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“CONCEITS” AND “LAST RESORT” MARIAN DREW AND ALEX SETON

WEB REVIEW BY DENISE TSUI

LINDEN CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

AUSTRALIA



Installation view of **ALEX SETON**'s “Life Resort” at Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney.

Two intimate solo shows were the summer highlights this year at Melbourne's Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts. Taking over four rooms across the ground floor of what was once a grand Victorian mansion were the works of multidisciplinary artist Marian Drew (“Conceits”) and sculptor Alex Seton (“Last Resort”), which both play with traditional European art constructs by reinventing them within an Australian context.

Challenging the rocky politics that surround Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, Sydney-based Alex Seton carves majestic sculptures out of marble, which question the unseen high stakes that refugees pay for the chance at a life of comfort and safety. A deflated life raft, isolated and lifeless, rested atop the wooden floorboards of the exhibition space, while a lone oar perched against a

wall. Three inflated life jackets of different sizes—“S,” “M” and “XL”—stood upon individual pedestals, each bursting at the seams with air, though human presence is eerily absent. “Last Resort” extends from the 37-year-old artist’s recent work for the 2014 Adelaide Biennial, *Someone died trying to have a life like mine* (2014), which explores the false ideals of Australia as a utopian paradise. It urges reflection on the tragic cost of human lives as a consequence of restrictive government policies that are seemingly in place to protect the privileged, peaceful and comfortable lifestyle of the Australian people. Marble has been re-contextualized here from a medium traditionally attributed to beauty and wealth to one of darkness and shattered hopes. The sculptures, ghostly silent, bear a powerful comment about the heavily debated and contentious treatment of asylum seekers in Australia.



ALEX SETON, *Odyssey*, 2014, 5.1 surround-sound stereo, laptop mixer, single light bulb, infinite soundscape. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney.



Installation view of **MARIAN DREW**'s print series "Still Life/Australiana" (2003–11) at Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne. Courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Melbourne.

In a second room, Seton presented a new, computerized soundscape installation, *Odyssey* (2014), which recreates the fearsome sounds of being caught at sea amidst a heavy storm. Viewers are consumed by their pitch-black surroundings, as a single dangling globe provides the only source of light and visual reference. The sounds of thunder and crashing waves harrow from all corners, creating an unnerving sense of displacement. Immersed in this soundscape, the dangers of sea travel become evident; the risks taken by asylum seekers suddenly appear more real.

On the other side of the gallery space were the works of Queensland-based Marian Drew, who also explores issues familiar to Australians with a similarly dark, underpinning message. Seven digital prints from her striking "Still Life/Australiana" (2003–11) series were presented as part of her exhibition, which was centered on a new sculptural installation. Entitled *Conceits* (2014), the work was displayed solely in a conjoining space, which had served as a dining room during the venue's former life as a Victorian mansion. Drawing inspiration from "Still Life/Australiana" and the elaborate styles of Baroque table settlements, *Conceits* is composed of small sculptures of human, animal and plant forms morphed into unnatural compositions. Made of bronze, coral, wood and plaster, the sculptures are arranged carefully atop a tailor-made table of wood and metal. Close inspection reveals that the sculptures depict local flora and fauna, a feature that is part of Drew's ongoing interrogation into the ramifications of European settlement on the native species of Australia.

Pinned informally to the wall in the gallery space's front room were prints depicting delicate compositions of limp, lifeless animals that are set against lush fabrics, glossy fruits and kitchenware. The pictorial images are painfully beautiful and are a play on light and dark shadows and depth, in the manner of chiaroscuro. In these works the artist—inspired by her time in Germany where she visited a museum that exhibited paintings of dead animals—converges notions of the European still-life genre with the phenomena of road kill in

Australia. Drew's images represent her visual response to the common experience of seeing road kill in Australia; an experience she describes as something one grows up with in this country, yet is disregarded (or preferred to be forgotten) by many of its people. The remnants of small animals and birds, many of which are native to Australia, are given an eternal presence in Drew's photographs. The representation of their deaths is a further critique on the consequences of European settlement and invasion of Australia.

Through their art, both Seton and Drew make distinct statements that respond to the circumstances of their environment and surroundings. Although small in scale, the two exhibitions carried a strong message that called into question Australia's identity as a nation, culture and attitude, pertaining to both its historical and contemporary society.



MARIAN DREW, *Conceits*, 2014, bronze, coral, wood and plaster sculptures, marine plywood, chalk and metal table, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Melbourne.

"Conceits" (December 19, 2014–February 22, 2015) and "Last Resort" (January 6–February 22, 2015) were on view at the Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne.

Denise Tsui is assistant editor at ArtAsiaPacific.