

Another way to be

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Jo Holder started The Cross Art Projects in September 2003 to promote contemporary art practices and investigations which could not be undertaken in the established gallery/museum matrix. The low cost space in Sydney's Kings Cross was conceived in tandem with The Cross Art + Books, which sells second hand and imported books on design, art theory, gender and cultural studies. The 2 establishments are divided by a corridor but there is a conceptual and spiritual flow between them. The Cross Art + Books displays publications which complement the current exhibition and provides a spillover area for gallery crowds.

The site is relatively low cost but elegant, spread across the lower storey of a grand Victorian house. The Projects is a charming but decidedly professional space, big enough to allow large paintings the required sweep of perspective and provide an area for lectures and public discussion.

Holder has the needs of independent curators very much in mind. In her opening night address, Merryn Gates, the curator of Vivienne Binns' show *Twenty First Century Paintings*, talked of the artist's long career as an investigative and collaborative artist, and of travelling in the Kimberley with Binns during her persistent search for the ideal art hill. Although the talk was marked by academic distance and all sorts of theoretical and historical contextualisations, it was shot through with a warm personal regard and humour not usually associated with academic discourse. Holder's space encourages this kind of personal engagement.

Peter Fay curated The Cross Art Projects' first show, by naive artist Gina Sinozich. Sinozich's response to the war in Iraq and other public events attracted major media attention and widespread admiration. At the same time selected works from Fay's personal collection were being exhibited as *Home Sweet Home* in the National Gallery, the first time a private collector's vision and taste have been given space on that gallery's walls. Fay was the right person to be given this honour, as his acquisitions are imaginative and courageous in their taste and judgement, though of a kind that no professional art buyer would be likely to even see, much less give a second glance. They are awkward and true, challenging and poignant.

Sinozich's show, *The Iraqi War*, was similarly terrible and true: rockets aimed at fleeing Iraqis burst in delicate, beautiful colours. Its popularity revealed how this artist speaks to the fears and needs of Australians. Fay donated this group of works to the Casula Powerhouse in the artist's home suburb of Liverpool.

Holder has also provided an opportunity for local resident Gail Hastings, an artist much better known in Europe and the US than Australia. Her exhibition *But Is It Art?* invited the viewer on a participatory mystery tour of minimalist paintings, 'sculptural situations' and texts which posed questions about the nature of art and its reception. It was a demanding exhibition by a painstaking artist. We might remember that Godfrey Miller was undertaking a comparable exploration of theory through practice in Kings Cross in the post-WWII era.

Holder not only wants to give curators and artists working outside established institutions

the opportunity to mount challenging and experimental shows, but to offer a site for artists working outside their perceived range or employing content and form not usually given professional respect. The Projects displayed large watercolour works by the late cartoonist/architect George Molnar for the Cross Arts Festival. Their subject matter was familiar Molnar, offering a gently wry commentary on contemporary life and controversial urban events. But their scale, careful construction, colouring and gold framing put them outside the recognisable Molnar style of idiosyncratic, stylish pen and ink newspaper cartoons. Later, The Projects twittered and rustled with the paper and cardboard birds, plants and portrait assemblages of ex-country and western singer Slim Barrie. His works are irresistibly fresh and enthusiastic in their discovery and proclamation of creativity. "Every work a masterpiece" their maker declared.

Holder's Projects offered a response to Mardi Gras with *It All Started at Patch's*, curated by Robert Lake. Lake had curated a series of shows about queer art, leading to the comprehensive *Hung Drawn and Quartered* (with Jim Anderson) at the Tin Sheds. The Projects provided Lake with an opportunity to explore more tangential historical significances, art practices and ideologies through works such as the video *Patch's People by Night and Day*, c. 1979-94 and a video of a week-long party. This was supported by talks from Lake, Tim Hilton and well known curator and theoretician Craig Judd, under the ambit title "Cross Conversations: the Necessity of Queer Art." The lively audience discussion broached sexism, the historical placement of the week-long party video in terms of 60s staged happenings and the uncovering of parties as an historic means of gay expression. The show was underwritten by local doctor Robert Finlayson, and Holder continues to encourage this kind of local support for Projects exhibitions.

Holder's goal for The Projects is to give the work exhibited and uncovered under its auspices wider exposure, since she can encourage raw, radical and critical art processes which the gallery/museum circuit, with its built-in need to market and merchandise, finds uncongenial. It is only through spaces such as The Cross Arts Projects that the works of key, socially responsive artists like Vivienne Binns are given their due.

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