



Greener postures

Can't see the forest for the text – politics trumps painting but it's for a worthy cause, writes JOHN McDONALD.

Can an issue be of overwhelming, global importance and not be a great subject for artists? After experiencing *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, I'm almost inclined to write off the environmental movement as subject matter. This would be unfair, because I'm sure there have been significant works made with an environmental theme. It just so happens that very few of them appear in this exhibition.

The logical conclusion one might draw from *In the Balance* is that when the artist becomes a political activist, their art plays second fiddle to their politics. This is a show in which the wall labels take on a disproportionate importance, having to provide lengthy explanations – “excuses” might be a better word – for a lot of undistinguished imagery.

This is not to deny the centrality of environmental questions. Kevin Rudd may very well have been right when he said climate change was the single most pressing moral issue of our times. What a shame he didn't act on that belief. In itself that lack of action shows how complex and fraught these questions have become.

The paralysis of the main parties reflects the impossibility of juggling public concern for the environment with all those painful economic considerations. In Western democracy, where powers of persuasion count for more than questions of right and wrong, the ground is constantly shifting.

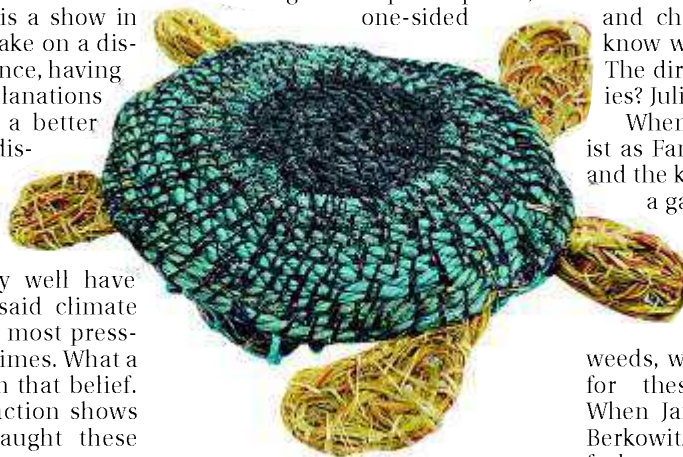
During the years of the Weimar Republic, the German jurist Carl Schmitt analysed this crisis of democracy with great prescience. In the “total state” the government spends all its time micro-managing the affairs of the individual, while being acutely sensitive to the tides of public opinion. Schmitt's unfortunate solution to the problem was

IN THE BALANCE:
ART FOR A
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 until October 31

to embrace the totalitarian politics of Hitler, but even this does not detract from the lucidity of his original critique.

In the total state, politics is one long, indecisive seminar, where everyone is talking at once.

Politicians make promises they cannot and will not keep, while ideologues adopt simplistic, one-sided



Bold ... a turtle by Angela Torenbeek.

views of intractable problems. Matters are only decided when the pressure from one side of the debate becomes too intense. Morality does not feature heavily as a factor.

This is the world in which the artists in the MCA show are pitching their ideas and projects to a receptive audience. Most viewers, myself included, would find little to argue with in protecting the forests, saving the Murray, ending driftnet fishing, making corporate criminals accountable for their actions, preserving indigenous lands and heritage, or encouraging better practices for waste management and recycling.

Having ticked all these boxes there is precious little in the exhibition that makes one pause for thought. For most viewers it hardly matters if an artist is “exploring” a political issue to which one is already committed. Most people of small-L liberal sentiments need no convincing. Only certain newspaper columnists seem to be able to adopt positions that consistently defy common decency and common sense.

Consequently, the MCA exhibition is bathed in a warm glow of moral purity and self-satisfaction, while one struggles to find an arresting artwork. Needless to say, all this work is supposed to be subversive and challenging but it's hard to know who is the target audience. The directors of logging companies? Julia and Tony?

When the little group called Artist as Family – basically mum, dad and the kid – tells us they've started a garden in Surry Hills to feed homeless people, we can all say: “What a nice thing to do.” When Diego Bonetto alerts us to the interesting properties of weeds, we can feel a new curiosity for these much-reviled plants. When Janet Laurence and Lauren Berkowitz dabble in horticulture, we feel a natural sympathy towards these delicate bits of greenery. When David Mackenzie and Susan Norrie show us the muddy ravages caused by Lapindo's mining practices in Indonesia, we can feel suitably shocked and angered. None of these reactions is surprising.

Anyone who walked through this show without stopping to read the explanatory texts would be confronted with a lot of old plastic rubbish arranged on tables; an abundance of pot plants; some attractive wilderness photos; a few interesting pieces of indigenous art, and the odd home-made contraption that doesn't seem to work very well. If that viewer had a few hours, or days, he or she might



watch the documentaries that are included.

It's a familiar MCA syndrome: a propensity to forget that visual art is primarily something to be looked at, not accessed by means of long-winded verbals. If a work does not immediately impress itself upon the viewer, only the most conscientious types will pick up the catalogue to see what it's all about.

Once again we are in the realm of ideology, not art. The stuff on the walls provides examples of artists who have the right attitudes and are doing the right things. But it is only in a totalitarian state that the right attitude ensures a successful work of art. Propaganda is a much easier proposition than these very worthy, very boring works.

There are a handful of standout pieces, most notably the assemblages of Lorraine Connelly-Northey, including a large-scale wall map of the Murray-Darling area made from discarded iron.

These pieces are bold and direct, whereas so many others are oblique. One is attracted to the object itself before any consideration of what messages it might convey. Some of the same qualities may be found in the pieces by Torres Strait Island artists, such as Angela Torenbeek, who uses plastic refuse and net to make sculptures of turtles. One knows straight away there is something toxic about this material, and that turtles are its victims.

The other distinction of this show is that it recognises the pioneering

work of Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis, whose photographs of the Tasmanian wilderness made a seminal contribution to the fight to save the state's forests from gunggho development. What began in the 1970s as a local issue became a national and international scandal as these images of a pristine environment were widely circulated.

One could say the indigenous photographer Nici Cumston is attempting a similar feat with her stark and desolate images of the Coorong, but there are fewer challenges for a photographer using digital technology. It may also be easier to make striking images of a defiled environment rather than a thriving, fertile one. Pictures of bountiful nature often look like they were made to be put on calendars.

Even Truchanas and Dombrovskis do not avoid such associations.

Curator Glenn Barkley touches on this problem when he notes that these works have much in common with "colonial and picturesque traditions", making them an awkward fit in the contemporary art museum. Barkley describes that museum environment as "a cynical, ironic one". This underlines the sincerity and integrity of Truchanas and Dombrovskis' images, but also it raises doubts about the exhibition and the venue.

By coincidence, I'm writing this on a boat floating down the Yangtze, in the midst of the biggest dam development the world has ever known. Compared with the Three

Gorges Project, which has displaced millions and inundated towns, cities and historical sites, the actions in Lake Pedder and the Franklin seem small-scale. They were, however, far less justifiable. For all the problems of China's massive project, the government can always point out the country's need for clean electricity and flood mitigation. In Tasmania, it was impossible to prove that the benefits warranted the wanton destruction.

Artists, as functioning members of a democracy, have played an important role in bringing these issues to wider attention. This is quite different to saying that their work has a special quality because of the causes with which it is associated. All great art transcends its immediate context, even when it is made for a particular purpose. Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) was inspired by the Fascist bombing of a small Basque town, but it stands as a permanent rebuke to political violence.

The works in *In the Balance* are less ambitious and less engaging. The most powerful piece of environmental art is probably a magnificent landscape painting but there are no landscapes to be found in this show apart from the symbolic pictographs of indigenous artists. How strange it is that the MCA can be so progressive in its approach to the environment but so blinkered in its ideas about art.



Pioneering ... Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River by Peter Dombrovskis. His photos brought the plight of Tasmania's forests to popular attention