

PASSENGER ON SOMEBODY ELSE'S TRAIN: THE ARTISTIC DIASPORA

TRANSCULTURAL INSIGHTS OF AN AUSTRALIAN ARTIST WORKING IN COLOMBIA DURING THE 1990s

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As a visual artist and writer on contemporary art with a special interest in transcultural issues facing Australia, including its colonial history, I developed a specific interest in Latin America. I began to wonder how Australia would have fared if its colonisers were other than British.

My understanding of Latin American culture came about during a three-year period as a postgraduate student and artist in Bogotá, Colombia. Therefore you could say I view it through a Colombian filter that is surely of a distinct character. I believe that the Latin American experience of culture and their hybrid postcolonial societies affords us, as Australians, an insight and possible understandings that could inform our future cultural frameworks.

Over the last ten years as an Australian postcolonial artist, my work has continued to look at the cultural pressure points that signify the thresholds of transglobal identity at the crossroads of language and culture, drawing on my experience in Latin America in my thoughts — about my own place — Australia. In this paper I look at the effect of changing one's physical context to one's creative output. With a focus on my

personal experience as an artist in Colombia contrasted with the experience of the artist Juan Dávila in Australia, I will also explore some of the wider issues of location, identity and culture.

THE JOURNEY

Let me explain my journey as an artist to Colombia. People always ask me why I wanted to live in Bogotá, not New York. Sensible question no doubt. And though it may seem strange I did not just arrive there by accident, but as the result of a well considered plan (well at least I thought so).

Before I begin it will be valuable for me to contextualise my arts practice. Early on in my work, my thinking and research was being driven by a quest to understand my personal colonial history located at Botany Bay. From 1987 until 1992 my paintings were focused on this history, exploring the idea of belonging through an intense look at the Bay as a symbol of Australian history and identity. I was interested in exploring the idea that the way in which things are born can affect how they grow and develop.

Botany Bay became a metaphor in my work for Australia's relationship to her



Figure 1
Innocent Bystander I,
Oil on canvas 65 x 80cm,
1992

colonial past. For me the Bay itself also embodies a palpable presence of our Indigenous past in its rock carvings and Indigenous community presence at La Perouse — the site of the first encounter between Captain Cook and the Indigenous people. It is the place where one of Cook's crew, Forby Sutherland, died of illness and was buried at what is now known as Kurnell — supposedly the first white man buried here. As a place, Botany Bay — Kamay — was quickly dismissed in the first months of the colony as non-functional and barren territory to be replaced in importance by Port Jackson, now Sydney.

Subsequent years of exploitation of the Bay's resources left it a bleak

industrial ruin within 200 years of the first settlement. It became for me a metaphor for the colonial experience. That particular artistic inquiry became an exhibition of paintings called 'Innocent Bystanders' shown at the King Street gallery in Sydney in 1992.

This project showed me two things. First, my interest in places and spaces of encounter between cultures — and secondly, my appetite for colonial histories and their relationship to the development of identity and cultural processes that follow them. I began to wonder how Australia might have developed in 300 years or how we would have developed had we been settled by the Spanish or the Dutch. It was this



Figure 2
The Bay gives away few secrets, Oil on canvas
65 x 80cm, 1992

project that made me ask myself the question 'How will Latin Americans mark their 500 years of colonisation?'

My journey began when I won a postgraduate scholarship from the Colombian government to study Latin American art history at the Universidad De Los Andes. As far as I understand, I was the first Australian to receive this scholarship. It was 1992, pre-internet days. Mail was slow and course information scant. With a copy of the letter of offer in hand, I set off for Colombia, on a wing and a prayer, via Zurich, Frankfurt, New York and Boston.

LOSS OF LANGUAGE

In her catalogue essay on the work of Juan Dávila, Nelly Richard writes:

the wandering self is polymorphous. For to cross boundaries means a change in state. Itinerancy leads to renunciation of sedentary habits binding the subject to a fixed morality or truth. By breaking out of this mould, the subject becomes a transient in identity.¹

The first time I arrived in Bogotá it was during the day. The plane pushed down through the cumulus clouds, over the mountains onto a high plain of rich green grass. In the distance the city pushed up against a panoramic backdrop of mountains embracing the city along a north-south parallel. The city towers diminished against the mountains. The Virgin Guadalupe sitting like a silver star high on the hill watching over the city.

Immediately on arrival in Colombia I was confronted with a loss of spoken language. Without my native tongue and beginning to learn another, I was transported back to childhood.

Communication became an important key to understanding this new place but language, or lack of it, became a barrier to getting there. Engagement with the Spanish language was a challenge, but luckily I did have visual language with which to communicate. The strangeness of some of the words and their concepts struck me and I began to use them as a way to handle the culture. And at once began to enjoy the game of living in translation.

In an interview with Paul Foss, Juan Dávila describes his own loss of language. He says:

I was living in Melbourne and returning to Chile for visits. The circumstances of living in two extremes of the world, in two peripheral cultures, slowly forced me to look at the materiality of the circumstances where artworks operate. It also forced me to assume the dimension of loss of language and history that emigrants have to find options for identity.²

Identity and culture are located within quite definite cultural contexts; therefore, to change country, whether as a refugee, an exile or a permanent resident, implies a certain giving up of identity. There is always a liminal space between arriving and settling into the new place where one's identity is challenged, or perhaps, neutralised in the face of the new context. No longer are the familiar tropes of one's culture there to remind one of who one is. An existential problem arises, particularly for an Australian, carrying the inbuilt cultural uncertainty of belonging or not belonging, and a weak sense of identity due to a lack of relationship to the narrow cultural stereotypes.

Juan Dávila came to Australia in 1973. He came not as a refugee or exile but for love. He had been an artist in Chile before arriving in Australia and was associated closely with some of the young Chilean artists who were working during the censorious time of Pinochet. As a way of belonging and engaging in the Australian culture he says, 'I decided to strengthen my voice as an Australian'.³ By claiming his territory not as a Chilean artist, nor as a Chilean/Australian artist, but as an artist and through making a conscious engagement with the new culture, he was able to engage this new visual reality and culture without abandoning his Chilean cultural language and history. So his work became, in a sense, a postcolonial fusion of two marginal cultural perspectives. It became a conscious acknowledgement of his circumstances through a concrete and tangible engagement. Through this engagement he made work such as *Sentimental History of Australian Art* (1982) and *Fable of Australian Painting* (1982/83), both of which mix a range of Australian cultural icons and Latin American heroes, which convey a paradoxical comment on Australian culture within a global history of colonisation. His recent work *Woomera* (2002) does the same, alluding to racist caricatures from early print journalism and recent media images relating to the refugee in Australia. These works are a clear example of how making conscious engagement with culture, even if it is not the culture of one's birth, may provoke new images, considerations and perspectives.

Enrolling in Latin American art history with Yvone Pinni, historian and now editor of *Art Nexus*, I began to immerse myself in the Latin American culture, through the Colombian prism.

Moving into a studio with Jaime Avila — a young artist who had just exhibited in the Biennial de Bogotá 1992 — I started to paint and draw. As a student at the university I was generously included in the art community, and met artists like Antonio Caro, Colombia's foremost conceptual artist, and the curator Carolina Ponce de León.

The problem of cultural context came welling to the surface for me very quickly. How was I going to work in Colombia and bring to bear my previous practice? Suddenly all my Australian ideas seemed irrelevant. My particular perspective on colonial histories did not appear relevant in this new place. I was losing my identity and needed to find new ways of cultural engagement, because painting in the studio was not enough.

It did not take long to realise that nostalgia for where and what had been left behind was an immobilising strategy for cultural engagement. It left me unable to partake wholeheartedly in the new culture and hence, come to new insights and understandings. Like Dávila, I decided upon a pro-active involvement in the Colombian culture.

It was at this point that my work made considerable shifts as I tried to link together my original interest in history and culture as it related to the postcolonial condition of Australia with this complex, and often violent, postcolonial situation in Colombia. This realisation led me into new areas of material exploration in which I began to experiment with a diverse array of local materials like blocks of sugar, coffee, and maize as well as use popular iconography, different supports for the artworks such as blankets, and explore combining documentary photography alongside traditional oil paintings.

With this new approach the range of my art production broadened tremendously. Apart from working in the studio, Jaime Avila and I began a series of experimental art workshops in La Picota and La Modelo Prisons in Bogotá, which resulted in several 'Patios Urbanos' exhibitions and the publication of a screen-printed artist's book entitled *La virgen desnuda voladora*, exploring perceptions of the city as seen through the eyes of those incarcerated. Through the university I was able to participate in cultural exchange programs in the provincial centres of Rioacha and Puerto Inirida. And through my involvement with the Bogotá art community I was selected to exhibit in a couple of the National and Regional Salons — annual survey art exhibitions — and several of the curated exhibitions such as the *Salón de Arte Jóvenes*. Leaving nostalgia behind me and adopting this proactive and immersive engagement with the Colombian culture meant that Bogotá transformed into a surprising and expansive visual field in which to work.

One of the first mixed media works that I produced during this period was *Limpio de Sangre* (literally, 'clean blooded', but meaning 'blue-blood'). It was a work exploring various levels of Colombian colonialism through looking at the role of the privileged classes in relation to the history of slavery, while also hinting at indigenous ingenuity and the complex relationship between them. The work was described by Barbara Bloemink in *Arte* magazine:

{*Limpio de Sangre* is} an architectural structure with cakes of dark sugar (panela) carefully arranged with an abundance of cracks giving the



Figure 3
Limpio de Sangre, Sugar blocks, gold leaf
165 x 165 x 15cm, 1994

appearance of a jigsaw puzzle. The acrid and penetrating smell of the sugar filled the space around the work, producing a sensorial dimension for the spectator. Grand letters covered in gold leaf, and dripping a rusty colour, were inserted into the blocks of sugar forming the phrase: LIMPIO DE SANGRE, words that played ironically on the history of gold in the pre-Colombian era, and on the political and economic situations in the country that have caused the spilling of blood.⁴

Another sculptural work from this period was *PAX*. It comprised a metal barbecue, typical of the Los Llanos region,

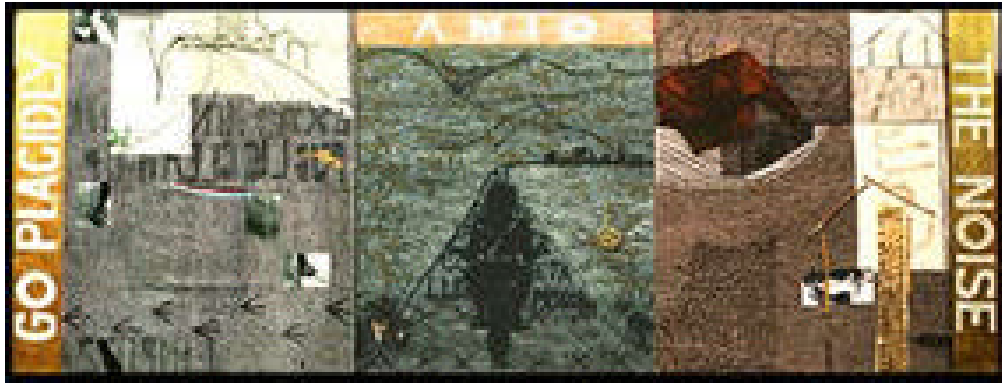


Figure 4 (left)
PAX, Colombian BBQ, photocopies on
card 140 x 40cm, 1994

Figure 5 (above)
PAX (detail)

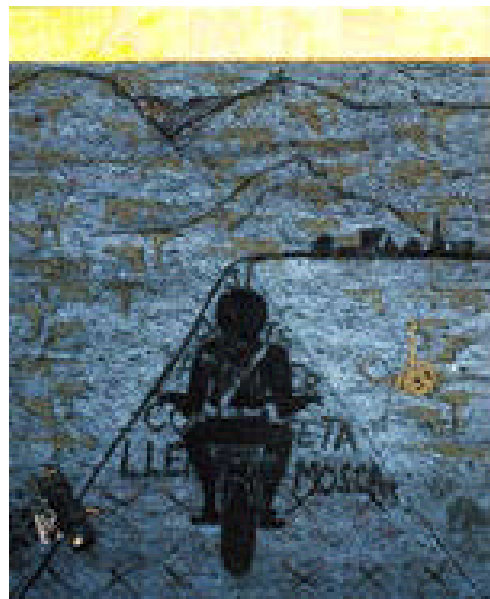
which is normally hung over a fire and around which large thin pieces of beef are draped to cook and smoke. In this work the letters P-A-X have been inserted into the metal structure to form a field of cold blue within. On closer inspection there are deathly images on the blue letters that have been cut and photocopied from the local newspaper. This work employs ironic juxtaposition as a means of reflecting on the endemic urban violence, but it also made reference to the guerrilla movements that developed in the Llanos region during the mid-twentieth century, as the style of BBQ comes from that region.

A third work, employing local materials as metaphor during this period, was *Go Placidly Amid the Noise*. This enormous six-metre by two-metre triptych was made on grey blankets typically used by the 'indigentes' (street kids and homeless people). Each panel took up the story of a fictitious life on the street to explore the various ways in which people came to be living there. The title of the work was carved in flat wooden panels in large letters in English and then covered in gold leaf and attached across the top of the work. The work became a symbolic juxtaposition of social relationships from the life of the



Figures 6, 6a, 6b, 6c
Go Placidly Amid the Noise (triptych),
 Mixed media on blanket 600 x 200cm,
 1994

most needy, represented by the blankets contrasted against the gold, and the text making reference to the role of the church and the divide between rich and poor. This work, exhibited in the 1994 National Salon, inspired a lot of debate. I was told by an artist colleague that, but for the fact that I was a foreigner, the work would have won the grand prize.



During my time in Colombia I could not be an innocent bystander, but my interpretation of what I was responding to was obviously influenced by my Australian cultural perspective that supposedly promotes an all encompassing egalitarianism. This view contrasted starkly with the Colombian perspective and experience of the world. My reactions to living in this new place were played out in my artworks, at times leading to biting criticisms. Through a visual articulation of my response to living in the complicated Colombian cultural paradigm that incorporates a strong indigenous history as diverse as Australia's, a history of slavery that has left traces of African influences in the music and language, mineral wealth that has inspired exploitation, the drug war, incessant guerrilla activity and general political instability, to name but a few, I was able to voice my various responses to the new culture as I worked myself into understanding it and becoming a part of it.

TRANSCULTURAL VISUAL LANGUAGES

Dávila took the right as an artist to engage in Australian culture, reproducing and commenting on such heroes as Ned Kelly and our sacred icons like the meat pie and football. My participation in Colombian cultural life was welcomed by the Colombian artists: I knew I was seen as an artist first and as an Australian second. This process of moving from the outside to the inside of the culture was surprising to me as I had rarely felt that in my own country. After three years I was accepted as part of the cultural group. I was not marginalised because of my national identity nor was I given special treatment.

I was able to live an active artistic life in Colombia and, in the short time I was there, I put some of my stories up for consideration alongside other Colombian artists.

On returning to Australia I was able to draw on my experience in Colombia to look openly and critically at the Australian visual and cultural reality in my work. As Latin America does not play an important role in Australia as either trading or cultural exchange partner, I decided to turn my focus locally. This led to a body of work exploring the relationship between Australia and Asia, in which both contemporary and historical attitudes and stereotypes were questioned and parodied using visual motifs in what became broadly known as the *Stories from Home Project*.

As a starting point for this project I interviewed 14 people between the ages of 18 and 30 about their perceptions and understandings of Australia and of Asia. The interviewees came from Australia, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Each person was asked to bring two objects with them to the interview — one representing Australia and the other Asia. I asked each person the same questions, such as, what they know about Asia/Australia, how they came to their understanding, why they selected their particular objects and I photographed them holding their chosen objects which ranged from a wok, a car and a carton of milk to hats, clothes and mementoes. These images and interviews became the basis of many of the visual components of the project.

During our talks, notions of identity and stereotypes were explored uncovering both political and historical prejudice on both sides. For instance, in



Figure 7
Lingua Franca, Photocopy/digital print,
140 x 165cm, 1998

the interview with Yoko from Taiwan, she talked about her mother's fear of her coming to Australia due to the White Australia policy which she believed still to be in force in 1997. At the time of our interview the One Nation Party had just

won its first seats in parliament. The work *Lingua Franca* is a coalescence of our conversation, with a historical image of Robert Menzies, a promoter of the White Australia policy.

The historical fear of an Asian invasion or 'yellow peril', etched deeply in the Australian psyche, was discussed regularly and is mocked in the work *Armour Yourself* — in which a person stands poised to defend the nation with a wok in hand and lid on head, resembling an ancient Mongol warrior: Don't fight them join them! *Ginseng Cowboy* suggests the extent to which Eastern philosophy and medicine has become an accepted part of our culture, while *Euro-Geisha* suggests an admiration for the inventive tenacity of the Japanese who have managed to maintain a balance between traditional culture and the new. The work *Timor Crossing* makes a satirical reference to various Australian artists, such as Ian Fairweather and Donald Friend who found inspiration in Chinese and Indonesian culture respectively.

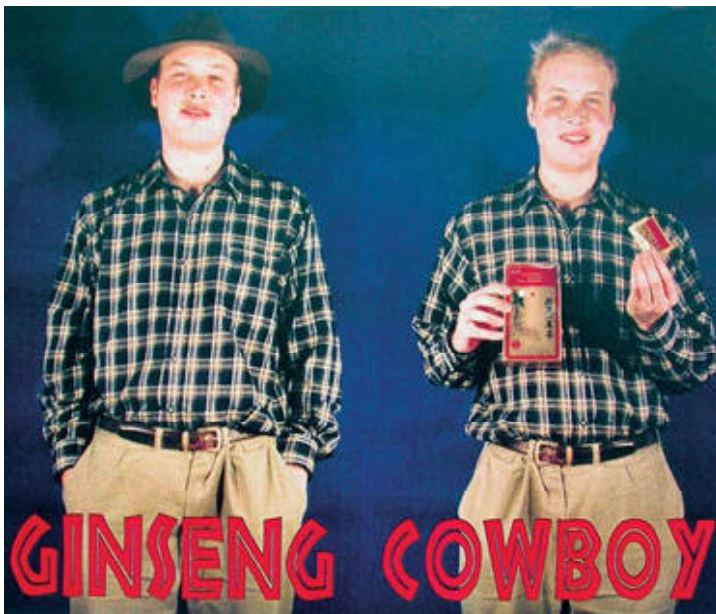


Figure 8
Ginseng Cowboy,
Digital print 100 x 80cm,
1999

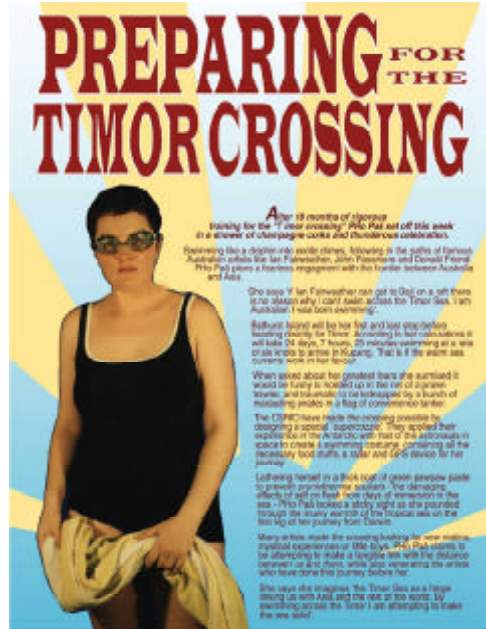


Figure 9 (left)
Euro-Geisha, Digital print 100 x 25cm,
1999

Figure 10 (above)
Timor Crossing, Digital print 100 x 80cm,
1999

The *Stories From Home* project required me to search for new ways to work with the visual material to strengthen the visual message. The experience of working as an artist in Colombia led me in my art practice to use a more diverse array of materials and media in the construction of my work. No longer strictly a painter, I began to see myself as an artist who choreographs my ideas to the medium that most suits them. In the *Stories From Home* project, advertising and marketing imagery became a strong point of reference. My research highlighted that prejudice broke down at some level when people spoke of food and shopping. This led me to make a series of works using commercial

souvenir type objects such as tea towels, plates, mugs and T-shirts. In this case the resulting images show the complexity of the ideas being explored but without proposing solutions.

In a sense this project became a visual exploration of cross-cultural dialogue focusing on Australia, looking at how exchange is manifested and expressed through our perceptions of the other. To emphasise this dialogue, images such as Borobodur, in *Tom Yum, Dick and Harry*, the Mongol hordes in *Armour Yourself* and Chinese script from the joss papers in *Follow the Leader Downunder*, all relevant to specific Asian cultures,² have been employed, thus creating a cross-cultural double entendre as well as giving the



Figure 11
*Tom Yum, Dick
and Harry*, Digital
print 100 x 80cm,
1999

possibility of the tongue-in-cheek humour that has a transcultural interpretation, and possibly, a transcultural punchline.

One shared mythos that became apparent from the interviewees was the notion of dual identity hinting at the multicultural realities of both Australia and Asia. Four or five generations since their ancestors migrated, some of the Asian interviewees identified as Chinese-Indonesian in the same way as Australians continue to identify, for example, as Greek-Australian. If we, as Australians, intend to locate ourselves within our geographical context this complex sense of identity and belonging could be read as a regional commonality. Wanting to emphasise this idea through the *Stories from Home* project meant making artwork which blurred the boundary between here and there, suggesting that the faces on the street could be either Singaporean or Sydneysider.

Here it is important to mention this issue of cultural inclusion. Australia has

a tendency to marginalise people, including artists, into categories such as Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB). The 'multicultural', as a category, therefore sits outside mainstream 'culture'. In setting up this separate category that applies to 'other', and by providing special funding to make art about migrant experience and/or identity, migrant artists are limited (perhaps condemned) to the position of working within the realm of nostalgia. What is not being enabled in this approach is the possibility of full participation in the Australian culture as citizens. What Australia loses in this is the breadth of cultural images, the words and sound needed to inform a more sophisticated understanding of our culture with its complexity of cultural heritages.

Pigeon-holing artists into cultural categories limits artists to producing work which sits within the realm of nostalgia and stereotype, meaning that artists and others are kept out of full

participation in the country's culture because their work is defined only by their previous 'national' definition and stays located and attached to identity which, if we recall the words of Nelly Richard, has become transient through the process of changing place. There is a danger of Australia limiting its cultural production to redundant stereotypes which do not fit the new and evolving culture we live in. If I felt a difficulty with these stereotypes in 1992, and still do, imagine how those who adopt this country as home feel about them.

In 2001 Guillermo Gómez-Peña was in Australia working with actors from diverse cultural backgrounds at the Performance Space in Sydney in a show exploring boundaries of identity. Gomez-Peña is a performance artist who challenges master narratives and explores the Chicano identity in the US in relation to the historically colonial relationship between Mexico and the US. In an interview with him last year we discussed the Australian colonial situation. Some of my questions put him on the spot but it is important to hear his perspective. Gómez-Peña reflected that:

Australia has a complicated visual reality ... The Australian art world looks more to outside of Australia than to itself ... there is not an internal gaze or questioning ... One of the very obvious differences is that as a Chicano artist my political claims are textual, they are on the table always as a Mexican living in the USA based on the clear colonial relationship between Mexico and the USA. Australia doesn't have that particular colonial history vis-à-vis the immigrant communities it has hosted.⁵

Later in the interview we discussed

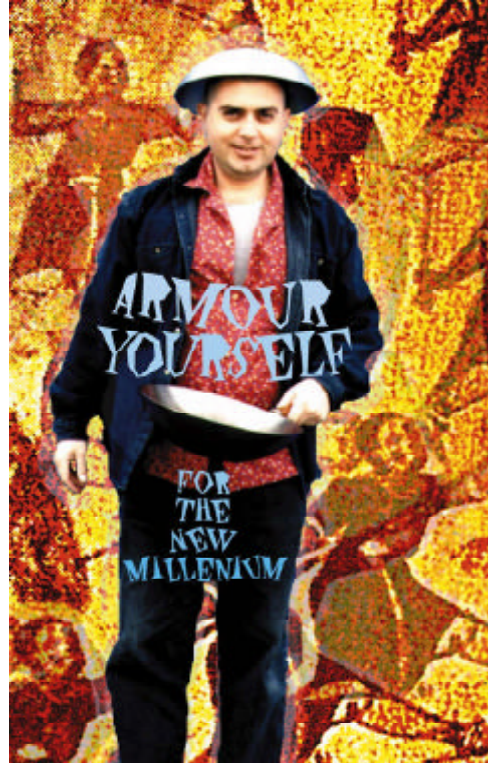


Figure 12
Armour Yourself, Digital print 100 x 80cm, 1999

various means of finding shared ground in Australia. It is in this area that I think it is important to begin thinking of a more mainstream inclusion of the perspectives of the cultural diaspora within our culture. Gómez-Peña continued:

{In the US, the Chicanos have} some ground on which to build a political claim but that does not exist in Australia when we are talking about immigrant communities. It does exist when we talk about the Aboriginal question but not for immigrant communities. The key question of the actors while working with them was, 'What is the cartography we are going to draft to begin to develop a

shared mythos ... and what [here in the Australian reality] is going to be the common ground?'⁶

It is important for us to consider our shared mythos as a nation. Currently there is a dominant cultural myth that, as our nation grows, is becoming outdated as it begins to exclude the majority population. Given the breadth of cultural diversity in Australia, the icons of colonial/white Australia, like the bushranger Ned Kelly and sliced white bread, are becoming less relevant to much of the population. If, in Australia, we are to have critical engagement with our complicated visual reality and culture, and if we are to enable an envisioning of our culture that relates to our current social and political circumstances and which explores our own complex mythos, we must begin to include the voices of the artistic diaspora as an Australian voice.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Nelly Richard, in Paul Taylor, ed., *Hysterical Tears*, (Richmond: Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, 1985), p. 19.
- 2 Juan Dávila, cited by Paul Taylor, *Hysterical Tears*, p. 11.
- 3 Juan Dávila, cited by Paul Taylor, *Hysterical Tears*, p. 11.
- 4 Barbara Bloemink, *Bogotá's Second Young Artists Salon*, December 1992 to January 1993, Planetario Distrital, *Arte* No.15-16, Bogotá 1993.
- 5 Interview by Penelope Richardson with Guillermo Gómez-Peña at the Performance Space, Sydney 2001 (unpublished).
- 6 Interview by Penelope Richardson with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 2001.