

A world of difference

Visit the Sydney Biennale with a spirit of adventure, writes Sebastian Smee

Once provocative and poetic, the new Biennale of Sydney is a winner. Spread across 16 venues and featuring the work of more than 80 artists, it is, inevitably, a hit-and-miss affair. But the surprises come thick and fast, and there are brilliant things in abundance.

More than this, Charles Merewether, the Biennale's director, has produced one of the most satisfyingly coherent biennials I have seen (this, despite claiming to have shunned the chance to impose a theme on the event). Unquestionably, it is a political affair. But political here should be understood to refer not to shallow, attention-seeking polemics but to the real plight of actual people in a world of absurdities and extremities.

Merewether has chosen work by artists — most of them unknown here — caught in the headlights of globalisation, from countries writhing on the rack of history.

Their works respond to conflict, displacement and immigration, and in 100 ways they reflect the individual dramas that stem from these conditions.

What is best about the Biennale as a whole is the way the tenor of the works oscillate between poignant serenity and cacophonous drama. And while there are works that come across as little more than stunts or exercises in

obscurantism, the overall effect, built up slowly, is wondrous and humbling. When Australian culture is more parochial, fearful and inward-looking than it has been for several decades, you come away from the best things here with a shifted, unsettling, yet intimate sense of a whole other world.

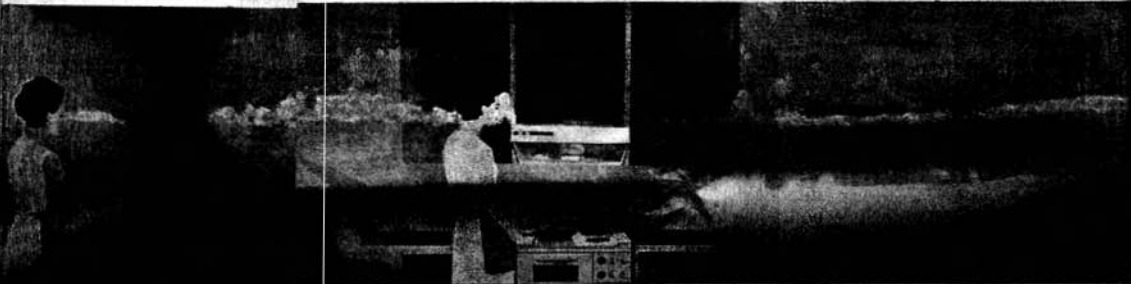
Even the best-organised biennales tend to be messy, unpredictable affairs and sorting out the good from the so-so can be frustrating. Here, the proportion of good things is quite high. But how do you negotiate it?

Here are some tips. See Antony Gormley's installation of thousands of tiny clay figurines upstairs at Pier 2/3, Walsh Bay. Gormley, I'm afraid, is a vastly over-rated artist. But this work exists at a pleasing remove from his artistic dead hand and, quite simply, it is stupendous. Similar Gormley works have been installed across the world, but the dimensions of the Walsh Bay space and the field's punctuation by abandoned dockside machinery make it the most satisfying installation of the work yet.

Another tip: make the satellite venues a priority. Some of the best things are not at the Biennale's three main sites — the Art Gallery of NSW, the Museum of Contemporary Art and Pier 2/3 in Walsh Bay — but at smaller institutions in eastern and far-western Sydney: Campbelltown Arts Centre, for instance; the Performance Space in Redfern; the Ivan Dougherty Gallery and the Australian Centre for Photography in Paddington; and Artspace in Woolloomooloo.

There is a distinct advantage to seeing the works at these venues. The smaller scale (three to eight works a venue) allows you to take in surprising, sometimes challenging work at a suitable speed, without feeling overwhelmed or crowded out. This is especially helpful when so much of the work is presented in elaborate combinations of different media: multi-screen video projections or sprawling installations of seemingly disconnected objects.

Of the three main venues, I thought the works at the AGNSW were generally of a



Eclectic: Works at the Biennale of Sydney include, clockwise from above, Mamma Andersson's *Are You Here to Stay?*; Antony Gormley's *Asian Field*; and a black-and-white image from Daido Moriyama's *Shinjuku series*

higher standard than those at the MCA and Pier 2/3, but all three locations have works it would be a shame to miss.

At the MCA, look out in particular for Palestinian-born Mona Hatoum's moving installation of linen and domestic objects. It's simple, reticent and ingenious.

I was also impressed by Thai artist Tawatatchai Puntusawadi's drawings on slate, Indian artist Amar Kanwar's video about recent Indian history (beautifully made and movingly nar-

rated), and Yugoslavia-born, Singapore-based Milenko Prvacki's dramatic abstract paintings.

Of the works by the seven Australian artists, I thought only Julie Gough's beguiling installation of tea-trees and canoe and Djambawa Marawili's bark paintings at Pier 2/3 really stood out. Tom Nicholson's colour photographs of books sent to East Timor distinguished itself for other reasons: it is political art of the most indulgent, vacuous kind. At the AGNSW, the best things included Japanese

photographer Daido Moriyama's room of black-and-white photographs, Mexico-born Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's spooky surveillance system and spinning fluorescent light tubes, and a clutch of superb paintings by the Swede Mamma Andersson.

There are some brilliant videos in this Biennale. The best of them are Russian artist Olga Chernysheva's exquisitely funny, lyrical films at the Australian Centre for Photography, Latvian artist Katrina Neiburga's surreal multi-

screen video at Ivan Dougherty Gallery, British artist Tacita Dean's poignant video of an old architect walking around an empty building as the sun goes down at Artspace, and Israeli duo Ruti Sela and Maayan Amir's genuinely subversive documentary-style videos at Performance Space.

Look out, too, for Indian artist Ranjani Shettar's beautiful wavy wire and wax installation of raindrops at the National Art School. And it's worth popping in at Hyde Park Barracks to see Belgrade-based Milica Tomić's shipping container punctured by bullet holes and Polish artist Mirosław Balka's photograph from Birkenau printed on glass, then mounted as an outdoor ceiling: both desperately sad.

A final thing worth bearing in mind: if, at various points in your attempt to negotiate the Biennale, you find the standard irritatingly uneven, remember that more than half the works in it have not been shown before, anywhere. That means not even Merewether knew quite what he was getting.

It may be that this element of potluck, of operating in the dark, is a problem with biennales in general. More control over what goes into the exhibition may produce a higher overall standard. (One of the reasons the 2000 Biennale of Sydney was so good is that it was a retrospective "best of" exhibition intended to celebrate the event's 25th anniversary: the curators knew what they were getting.)

But for better or for worse, it is seen as inherently to the good if a biennale director commissions as many new works as possible. The best response for audiences, then, may be to treat the whole event as an adventure. It is better to be surprised by a work you knew nothing about than to tick the box in your brain consigned to a work you already knew.

The Sydney Biennale continues until August 27.