shopping for interactivity

lisa gye visits melbourne’s wunderkammer

HAVING BEEN BORN AND RAISED IN MELBOURNE, AND BEING PERIPATETICALLY INCLINED, I WAS SURE THAT I HAD SEEN ALL THERE WAS TO SEE IN THE CBD OF MY HOMETOWN. HOW DELICIOUS THEN TO FIND A HIDDEN TREASURE LIKE THE WUNDERKAMMER.

Part shop, part museum, the Wunderkammer, like its 17th and 18th century counterparts, is home to an extensive array of scientific curiosities, artefacts and ephemera. From piranhas in bell jars to the full sized, taxidermied remains of a lioness from the long defunct Bacchus Marsh Safari Park, all manner of strange and strangely beautiful objects compete for the visitor’s attention. And amidst this cornucopia is a collection of works by artists Chris Henschke and Donna Kendrigan.

Collected together under the title Unnatural Curiosities, there are more than six distinct and distinctive works, each of which draws inspiration from earlier cultures of display of which the Wunderkammer (or Cabinet of Curiosity) is one example. Each work is displayed in a custom-built cabinet superbly and lovingly crafted by Lindon Davey-Milne. The works stand up as craft, effortlessly melding into their surroundings. But as works of art, they offer even more. Each piece is aesthetically interesting while offering an intelligent and reflexive critique of the cultures of display in which they themselves participate.

The largest of the works Transplants (2005) is housed in a reproduction 19th century style botanist’s cabinet. Comprising both artefacts and a touch screen installation, the work allows the viewer to engage with a digital interactive titled Garden of Transplants, housed within the cabinet. Navigating the space brings to life science fiction writer Adam Browne’s short story, Orlando’s Third Trance. The garden itself is inhabited by strangely mutated and unnatural organisms rendered in the style of the colonial botanist. The aesthetic overlay of the past on present and future creates a sense of historical all-at-oncenes, a sense usually denied or repressed by most scientific descriptions of the world where progress and rupture override renewal and continuity.
Electrococo Salon (2007) also plays with the intersection between past and present by housing an exotic three dimensional, digitally constructed scene featuring 18th century French prints of interiors, electrical circuit diagrams and antique machine parts. This is displayed within a diorama cabinet along with a sound score composed from manipulated voices, jackhammers and harpsichord. The work challenges the viewer to think about relationships between the interfaces of the computer and preceding technologies of display like the diorama.

Similarly, Salon of Spirits (2006) and Lunar Mosque (2006) feature stereoscopic images created through the blending of Victorian era Keystone images printed onto Lambda Duratran. Both works reference key moments in both the history of display technologies. Salon of Spirits features images familiar to anyone interested in the spirit photography of the late 19th century. Lunar Mosque features a moon straight out of a scene by French illusionist and cinematographer George Méliès. Both works remind the viewer that the desire for immersion in a three dimensional world extends back beyond the development of virtual reality in the late 20th century.

The evocatively titled Interior Probably Undisturbed (2007) is a beautifully textured digital collage featuring 18th century geological diagrams. The images combine to form a strange volcanic landscape suggestive of close-up cross-sections of scientific specimens. Similarly, New Ocean Fantasy (2007) appears as if collated from items in an ancient oceanographer’s desk drawer. Both works invite us to see differently, to mistake one thing for another, one time for another, one world for another.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this exhibition is its location within the Wunderkammer. As media artists struggle to secure ongoing opportunities in a world of seemingly contracting exhibition opportunities, the marriage, in this instance, of commerce with art has proven to be a savvy choice by the artists and the shop owners. Apart from the obvious concurrence between their thematics, each brings their own audience to this arrangement.

Henschke and Kendrigan are certainly not the first media artists to realise that sourcing new kinds of spaces to exhibit their art is not only likely to bring them into contact with new audiences but also enhances the possibility of creating a market for media arts (they have already managed to sell one of the works exhibited in Unnatural Curiosities). Ian Haig certainly explored this when he exhibited Futurotica at both Sexpo and the Erotic Museum in Los Angeles in 2004.
In this instance, Henschke and Kendrigan’s work could not have found a more apt home. To some extent it is telling of media arts’ status in the arts hierarchy that artists need to be so inventive in order to get their work seen. With traditional gallery spaces still reluctant to exhibit work that invites physical interaction and media arts organisations being squeezed by slimmer budgets and demands for large audience returns, we may well see more opportunistic manoeuvres like this by artists intent on getting their work into the world.

Unnatural Curiosities, Wunderkammer, 439 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, Aug 4-Sept 29

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