

## Beyond Possession: John Gillies' Divide

by Therese Davis

*Divide* is a powerful cultural response by video artist John Gillies to bitter social divisions that arose in Australian society in the late 1990s around land ownership, race relations, refugees and environmental destruction. The film seen on the main screen is set in an indeterminate time and tells the story of a group of bedraggled men herding a flock of sheep across iconic Australian landscapes. A short way into the narrative, we see a page torn from the Bible's Old Testament floating precariously in the running waters of a shallow creek (stream). From the left hand edge of the frame, a young woman's hands emerge and reach into the water to salvage the page from certain destruction. This gesture has an interesting function in the narrative. As an image of the recovery of a discarded object, something left behind, it's also highly emblematic of the processes of retrieving lost or forgotten images that Gillies undertakes in his major video works of the past ten years.

*Armada* (1994 and 1998), one of Gillies' largest and most elaborate installations, was staged in Salvador, Brazil; a once thriving shipping port in the Bahia region. Gillies' aim was to create what he calls "an anti-heroic public sculpture" that would bring undercurrents of the port's colonial past as a centre for slave-trading to the surface. The work involved projecting extreme close-ups of the textures of pre-industrial arts, such as stone-masonry and weaving, onto a specially designed sail-like screen

erected on a wooden barge anchored in the centre of the harbour. Combined with a minimalist soundscape of trains, bells, and the creaking boards of wooden sailing ships, *Armada's* imagery sparked associations between past and present by releasing the textual and sonic impressions of the port's past embedded in the surfaces of its buildings and natural environment.

This notion of historic undercurrents is revisited in *The Mary Stuart Tapes* (2000), made in collaboration with highly acclaimed Australian experimental performer Clare Grant. The work is based on a re-translation of Schiller's anachronistic text *Mary Stuart 1800*. The use of Sydney as the location for the work is significant, for as Gillies explains: "Australia is the inheritor of the British idea of the state. Within this idea, Mary Stuart is a buried potentiality, a force trapped within". Stuart is imagined in this politically charged work as an unrecognised 'body' underlying the contemporary state. This provocative image is achieved through Gillies' direction of Grant's compelling physical performance of Stuart's speech/body as a spectre of female power striding the streets of the city. While she remains unrecognized by passers-by within the frame, this video performance piece forces us as spectators to recognize Stuart as a potential alternative to well-known texts of Australian nationhood.

In this vein, *Divide* is also designed to prompt historical consciousness. Sheep

watch on as the film on the main screen invites us to reflect on how biblical doctrines of possession, such as the Genesis 12 story of the call of Abraham and his chosen “flock” to the promised land, have been used throughout the modern world to justify the dispossession and continued oppression of indigenous peoples. From its first stunning scene of one of the men disturbing the fragile structures of an ant nest, this work slowly builds up a series of images of practices of division and possession: the deformations and reformations of a tightly-packed herd of sheep, the endless counting of stock numbers, the tearing and scattering of pages from the Bible. Together, these images recast this colonized land as a deeply ambiguous space. It is coveted *and* covered in and by the Word of God. Yet, at the same time, the land clearly refuses to give over to the Genesis logic, resisting human possession.

*Divide's* vision of the Australian landscape as an ambiguous and resistant space is not entirely new. But what Gillies introduces to this view-point is a new peculiarly Australian performance mode. As in Gillies' past works, *Divide* is connected to the physical tradition of Sydney performance that mixes a diverse number of cultural influences and physical performance traditions and techniques. Gathering performers from various sections of this tradition to play the four men (Denis Beaubois, Ari Ehrlich, Mat Millay and Lee Wilson), *Divide* allows us to see - and to *hear* - familiar images and sounds of Australian nationhood differently. Take for example a night-time encounter between the group of men and a Chinese opera singer. Like the men, we are startled by this unexpected apparition that disrupts the narrative. We watch and listen as Sydney-based Chinese performer Xu

Fengshan performs the rare Chinese drama tradition called Kunqu, transforming the Australian bush into a site of temporal and sexual ambiguity. Xu's truly amazing performance of what he describes as 'a vivacious woman role' and her plaintive song of loss, longing and cultural estrangement, brings to light a long and persistent Chinese presence in Australian history. It also speaks to issues of gender, sexuality and nation, as well as to the potentials of new hybrid, globalised forms of cultural performance.

And then there are the hands, reaching into the water and bringing the discarded words of the Bible to the surface. This is, as I suggested earlier, an important gesture, because it grounds the Indigenous narration of the Genesis story (performed by Dalisa Pigram, co-founder of Marrugeku theatre company in Western Australia) firmly in the film's diegesis. But while this image helps to link the narration directly to the story world of this tale, it is also one of the work's most ambiguous images. Where exactly is the narrator located in time? The past? The present? The time of an as yet unimagined future Australia? And what is the nature of children's laughter that runs lightly under this act of retrieval? Do they laugh because these newly-found, foreign words are so totally incongruous to Indigenous knowledge and experience of the land? Declaimed now in the voice of the dispossessed, the story of the call of Abraham is turned back on itself to expose the impossibility and supreme arrogance of this story's ideology of land possession. Just as the tribes of Abraham came to see when they faced famine in the so called promised land, *Divide's* final devastating image shows how European land-possessing doctrines and practices have led to an unmitigated destruction of the land in

Australia. Sheep watch on as we come face-to-face with this failure. Sheep - creatures easily led, easily spooked by encounters with strangeness, difference.

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