

Don't be too optimistic. The light at the end of the tunnel may be another train.

Unknown source

4-21 May 2011

Everything is Going to be Alright

Devon Ackermann

Hubert Algie

Roberta Rich

Paul Yore

Curated by Devon Ackermann

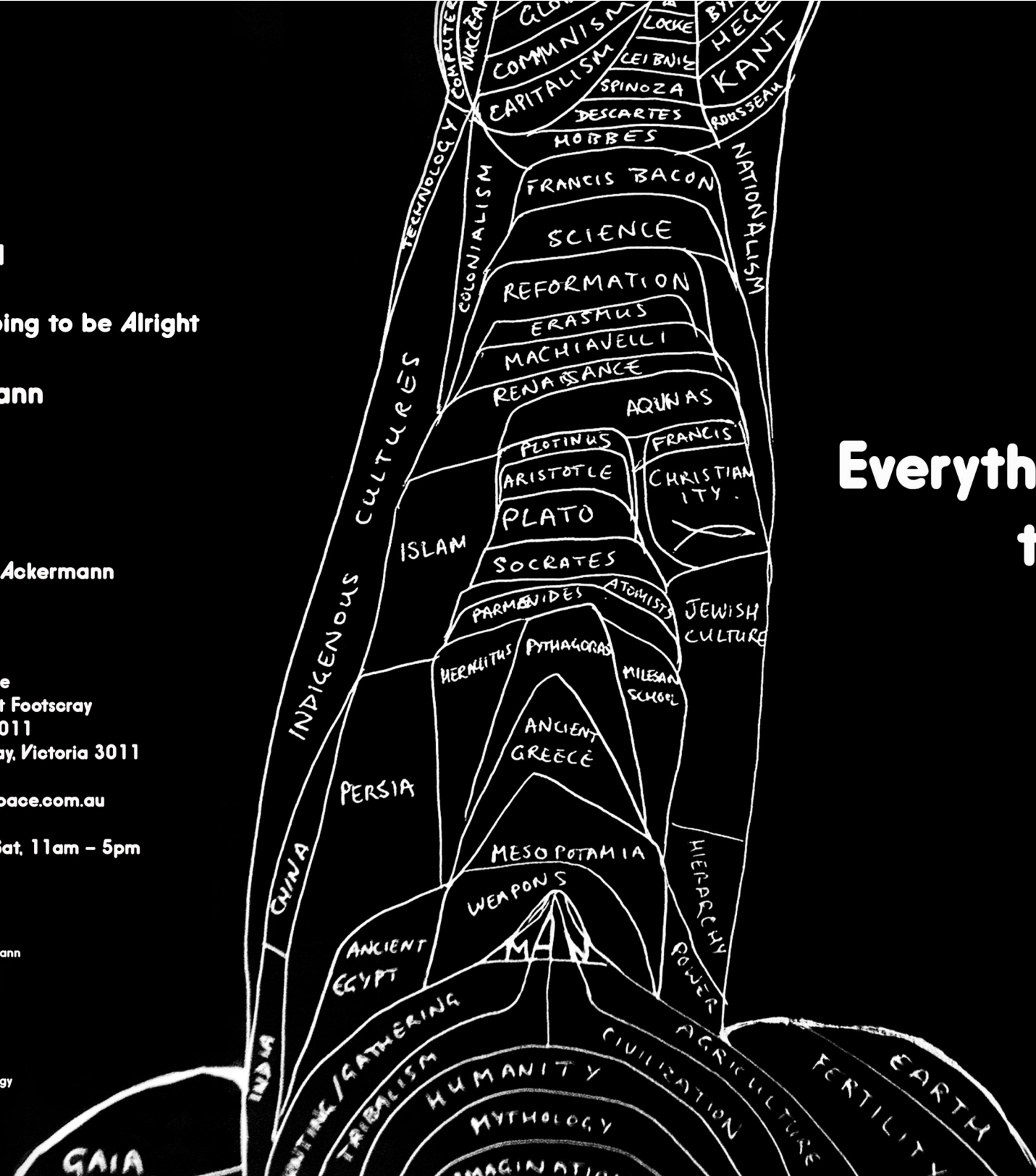
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Catalogue Design - Dale Ackermann
Media Circle
Cover Image
Paul Yore, Untitled, 2009.

Special thanks to the work of Ziggy



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Devon **Ackermann**, Hubert **Algie**, Roberta **Rich**, Paul **Yore**

The 2008 exhibition Contemporary Australia: Optimism shown at Queensland's Gallery of Modern Art, was a show proposed by the gallery director Tony Ellwood in response to what he saw were a lot of international contemporary art surveys emphasizing the negative in contemporary art.¹ It was also an exhibition, in the words of curator Julie Ewington that convened an extended conversation amongst a fraction of artists in highlighting "what makes life worth living, what makes life worth surviving, what contemporary joy looks like, what hope for the future holds – despite all evidence to the contrary."² The exhibition Everything is going to be alright marks a slight departure in this thinking, with the artists' wry visual expressions, a suggestion that perhaps optimism is not at all what it's cracked up to be. Sure it can seem, at times to be the only thing we can hold on to. However, rather than simply positioning oneself in hopeful assumptions that Everything is going to be alright – if we focus on better times ahead - the artists' curated in this show advocate reconsidering our attention towards actually examining why such displeasures are necessarily felt and exhibited at all.

Stephen Jay Gould famously said 'the most erroneous stories are those we think we know best - and therefore never scrutinize or question.' Proposing a re-evaluation of commonly held assumptions regarding constructed notions of Australian mythology and identity; the artists advocate a committed focus of a de-construction in order to dissolve its continuation. Looking back opens up possibilities for providing answers in looking forward and through reworking assumptions of accepted hegemonic norms, the artists challenge the viewer to examine their own individual perceptions, interactions and relationships towards those around them in order to re/consider what we know and what we think we know, assess what is now considered acceptable and what is considered unacceptable.

Quantifying what positives we're supposedly expected to be optimistic about certainly stands out to being a key concern. The other important concern is considering this call to shift from pessimism towards optimism or rather away from past considerations toward future ones. If there really is a trend towards negativity, is it something Australian contemporary art need move desperately away from? Can we truly assess what future is possible without interrogating the mistakes and failures of our past? In consultation with the artists when curating the show there was a feeling that Ellwood's calls for a shift seemed peculiar if not unjustified. Particularly as paradoxically switching our focus toward optimism neglects critically examining the reasons optimism is required in the first place. The other thing this shift can potentially suggests is, confrontation and critique must make way for passivity and acceptance. Perhaps it seems simplistic to categorize exhibitions in such one-dimensional terms, however is there any middle-ground when we are believed by Slavoj Zizek (considered by many the last great thinker of our era) to be 'living in the end of times'?

Roberta Rich's video Lesson Seven: Learning Our National Anthem, 2011, explores constructed notions of cultural identity, with a strong emphasis on highlighting the absurd nature of an inferred socially identifiable 'one nation'. Rejecting notions of a unified culture, Rich subverts straightforward and assumed 'Australian identity' using humor to articulate repressed issues, particularly the denial of language and culture with respect to indigenous and mi

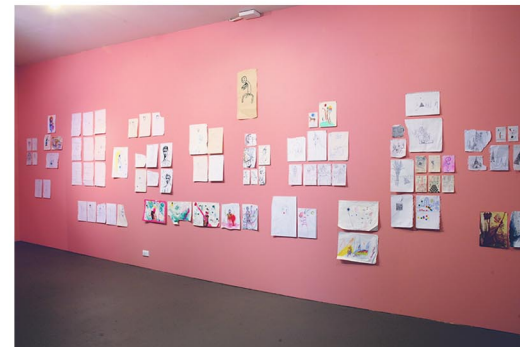
grant peoples. Employing friends, family and colleagues to speak or sing lines from the Australian National Anthem, Rich underlines the complexities overlooked in the reductive homogeneity of standardizing culture and nationhood. This is comically witnessed through the bizarre mix of clunky performances, strange sets and variety of translations that promote a powerfully evocative study of an extremely dated text.

Challenging ideas mythologizing Australian identity, my banner YOU FLEW HERE / WE GREW HERE, 2011, dissects the gallery space in half; acting not only as a physical obstruction but an ideological one. Interrogating notions of entitlement and privilege, the banner raises questions about authority where culture and traditions are concerned. Mimicking the world of sporting culture, the banner's slogans re-evaluate the power relationships surrounding these structures and evoke with the aggressive oppositional play on words sentiments of chauvinism and contempt. This is not only a pointed comment on the rejection of Indigenous culture, but also a monument erected in memory - who for those, it conjures up images and associations regarding xenophobic school-yard taunts or the Cronulla riots. The banner is however, also built using weak foundations, much like the constructed nature of assumed and forceful Australian identity norms and as such the degrading sentiment is capable of being torn down.

Subverting conventions of both form and content, Paul Yore's overwhelming installation of drawings, sketches, notes, and paintings, collected and catalogued over a span of several years appear to be simply and intuitively blue tacked onto pastel pink walls. The works casual appearance however, belies their sophistication and Yore's challenging and sharp critique on the absurdity of contemporary life ensures a variety of mixed responses. At times haunting and confronting, sometimes banal and didactic, these works offer little in the way of any meaningful purpose or resolution. Responding to visions, dreams and thoughts of consciousness, Yore sees these juvenile revelations as explorations in examining the perceived boundaries of ones margins – which ironically Yore acknowledges are limited to the borders of the pages the works are drawn on. Essentially, Yore uses this analogy to open up considerations 'beyond the page' in an attempt to re/examine rigid and conventional limitations imposed in contemporary Australian culture.



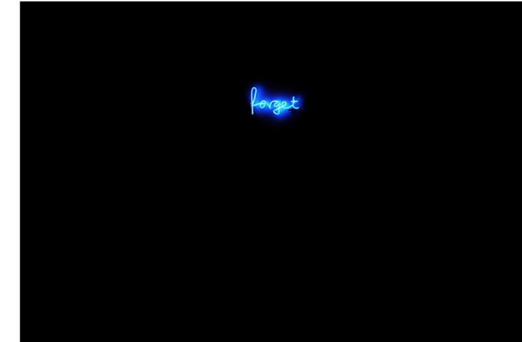
Roberta Rich, Installation view Lesson Seven: Learning Our National Anthem, 2011.



Paul Yore, Installation view Selected Drawings, 2011.



Devon Ackermann, WE GREW HERE / YOU FLEW HERE, 2011.



Hubert Algie, *I'll never forget me*, (2011).

Connected to a sensor and therefore dependant on a viewer within the gallery space, Hubert Algie's neon Forget, 2011, flicks on and off. Like the light bulb/bright idea metaphor the soft baby blue word quietly insists upon itself. This strange contradiction taking place, powerfully captures our nations ability to at once, both consider and disregard our past - which ultimately will only further complicate our future. Algie's neon Fear 2009, alternatively is loud and unrelenting; filling the gallery space with hot pink light. Like the signage of a sex shop, the neon acts as a warning to viewers ignorant to the potential offences committed within the spaces of the gallery walls. However it's also beautifully hypnotic and has the potential to seduce and paralyze the viewer into complacency. Algie is drawn toward investigations regarding deeply personal human interactions relating to our understanding of language, memory and identity. All spaces of contestation that he suggests are worthy of closer examination as they paradoxically liberate and inhibit us.

It would be a mistake to conclude that the artists in the show advocate pessimism, just as it would also be a mistake to conclude they campaign for optimism. Not that they need be either, or. But one gets the sense due to society being compelled to categorize, there hasn't seen to be much space in-between. The defining feature of the works in the exhibition consequently becomes suggestions by the artists of creating and inhabiting these spaces in-between. Certainly these are times worthy of scrutiny and critique and therefore confronting and exposing suppressed fears and prejudices in order to abolish harmful marginalization becomes mandatory. The intention of the artists with this exhibition is to cautiously provide an invitation to all to re/consider and re/evaluate those spaces in-between. Spaces where we as Australians can all create and move through without restriction. It's about as optimistic as they get, but if we all take up the invitation, one could get the sense that everything is going to be alright.

Devon Ackermann
Melbourne artist and curator

¹ *New GoMA exhibition takes Optimism as its theme*, **The Courier-Mail**, November 07, 2008.

² Julie Ewington, *Introducing Optimism In Contemporary Australia: Optimism*. Queensland Art Gallery, (2008).]