



Liquid Sea

Leopold & Rudolf Blaschka, Louis Boutan, Etienne-Jules Marey, Jean Painlevé, Doug Aitken, Christine Borland, Joan Brassil, Dorothy Cross, Tacita Dean, David Haines & Joyce Hinterding, Zhu Ming, Mariele Neudecker, Ani O'Neill, Elisa Sighicelli, Hiroshi Sugimoto
Curator Rachel Kent

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mca.com.au
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Theme exhibitions are out of favour at the moment. It is assumed that this kind of show can straightjacket the complex ambitions of the artist to support a curatorial argument. Works of art, it is said, are reduced to a one-dimensional illustration. *Liquidsea*, is a theme show that attempts to avoid this prescriptive approach. To do this, Curator Rachel Kent included more than one work to represent the majority of artists and built the exhibition around a suitably equivocal and broadly evocative theme. Indeed, the vigorous art in *Liquidsea* survives thematic restrictions, and is upbeat and uplifting. The viewer soon becomes less conscious of theme and more of the medium: an awareness of glass, film, video, wool, metal, water, etc. functions as a way of bringing together motley and disparate objects. This is daring in some ways, for a theme allows the art in an exhibition to be less uniform, permitting installation alongside photograph or contemporary and historical junctures.

But how do you ensure the success of an exhibition with a slight odour of moral illegitimacy? A policy of shock and awe is vogueish and *Liquidsea* lets loose with two colossal installations by American Doug Aitken and local artist Joan Brassil. Aitken's video works have been shown at the MCA before, and then as now negotiate a fine line between brooding ambient mood and wallpaper. On this occasion wallpaper triumphs. In *New Ocean* [2001], simple watery images are combined and mirrored to make changing patterns in a huge circular room. This effect could be as complex and hypnotic as watching a moving stream, but without the benefit of enhancing substances it is quickly grasped and dismissed as an oversized kaleidoscope. The severe, formal beauty of the construction in marine ply that houses the installation, as beautiful as the side of a ship and as imposing in its geometry as Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim in New York, is ultimately more interesting.

Brassil has built a career from single-mindedly combining video screens and curved plexiglass for nearly two decades. *Quay vive* [2003], continues this relentless tradition, water pools adding a symbol-laden complement to the customary exploration of transparency and transmission. The self-consciously emblematic elements in the installation refuse to work together and any meaning underlying the work remains elusive. *Quay vive* argues too strenuously for a poetic meeting of art and science and is as convincing as George Bush talking about freedom.

When neither of these 'mother of all installations' shakes the foundations, it's up to the grunts to carry the show and fortunately there are a wealth of strong works supported by high-tech equipment. Not a painting is to be found, despite the illustrious history of marine art. Even the delightfully eccentric early material, photographs and films by Jean Painlevé, Jules Marey and Louis Boutan, is machine generated, making the case for an objective recording of nature. The strongest claims in the exhibition catalogue for a focus on a "coming together of art and science" derive from this. A group of minimalist works in the show reinforce but simultaneously subvert this focus. Hiroshi Sugimoto's cool photographs of the meeting of sea and sky, while as precise as a diagram, convey reverence and spirituality. Tacita Dean's simple and direct films, installed with looped film and whirring projectors, expose the machinery that is the very magic of illusion. Christine Borland's perplexing experiment to meld human and bioluminescent jellyfish DNA is one of the most provocative [and best] mixes of art and science, conjuring up the fearsome prospect of life out of a beaker. Zhu Ming performed naked in a plastic sac, bobbing like a foetus in its caul, adrift in the fetid amniotic fluid of Sydney's Harbour.

This image of the vulnerable journey through life provides an introduction to the second group of works in the exhibition, in which the dispassionate beauty of recorded fact is tossed on emotional seas and sentimentalised. Joyce Hinterding and David Haines create in *House II* [2003] a mansion spurting floods from windows and doors, a gothic vision of the destructive power of water tempered by the humorous notion of leaving the bath running. Mariele Neudecker's romantic models of shipwrecks, icebergs and clipperships also comment on the wild splendour of the sea and our pretence at control. Out and out craft is present in the macramé octopus by New Zealand artist Ani O'Neill, a cheesy souvenir of the beach, light-hearted and fun.

Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka are represented with super-real glass models of soft-bodied sea creatures, perhaps the best works in the show. These were made for educational or scientific use in the 1880s and were not considered art at the time. They used glass as it was impractical to taxidermy a jellyfish but their work looks as precise as today's computer generated models. Their quirky glass menagerie provides a graphic illustration of the mysteries of the sea and the hideous beauty of life.

Michael Desmond



Zhu Ming

Liquidsea
Farm Cove, 9, 15 and 16 March

Mysterious and visually astounding, the *Bubble Series* was brought to Sydney Harbour by Chinese performance artist Zhu Ming, as part of the Museum of Contemporary Art's exhibition *Liquidsea*.

Born in Hunan Province in 1972 and a Beijing resident since 1993, Zhu Ming gained international recognition as an important performance artist by the collective work, *To Add Another Metre to an Anonymous Mountain*, in Beijing, 1995. Zhu Ming's works, which deal with themes of vulnerability and isolation, are distinguished by great conceptual concision and often restricted to closed environments. The concepts of isolation and vulnerability speak to the explicit and implicit hurt that results from both external and internal forces; forces which are socially and intuitively oppressive, and psychologically driven. The idea of the bubble was derived from Zhu Ming's experience of washing clothes by hand, a daily practice started when he was nine years old. The foam, made up of clusters of tiny, individual bubbles, provided his inspiration.

In the performances on Sydney Harbour, Zhu Ming enclosed himself in a large transparent plastic bubble. Adrift on the Harbour, he floated naked inside the bubble [with a breathing pipe attached to it] allowing the current to determine his direction. There was an implicit symbolic meaning – the soft and fragile skin of the bubble served as a metaphor for the womb from which life is shaped, nurtured and exiled; while the pipe connecting Zhu Ming and the bubble symbolised the umbilical cord. The crispness of the bubble represented the frailty of many aspects of reality as well as that of human nature. An inevitable natural life cycle, from beginning to end, was in full evidence in this work.

As much as *Bubble Series* was about life, it was also haunted by death. The uncertain pressure exerted by a closed environment makes the individual inside feel helpless and vulnerable. The threatening aspects of this experience are apparent in Zhu Ming's statement, "For me, death is more important than birth."¹

This work addressed a private experience in isolation, requiring a laborious effort on the part of the artist to expose himself naked to the public gaze. In this way, Zhu Ming called attention to the vulnerability of the individual when subjected to isolation, forged by social reality and pressure – such isolation being political, ideological, cultural and institutional.

It should also be pointed out that Zhu Ming's work is produced in post-Mao China, which still exercises a severe artistic censorship – in particular, performance art is not allowed to be staged in public, making this activity somewhat problematic since its inception in the late 1970s. Performance artists have often been put under pressure from Government harassment, and their exclusion from official exhibitions has meant a lack of a domestic audience. As a result, artists have found themselves cut off even further from mainstream society. Zhu Ming's work therefore, expresses a collective voice.

A further complication in Zhu Ming's case is that his works pose a challenge to the Chinese social taboo against the public display of the naked body. In response to these ongoing pressures and complexities, Zhu Ming has raised a unique voice as an agent of cultural criticism. His performances stage a silent appeal for public attention, and for collective efforts by a group of artists who are ready to end their isolation.

Note
1. From an interview with Zhu Ming at Newcontemporaries Gallery, Sydney, 22 March, 2003



Left: David Haines and Joyce Hinterding, *House II* [video still], 2003. Photo courtesy the artists.
Right+below: Zhu Ming, performance, 2003. Photos courtesy the Museum Contemporary Art, Sydney

Li Zhe