

So now it's MasterCurator

Robert Nelson
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PERSUASION EQUATION

Linden Contemporary Arts, 26 Acland Street, St Kilda, until September 20, lindenarts.org

RICHARD LEWER

Nobody Likes a Show Off, MUMA (Monash University Museum of Art), Wellington Road, Clayton, until September 5, monash.edu.au/muma

Reviewer: Robert Nelson

LOOSELY fashioned around the idea of *MasterChef* on TV, three curators have been set up at Linden to create three independent shows, each using the same five artists. The curators have to come up with a menu, so to speak, which best exploits the fresh ingredients that the nominated artists can produce for them.

Reuben Keehan hatches the idea of *The Ethics of Hypnosis*. You might think that it would be about the power of suggestion and manipulation during psychotherapy but it's more about failure, how failure is in some sense a guaranteed outcome, even if you don't try to fail. Very witty.

Melissa Keys builds her exhibition around the idea of "Coming Undone". It's all about things disintegrating and being reshaped in constant flux.

And finally, Peter McKay characterises our epoch, the Anthropocene, through the proliferation of artifice during the meltdown of nature.

So all three curators are more or less concerned with the same thing: entropy. Not surprisingly, therefore, the shows that engage the same artists all look similar and have a similar vibe, to the point that you could sometimes plonk their work in another space and no one would know the difference.

The curators don't bring out very different qualities in the artists. It isn't as if one of them decides to caramelise the onions while another serves them slightly braised. Anyway, it's all nouvelle cuisine - tending to a sharp salad - and conceptually austere.

While the curators tend to merge, the artists produce more interesting work in one space than another; and the reasons could be no more than hit and miss, a good idea here and a fallow patch there. Huseyin Sami has most fun with his painting performances, making pictures with a long pole from across the room. The painting machines are clever but the chandelier seems trite.

Matthew Hunt's best work is a piece of graph paper inscribed in isometric letters in felt pen with "Own Goal Hell", which seems to highlight the self-inflected spiral of ambition and anxiety characterising contemporary life and art.

Catherine Bell's best work is a sardonic video called *Gorilla Girl*, in which a baby is entertained with a pantomime of hopping mechanical primates, almost as if a Disney princess is training for her life with Tarzan.

Chris Bond's best work is a text in which he apologetically explains that he cannot rise to the brief of producing a work on the theme of failure, which he fears is ill conceived.

The best work by Akira Akira is an imitation wooden soccer ball encased in plastic mesh. The object sums up the perversity of production, in which the ball seems good for nothing in any incarnation, from the artificial to the original.

Though a brilliant idea, convincingly argued in a catalogue essay by Stuart Koop, *Persuasion Equation* nevertheless explores the gamesmanship of curating in a way that risks weakening our faith in the practice. So if you feel you need to restore the former integrity of curating in your mind, you can see a classical example at MUMA, where Kirrily Hammond presents New Zealand artist Richard Lewer.

Curating, among other things, consists of identifying unique and noteworthy examples that build a theme as well as hang together in a coherent way. Lewer makes this job easy, because his work, though varied and stylistically disparate, locks into certain irksome themes that wouldn't be out of place at Linden.

Using texts, animation, drawing and painting, Lewer dwells in failure, lapses of conscience, ugly remorseful stuff, rich in creepy feelings, self-doubt, self-reproach and perversity. There's little ennobling in his dismal world except black humour, where theology rubs shoulders with the tedium of a suburban boxing club or with the rancour of a domestic brawl.

To create the work, Lewer spends a lot of time with his subject matter, joining clubs and taking part in their activities. He remains more loyal to such societies than to himself. It's an existential show that you can stand back from and ask yourself: where am I in this crazy world of mediocre instinct?

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