

Blouin Artinfo, *Juliana Engberg's Bold, Triumphant Sydney Biennale*, Text/ Nicholas Forrest, March 24 2014

BLOUINARTINFO

Juliana Engberg's Bold, Triumphant Sydney Biennale

by Nicholas Forrest 24/03/14 7:35 PM EDT



Gabriel Lester *Where Spirits Dwell*, 2014 mixed-media installation dimensions variable
Installation view of the 19th Biennale of Sydney at Carriageworks Courtesy the artist; LEO XU PROJECTS, Shanghai; and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam Created for the 19th Biennale of Sydney Photograph: Gunther Hang
(Photograph: Gunther Hang)

The breadth and diversity of the typical biennale audience ensures that there no such thing as the “perfect biennale,” but that doesn’t meant that the artistic directors of biennales don’t pursue lofty ideals, which might sound like the best course of action, but in fact presents its own set of dangers, one of which is that a biennale ends up being over curated, slipping deep into the realm of the elite, and in the process becoming sterilized and sanitized to within an inch of its life. The antidote to an elitist biennale, however, is relatively simple: an artistic director who is not afraid to follow their own instincts or draw inspiration from his/her own knowledge and experience – someone like **Juliana Engberg**, Artistic Director of the **19th Biennale of Sydney**, Asia-Pacific’s largest international festival of contemporary art, which is currently showcasing the work of more than 90 artists from 31 countries until June 9, 2014.

LEO XU PROJECTS

Entitled “You Imagine What You Desire,” the 19th Biennale of Sydney exudes Engberg’s character and personality, reflecting her infectious enthusiasm, boldness, vitality, passion, quirkiness, and sense of wonderment. It is refreshing and exciting to experience a biennale with an identity so closely linked to that of its creator; and far from being a vain pursuit, the personalization adds authenticity and integrity to the Biennale experience. Further adding to the success of Engberg’s biennale is the fact that the look and feel of the exhibition reflects her curatorial journey: it is as though Engerberg ventured to the far reaches of the global art world seeking curiosities and specimens to bring back to her homeland. She even blogged about her art-finding journey, chronicling her travels around the globe through [Engberg on the Road](#). And although the choices she made were partially influenced by the art world developments she encountered along the way, such as the newly emerging art scenes of Eastern Europe, the Biennale does not feel like a static picture of a moment in art history, instead presenting as a dynamic expression of movement and progression, encapsulating a number of different threads that emerge as the Biennale unfolds.

The **Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA)**

is a space Engberg refers to as her air/water venue, where she situated the works that use “the psychological language of semiotics of surrealism, or the energetic movements of colour abstraction.” It is here, perhaps more than any other venue, where the Biennale’s wunderkammer personality emerges, expounding the uncanny and unexpected. Glaswegian artist **Jim Lambie**’s psychedelic floor installation “Zobop” (2014) is an unexpected delight, conceptually simple but

very effective. Meticulously installed strip by strip, “Zobop” (2014) exudes energy and vitality, completely transforming the character and feeling of the gallery space. From the outward gaze to the inward gaze, **Roni Horn**’s “Ten Liquid Incidents” (2010–12), an installation of ten solid-cast glass sculptures, exists as a series of meditative and reflective objects, challenging visitors to resolve the juxtaposition between their solid form and aqueous appearance. Training the eye back onto the viewer, one of the major drawcards of the Biennale, **Douglas Gordon**’s sensational installation “Phantom” (2011), is a multifaceted theatrical lament consisting of a video of a blinking eye, a burned Steinway piano, a black Steinway piano, and a video of a burning piano, complemented by songs from **Rufus Wainwright**’s melancholic album “All Days Are Nights: Songs For Lulu.” The MCA also hosts another of the of the exhibition’s main attractions, **Pipilotti Rist**’s mesmerizingly beautiful, all-encompassing video installation “Mercy Garden Retour Skin” (2014), which encapsulates the viewer within a trippy, kinetic dreamscape composed of imagery inspired by alpine and village life.



LEO XU PROJECTS



Cockatoo Island, a heritage listed former jail and shipyard, has been the centerpiece of the Biennale since it was first used as venue in 2008. But in 2014 the venue does not demand as much attention, which is not necessarily a bad thing as it results in a more cohesive and fluent experience. Leaving the island wishing for more would have been a disappointment, were it not for the quality of the other venues. The first work that greets visitors to the island, which is billed as a “fantasy location,” is **Callum Morton**’s “The Other Side (2014),” perhaps one of the best metaphors for the entire Biennale. Conceived as a multisensory experience of the internet, passengers hop onto a miniature train which disappears into the side of the upper island through a little door in a giant screenshot of the Google homepage, sending passengers on a journey of discovery and enlightenment. Moving into the turbine hall, a large rock hanging from the ceiling marks the space where Norwegian artist **Tori Wrānes** transforms into a strange alien-like creature for her haunting performance piece, “Stone and Singer (2014).” As she stands beneath the rock, which begins to swing back and forth, missing her head by a matter of centimeters at the lowest point of its trajectory, Wrānes begins a primitive and entrancing vocal performance accompanied by a cast of brass players, her long tail doubling as a microphone. Returning to planet earth, **Eva Koch**’s epic 12-metre high video installation, “I am the River” (2012), which depicts part of the great Icelandic waterfall Gjúfufarabui, slowed down for added effect, connects the exterior of the island with the interior.



LEO XU PROJECTS

At the **Art Gallery of New South Wales**, Engberg's "Promethean, the beating heart of the Biennale," several highlights emerge. Performance artist **Yingmei Duan's** "Happy Yingmei" (2014) is one of the most anticipated works of the Biennale, and it lives up to its reputation. Confining herself to a small, dark enchanted forest – accessible only by a small door in the wall – for five days a week for the duration of the three-month Biennale, Duan takes on a child-like persona, engaging visitors in a series of confronting encounters, some of which culminate in the gifting secret note of instruction: "Go to the church and ask them why religion is not free," for instance. Dressed in what appears to be a nightgown, hinting at the context of the work, Duan interrogates the nexus between reality and fiction, the corporeal and the immaterial. Equally powerful is **Yhonnie Scarce's** loaded installation "Weak In Colour But Strong In Blood (2013–14)," an investigation of the atrocities of displacement committed against Indigenous Australians in the early 20th century as part of the Eugenic movement. Housed in a space that resembles a scientific laboratory are a series of Scarce's signature black blown-glass fruits and vegetables, at once both magnifying and projecting, each symbolizing the plight of an Indigenous person. Moving from a silent expression of grief to a highly vocal lament, **Angelica Mesiti's** video work "In the Ear of the Tyrant (2013–14)" is one of the most effective and inspiring video works of the Biennale. Taking place at Sicily's Ear of Dionysius, an ancient limestone cave famous for its acoustic properties, Mesiti channels the women employed to sing songs of mourning upon the death of a community member, reimagining the ritual as a haunting vocal performance.



In 2014 Carriageworks has been included as a Major Venue Partner for the first time, taking its place as the main venue for video art – one of main components of Engberg's Biennale. Given the length of some of the longer narrative-based pieces, experiencing all the video works in their entirety is a multi-day mission. Thankfully many of the best works are shorter in length or do not have a linear narrative, allowing visitors to enter at any time. At the center of the dark, cavernous Carriageworks space sits **Gabriel Lester's** new site specific installation, "Where Spirits Dwell" (2014), which consists of a large-scale replica of a house with billowing curtains frozen in time, a cinematic remnant anchored in time and space, forever locked in a state of tension and drama, anticipation and expectation. Although the iconic male actors in **Daniel McKewen's** ongoing video project "Running Men" (2008–14) are sprinting for their lives, like Lester's installation, they too are trapped in time and space, this time within the confines of a video loop, forever pursued, never captured. Isolated from their surroundings and placed against a plain black background, anchoring them in a virtual vacuum, McKewen completely changes the context of the actors' actions, capturing the characters in a moment of fame while at the same time assigning each of them an inferior status. In an act that is almost the opposite of McKewen's, **Broersen & Lukács** erase the animal characters from the 1942 Disney film "Bambi" in their work "Mastering Bambi (2010)," leaving the music and scenery as the main protagonists. The result of Broersen & Lukács' subversive intervention is unsettling but also strangely beautiful.

LEO XU PROJECTS



At **Artspace Sydney**, the least populated of the Biennale venues, visitors are greeted by a flock of hand-cast raw bronze sculptures of birds, entitled “Primitive (2011–12),” by the renowned New York-based artist Ugo Rondinone. As well as naming each bird after a natural phenomenon, including “the sun,” “the horizon,” and “the waterfall,” Rondinone also leaves evidence of the creation process in the form of hand and thumb marks, situating the birds as a link between the natural world and the artificial gallery space. Following the trail of birds to the right leads to a space inhabited by three screens that are dedicated to another of the Artspace highlights, the trio of video works that comprises **Henna-Riikka Halonen**’s Artspace installation, which the artist refers to as a “future trilogy.” Although the trilogy runs for nearly 30 minutes, it is worth taking the time to watch all three videos in their entirety, especially considering the limited number of works at the Artspace venue. Linked in their references to futurist theater, literature, and design, Halonen’s three fictional scenarios of the future – “Strange Place for Snow” (2010), “The Bath House” (2009), and “Moderate Manipulations (2012) – are thought provoking and entertaining.

In her curatorial statement Engberg says that “You Imagine What You Desire” celebrates the power of artistic imagination, but it could also be said that it celebrates bold curatorial gestures. Just like Biennales of the past, “You Imagine What You Desire” has its flaws, but at the end of the journey the experience lingers deep within the imagination, which surely has to be a sign of a successful exhibition.

Follow [@ARTINFO_Aus](#)



TAGS Contemporary Arts Reviews Columnist Visual Arts biennale of sydney
19th Biennale of Sydney 19BOS juliana engberg You Imagine What You Desire
Nicholas Forrest