The Double Life of Krystyna
By Richard Nile

Exiles and immigrants are very often 'haunted by some sense of loss,' writes Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*, 'some sense of urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.' Yet, 'if we do look back', he warns, 'we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation…almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions…imaginary homelands…'[1]

For writers such as David Malouf and Patrick White, with their enormous poetic visions, Australia is a place into which the imagination can expand. As David Goodman, writing about Paul Carter's 'histories', has also pointed out, Australia 'scarcely exists at all, there are only migrants and the places they inhabit and dream…the settlers invented places out of their own memories and desires—which is why perhaps, they could foster as monstrous a fiction as terra nullius.'[2] The imagination, we might therefore want to conclude, has been a most effective device of colonisation.

It continues to be remarkable, if too infrequently commented on in the late twentieth century, that 'Australia' is overwhelmingly concentrated in the south eastern corner. We have not spread ourselves out on this slab of a continent. Beyond those five teeming sores of cities which A.D. Hope identified in 1939, 'real Australia' is perpetuated as a fantasy place, as a series of folk tales, photographs and television advertisements, through which we lay claim to something like 8.5 million square kilometres of largely 'unsettled area', as monstrous a fiction, surely, as terra nullius.

Chris Barry's art positions itself within 'two symbolic orders—two languages, two distinct kinds of consciousness', that of the artist's imagined Europe and that of her desired/feared Australia. Longing and unbelonging are concentrated in the works. Melbourne is both milieu and ambience. The city suffuses the art. It situates the works within that 'weird melancholy' of Australia, a text in the process of being inscribed with meaning and significance, a place lost in translation, a bizarre experiment of fragmented and exiled civilisations which, reassembled in 'alien' contexts, make do as best they can with remembered stories that have been carried across lands and over seas. Displacement provides art with its edge, gives it attitude, but it is also the source of the most persistent dreaming.

Poland is homeland and an imaginary point of departure. It presents a double life of Krystyna, the elusive, imagined other, the never-to-be properly reunited twin of the artist's soul. Imaginary Poland is the point of exile and disembodiment. It exists as broken-off fragments of family stories, old black and white photographs, and fantasy voyages. It infiltrates remembering, it is in the DNA of her art, her mark of Cain, her claim to identity.

Substantiated by the actual displacement of Polish-born parents and their generation of exiles, imaginary Poland is nonetheless an invention. In order to make physical alienation possible, a traumatic process of psychological death had first to be performed. Exiles extinguish that which they know and replace it with that which they desire or fear. They carry with them on their wanderings these freeze frames of constructed memory.

Imaginary Poland rises out of the annihilation of actual Poland, involving multiple acts of negotiation to cover the evidence. Physical evacuation severs the corporeal link and allows for new stories to be told in an alien environment. In this way, in a new environment, fantasy transmutes as real. Multiculturalism gestures towards the politics of identity and towards the tyranny of nostalgia—fertile material for the artist. The multiple acts of negotiation carried out by Chris Barry however refuse nostalgia. By artistically critiquing what she would see as the

[1] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (Granta/Penguin, London, 1992) p.10.
[2] David Goodman, 'Australian Identity: Postmodernism and History' in Livio Dobrez, *Identifying Australia in Postmodern Times* (Bibliotech, Canberra, 1994) p.51.

unconvincing binaries of actual-fabrication, real-imagined, the art maintains even more profoundly disturbing possibilities of the lies that are necessary.

Multiculturalism actively encourages the manufacture of essentially harmless inventions. Or, as Sneja Gunew has put it, 'Multiculturalism in its common incarnation of the "ethnic community" involves precisely the restitution of the community. In other words, these ethnic communities function as carriers of the burden of our nostalgia for lost communities'.[3] Yet the historical consciousness of Poland, however fabricated, does not afford the luxuriance of such essentialised immigrant identities, the pasta and polka of Australian multiculturalism. The history, quite simply, has been too bleak.

Poland is a site of great sorrow. It is a product of ancient European hatreds which has seen it shattered several times this century. Locked in by political borders which define forms of ethnic nationalisms on either side, it has been subjected to and has participated in shocking destruction. Forever entombed by geography and history, it would seem, its history recalls not the Slav tribalism of former greatness so much as the travesty of circumstance in which the 'niggers of Europe' (a phrase that has also been applied to the Irish) find themselves clustered in anticipation of the next calamity that seems to be Poland's lot.

With a whole continent for a nation, Australia proposes a credible alternative and, in true antipodean fashion, a happier place of refuge for exiles. Here refugees are habitually thought of as the lucky ones who escaped the ways of the old world, to paraphrase Les Murray, you really can lose yourself in Australia—forget about history. 'Speaking figuratively', writes Gunew, 'post-war migration also finally gave credence to a myth of a New Eden. Those victims of the Second World War inferno in the north had constructed Australia as the beckoning promised land that, out of the ashes of the penal colony and the murder of a people, a new Australia was apparently rising. Multiculturalism represented a wholesome spectacle of nutritious ethnic bread and finger-snapping circuses. Within the frame Australia was constructed as a liberal and pluralist nation.'[4] In this manner, multiculturalism simply masks assimilation.

Yet Homi Bhabha has made the point that 'it is by asserting the way in which ethnic groupings or communities express their cultural differences, that we confront the subject of liberation.'[5] Consciousness of alienation connects as art and sensibility with other dispossessed and in acts of empowerment, by whatever means (in this case multiculturalism of dubious intention), the voices of marginalisation insist on being heard. Policy makers intent on 'managing diversity' did not anticipate this particular unintended outcome of their efforts.

The displaced objects of this exhibition are consistently contrived into intensely personal projections. Yet the art is, almost defiantly, vicarious in its autobiography—these are self-consciously fragments of other's imaginings, reassembled and hybridised in daringly subjective contexts. Transmuted historical consciousness turns on unpleasant truths, those master narratives that have been constructed in order to conceal Australia's own genocides. Suppression has taken enormous energy and Australian stories of place, poetic visions included, are still built on such terrible lies as 'the quiet country', 'peaceful acquisition', 'terra nullius' and the like.

Australia has grown up with the camera which has significantly contributed to the empire of 'realist culture', and assisted in the delusion that we know the culture and ourselves. Complemented by other visual arts, literature and history in particular, this tendency has been documentary rather than interrogative. It has helped to perpetuate great historical silences. Documentary realism, that is to say, has been a powerful tool of colonialism. Barthes warned in his conceptualisation of the 'scandal' of photography: 'that the past existence of objects can be proved by a technique of writing, light writing, that makes impossible the proof of present

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[3] Sneja Gunew, 'Playing Centre Field', cited in Efi Hatzimanolis, 'The Politics of Nostalgia: Community and Difference in Migrant Writing, *Hecate*, Vol 16 nos 1 & 2, 1990.
[4] Sneja Gunew, 'Denaturalising Cultural Nationalisms: Multicultural Reading of "Australia"', in Homi K. Bhabha (ed), *Nation and Narration* (Routledge, London, 1990).
[5] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Identities on Parada', *Marxism Today*, June 1989, p.27.

existence, and, therefore, the photograph transgresses the customary association of the real with the present.'[6]

Writing about photographic collages, on the other hand, Barbara Kruger admits that you can 'thrive on mistaken identity'.[7] Chris Barry's photography, her collage, thrive precisely because of her particularised mistaken identity—the bridges by which she crosses between her homelands—Poland and Australia. The word 'translation', Rushdie tells us 'comes etymologically, from the Latin for "bearing across". Having been borne across the world, we are translated…It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.'[8]

It may be, as Barthes seems to argue, that we 'all stand on home ground, but we need not look directly at the subject rewritten in the utopias of language, even though we want to know what remains of the familiar subject.'[9] 'Stolen' portraits on essentialised and subjective backgrounds trace imaginary homelands, while disembodied clothing formally connect photography, theatre and history. If photography 'seems to be closer' to theatre than painting, then it is also a 'kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.' Art photography, as the name suggests, does this self-consciously. The rise of such profoundly held uncertainties invite us to remember more clearly, to acknowledge the lies by which we live, even if we choose to go on living with them.

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[6] Mary Bittner Wiseman, *The Ecstacies of Roland Barthes* (Routledge, London, 1991), Chapter 6, 'Make-up, Masks, Cameras and Chromosomes'.
[7] Cited in Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (Routledge, London, 1989) p.45.
[8] Imaginary Homelands, p.17.
[9] Wiseman, op.cit.