keys to paradise to wear around their necks before they were sent to clear minefields with their bodies.* Koller's work is chilling because it contrasts the real violence of martyrdom with the fictional conflicts of gaming. For a certain demographic x-box videos are widely appealing, a pleasure ground in which excitation is privileged but with the risk factor safely removed. The youthful models he works with appear tender but also wounded, so much is written there. Where is their paradise I wonder; is it the world and all that it offers or its digital on-line other?

In his video work, *Free Tomorrow*, 2011 **Paolo Consorti** also ponders the Arabian world and its image. In this quasi-Orientalist pastiche, European Imperialist discourses are reframed with ironic intent. The 'East' becomes a place of abandon and permissiveness, a fiction much grounded in Western belief but one critiqued here by the artist. Exoticism it suggests might not be as pervasive as it once was but our fears and fantasies, especially regarding Islam are no less fuelled by inherited perceptions: on the one hand the veiled and impoverished masses, on the other a locus of sensuality and abandon. Neither of these is especially illuminating, but the presentation of such images at a time when we know precisely the nature of their fiction is a reminder that our beliefs are exceedingly difficult to shake. To be free tomorrow, we must first be free of the past and its misconceptions. Consorti's *paradisio*, glimpsed at the rear of the composition may not necessarily be a place buried in history, but perhaps around the corner.

Eschewing the troubles of the world **The Sisters Hayes** have conjured a personal paradise, existing as it happens in the realms of childhood fantasy and play. *Shadowland*, 2010-2011, is a cubby of blankets and ropes. Inside it a shadow animation is projected. Created by Rebecca Hayes, it reveals a narrative in *which four children adventure across tree-tops and the wide open sea, and encounter one of Paradise's most infamous/iconic residents: the snake*. No sooner are we lulled into the enclosure than the point at which we must leave it is presented. The snake, harbinger of forbidden knowledge presages our flight from the garden. In childhood our paradise might well be assured but soon the business of living begins.

In the work of **Natascha Stellmach** the world of childhood does not seem half so sweet. The context of her *Untitled* installation is her own youthful migration from her parents' birthplace in Germany to Australia. *Is Paradise a place, asks the artists, and how does this relate to notions of "home"? Or is Paradise inside of us, with the child at play?* To illustrate the question the artist has reworked a post-Federation children's book, cutting into it and including snippets of free-associative writing. Handwritten wall texts accompany it and other more hidden tracts are found on closer inspection. With references also to Germany and its folklore Stellmach's world is plural and layered. Paradise in such a context could never be a singular place. However, as the artist suggests, play is something to be found within.

Fatalistic though the myth of Eden might be, for artist **Deborah Kelly** the unvarnished world of nature needs not be as oppressive as the post-fall narrative and its hardships suggest. In her effusive capacity for invention Kelly has been busy with the possibilities of hybridization. *I've always wished the parameters around the species were more permeable, the edges more malleable, the imperatives more negotiable. At various times I've thought it would be heaven to be perfectly mutable; to breathe underwater, to have diaphanous wings secreted under this predatory carapace, to idly groom my silky pelt with the tips of my very many fingers, to summon my familiars, my millions of minions, to settle this right royal, paradise-threatening blood feud between the life-forms.* It may not be everyone's perfect idyll, yet such imaginings are not solely the province of fiction. Science also has made advances in the splicing of genes and divergent species so might it be that the paradise here imagined is already in the process of occurring?

Equally indifferent to the natural order **Simon MacEwan's** watercolours remind me of the asteroid inhabited by Saint-Exupery's Little Prince. Suspended in space they are depictions of closed systems governed only by their own internal rationale. Called *...in a better world than this* the artist presents us with sui-generis environments; existing purely as imagined places they are studies of systems that are self-sustaining and largely improbable. With respect to their meaning the artist has stated: *If Paradise is a state of sufficiency- a closed loop where nothing really changes, then these hermetic systems; poised somewhere between entropy and renewal, must also find some kind of equilibrium; but what this might be and whether it would be anyone's idea of Paradise is far from clear.* Indeed such is the lesson of Paradise in the mythic sense, only on leaving it or being expelled are life's lessons and riches uncovered.

The material world and the exotic east, childhood play and the pleasures of invention and change: all have been sited as contexts in which paradise might exist but also debunked and derided. For the conceptualists however, paradise is not so much a place as a notion to be tackled head on. At large in our neural networks its siren call is tempting. It has shaped so much of our discourses but ultimately it is simply a thought, and on these terms others have sought to explore it. In his reductive word piece, *Now Here*, **Brad Haylock** considers paradise from two co-ordinates of philosophical discourse. Thomas More's *Utopia*, 1516 is the first of these. The title of this novel is a pun, a play on the Greek words *ou-topos* [no place] and *eu-topos* [good place], which we

see in Haylock's piece. Conflated with this is Marx's idea of history coming to an end, that is a state in which society is beyond its capacity for revolutionary conflicts. As the title of Haylock's work suggest that point is possibly 'now here'. Debatable though this might be, the artist's interest is clearly in the end point of a given idea. What might happen for instance when a utopian ideal approaches its own conclusion? *Inside-out white cubes (one used as planter)*, 2011 is similarly conceived in that it looks to the endgame of modernist architectural idealism. His white cube gallery, no longer the timeless space it was once imagined to be, is merely a cheap pot plant. Stripped of its cultural authority it is not yet even reclaimed by nature, merely it is a footnote of interior design.

Remaining in conceptualist mode **Michael Wegerer's** *Princess Paradise* Installation is intriguing. Read his statement and you'll see a literary set of referents: Brave New World, Robinson Crusoe, two dystopias both distant in time and place but both offering truncated contentment. At first glance however, the artwork presented by Wegerer suggests nothing of the sort. His chair for instance, which appears to be simply a chair is in fact a facsimile made of paper and glue. In its attention to detail it is most certainly uncanny and ever so weird. Strange one feels, because it calls into question most everything we take to be true. Look at it long enough and questions spew forth from your mind. Suddenly the dystopian allusion is apparent. Indeed what better visual metaphor for those moments when our thoughts are in revolt. What better catalyst than this to create the world we want. Or could it be that paradise really is ignorance if that is the bliss you prefer?

**Damian Smith, 2011**