



# THE PHYSICS ROOM

A CONTEMPORARY ART PROJECT SPACE

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## ...2 CENTS: THE AUSTRALIANS ARE HERE

### The Australians are here and boy do we know about it!

Australians, all from Sydney, have arrived en masse in Auckland this month, taking up space in Artspace and Teststrip. It seems to have started with a strange video positioned in true Teststrip style on the floor of the main gallery. The video by Hany Armanious featured the artist stuffing his blue jeans with pillows, then walking into Sydney on the day of some sort of parade. The video followed him, unnoticed by passers by, to the sound of what could be a great track for a porno flick.

This exhibition was followed by the icing paintings of Mishka Borowski, an artist who has used food in her art for some time. She has been putting [icing on walls \(1\)](#) for a number of years and used eggs (they hatched during the installation) in her work for the inaugural exhibition at Pendulum. The one week show that featured at Teststrip involved two drawings of naked women made from white icing, one placed on the inside of the street window and the other on the white walls of the main gallery.

The next one-week exhibition was by David Thomas who runs CBD gallery, and opened on the 13th May. Between the two exhibitions Teststrip held an "Artist Run Space Forum", on which Borowski and Thomas sat as well as Daniel Malone from Teststrip and Robert Leonard from Artspace. We were struck immediately by the fact that Artspace is not an artist run space at all. Why did we find Robert Leonard on the panel? This was a question which was unanswered. The forum was chaired by Billy Apple who as chairperson led an extremely boring and uninformative panel discussion. His questions were written on a TELECOM bill return envelope. One wonders if it will pop up in a gallery at a later date.

The discussion led by Apple asked each artist (including Robert Leonard who runs Artspace and is not an artist), what the galleries were and how they were run etc. The two Australians were clearly uninterested in these questions and answered extremely briefly. The two Aucklanders talked at length... Of course the audience knew what was being said and I had the feeling they were talking to the already initiated. We were sitting in Teststrip, we were informed about the forum via the Teststrip mailing list. By the time Apple opened the discussion to the floor I had a boredom headache and even if any interesting discussion was to take place I could not have taken it in. So this spectator along with a number of others quietly left.

The other venues for the Australians are the two main galleries at Artspace. The show entitled "Child Bride" was curated by Hany Armanious and included himself, Tony Schwensen, Robert Pulie, Mary Teague, John Spiteri and Adam Boyd. Armanious has the centre piece of the show. It hangs from the ceiling of the main gallery, an oversized mobile. The mobile is made up of two black cartoon figures each with Armanious' signature traffic lights. It is suggested that this work represents Armanious' position as director of the show, giving the artists the stop and go, in what is perhaps a more immersed role than that normally held by the curator who is not an artist and who does not have 'work' in the show.

It has been said of the Sydney art community "[...Sometimes it seems as if the Australian contemporary art scene sprang fully formed from the loins of a larrikin culture back in the early 80s.](#)" (2) I get the feeling that this is a fact not lost on them.

The show at Artspace seems to sit uncomfortably with what we have come to expect, being predominantly paintings, if not in a pure form. This causes the gallery space to look flat and unengaged. The works look as if they belong at an established dealer gallery with price tags attached.

Also it seems as if some of the work is shoddy - shoddy even within a movement comfortable with shoddiness. Tony Schwensen perhaps illustrates this best with a work entitled "Australia A (Recent Australian Art)". (Are these artists really Australia A, really the best team?) The work by Schwensen consists of a number of cardboard rectangles screwed to the wall, painted roughly with what might be house paint or the like. Compared to other works by the artist these paintings seem extremely thin and dull. The artist is known for using cheap mass-produced toys and payless plastic equivalents to 'reanimate otherwise Minimalist concerns' (3). Schwensen has in the past exhibited cheap but colourful skateboards, hung on the gallery wall. In a recent exhibition he showed blue plastic swimming pools on castors along with pine logs elevated on axle jacks with the same title "Australia A" (4). These works seem much more elegant both visually and conceptually than the sloppy and badly made (in the most uninteresting sense) paintings seen at Artspace.

The show has some moments, a gorgeous painting of a carnival with a pink poodle in the middle by John Spiteri, and a row of 50's style holiday snaps, one showing a man sitting over a woman with rock in hand, by Mary Teague... Otherwise the show is uninteresting and uninspiring. Is this really the best Sydney, and in particular these artists, have to offer?

The final crash has come from David Thomas. His show at Teststrip opened to loud and annoying noise. The window work seemed like it might have been a bit more of jovial abstraction, Sydney-style. Two diamonds made from masking tape, one on the window and one on the rear wall. Quite nice. The show however was nothing like this. It consisted of placards with throw away statements, two amps and guitars and a beaten up drum kit. Those who wanted to make noise on the instruments were welcome. Feedback. This was not a pretty sound. The boys tried to do something with the instruments, tried to make 'works'. Sounded horrible to say the least. When no one in particular was using them there was something of a nice ambient thing going. Someone would walk up to the drum kit and hit it and walk away, someone would then strum a guitar. This was OK, kind of.

It does seem to make the point however.

THE AUSTRALIANS WERE HERE, THERE IS NO WAY YOU COULD NOT HAVE HEARD!

**Caleb K**  
14 May 1997

1. Kit Messham-Muir "Mishka Borowski, Selenium, Sydney", Art & Text, No. 49, 1994.
2. Jeff Gibson "Sydney: Theory or Therapy?", Flash Art, No. 185, 1995.
3. Jeff Gibson "Beuys in the Hood", Art and Text, No. 48, 1994.
4. Melissa Chiu, Review of a show at the Art Gallery of NSW, curated by David Thomas, World Art, No. 13, 1997.