Divide (2006), John Gillies

Rachel O'Reilly 2008

John Gillies' *Divide* 2006 quickly orients the viewer in to a sensory rendering of the Australian bush: the dry airborne scuffle and scaled peeling tones of eucalyptus branches and hard grasses, and these images and sounds in ghostly dialogue with a diverse set of almost-recognisable landscape narratives conjured from key works of Australian film and literature. In time, the work's specific enactment of the story of the call of Abraham and his chosen " flock" to the promised land becomes more clear.

The passage of Genesis 12 that provides the work's voiceover is the originary possession doctrine in the Judeo-Christian worldview. The passage evokes the promised land as the call to hardship; the summons to the evangelist campaign requires the sacrifice of identity (from home, from family) for a land unknown; the call to colonise is the call to a wisdom that is for the world's sake – the fresh religious start of the human race on new soil, under new conditions.

 Gillies' choices in conceptualising this work, the artist acknowledges, are made in the wake of a decade of debates over Australian historiography, and within local contexts of exhibition that have become tired, shy and suspicious of local traditions of politically inflected aesthetics. The authority of the biblical voiceover and the narrative it delivers is differently rendered ambivalent, malevolent, arrogant, through the men's performed gestures, and through interventions from the landscape of their new world. The men disturb the fragile structures of an ant's nest at the very beginning of the work; a set of uncanny, additional hands and an associated laugh appear briefly, as a possible momentary and knowing indigenous presence interior to the land. The four men's fixation upon stock numbers equivalences their anxious, opportunistic modes of occupation; their tearing and scattering of the pages from the bible, tend to cover, but are further decomposed by, their inhospitable landscape, resistant to possession. *Divide* steps in to allegorical

time in this way – in to a singular reduced formal rendition of the colonizers' actions and intentions – to construct an alternative means of re-experiencing and re-exploring historicized trauma and discomfort with renewed sensory awareness.

A more local reception of *Divide*, and the work that it does, recognises Gillies' long term engagement with the Sydney performance scene, the cultural influences and performance traditions that are local to that, and that communities' motivations in participating in this work, making strange and ambiguous certain signs of national identity through signature detourning gestures and techniques. The four actors are all renowned figures; the appearance of Sydney-based Chinese opera singer Xu-Fengshan who performs a Kunqu, a rare Chinese drama tradition, further upsets the male journey narrative with temporal and sexual ambiguity. Local audiences then, decipher a work with these additional markers that speaks to and from a renowned performance community with deep concerns about narrative, representation, and national identity at the time of the work's production. In the work's final scene, the men and their journey falls away in to blurred images of sheep, whirring and circling (as colonizing sheep requiring constant guidance tend to do), within a seemingly more present moment of famished and deforested land. A more imaginative title for this exploration of Gillies' work might have been titled, with full respect, 'How to make another work about colonisation'. Its achievements in this sense are quite profound.

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