

Catalogue Text

Sculptor, Brian Ash, consolidates links with Kuala Lumpur, forged during his recent Asialink residency, and his hometown, Darwin, his installation, Kampung Darwin. Ash references the social implications of the rapidly changing cityscape in both places and the replacement of traditional building materials and styles by generic architecture. He uses mirrors, screens, veneers and architectural façades meticulously carved in polystyrene to reveal narratives of identity and belonging and the flip side, that of alienation and exclusion, in a pervasive "single-use" culture.

Camilla Lawson

The Disposable Building

The disposable building is the ultimate irony.

The neo-classical façade is the archetypal symbol of colonial power; a signifier of all that is strong and permanent and monumental. It speaks of the history of civilisation, of an ancient lineage of culture, colonialism and hegemonic power. For centuries it has been transported across the globe and plonked on top of other layers of culture and place.

It is interesting that this whole model can be subverted ever so subtly by the use of one of the most degraded and culturally base materials – polystyrene. A material so contaminated with over use and the stain of environmental degradation that it causes us serious disquiet.

The artist has created a monument to the glory of architecture. However, it is the antithesis of this because he has created an edifice/artifice that can be pitted by a fingernail or dented by a pen. Yet the artist has carved the façade using the same techniques that artists have for centuries. He has created a gleaming confection that is both pristine and vulnerable. Monumental and perfectly executed, we are trapped in its ambiguous space.

We are in the territory of hyperreality, where things are obviously not what they seem and their lie calls into question much of what we hold dear. We are nudging at the frisson between classical illusion and high camp.

Brian Ash first used a façade of arches in this same gallery in 1998 in a show this writer curated called *Veneer*, which dealt with similar concerns on the local level. I have watched the development of his work and the distillation of his ideas. He is interested in architecture as a metaphor for cultural identity and dislocation. His concern about the rapid rate of change to the built environment and cultural homogenisation is now global as well as local.

Ash has recently returned to Australia from an Asialink residency in Malaysia. During his stay in Kuala Lumpur he has refined these ideas and found that there are similarities between the two cultures and their equally voracious embrace of rapid development and social change. Both societies are engaging in a little cultural wallpapering.

In this exhibition Brian Ash has reflected on (literally) his experiences in Malaysia as an artist and cultural observer. Working in the Petronas Tower Building, the tallest structure in the world, would influence anyone. Ash states, 'The work is about the façade that cultures within cultures present, the point of interface (liminal space) between sub cultures, about inculturation into other cultures and about the barriers that exist to prevent inculturation from happening.'

The two installations presented in Kampung Darwin are witty and elegant summations of these complex ideas. The artist uses the language of architecture to speak about cultural parallels and the erosion of regional differences. He re-presents a public face of culture to us, which leads us to question what is behind the façade and the impenetrable barrier of the mirror.

Cath Bowdler
Darwin, 2000