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Utopia's latest venture: exploring concepts of visual art

By Dione Joseph

The word utopia is often bandied in the most casual of ways but the etymology suggests two very distinct notions, that of an ideal place which is good/true, as the Greek root of the word 'eu' proposes; but it is also imaginary (i.e. no place). These two fundamental ideas are the tenet of Asialink's Utopia which recently presented it's first public forum and exhibition themed around art in the Asia Pacific region. The exhibition, which is currently running till November 5, looks at the issues of intimacy within public space.

The idea to create a forum which discusses this notion of utopia as a collective and collaborative initiative first took root in Tokyo and has now spread itself across five cities.

Melbourne, Seoul, Singapore, New Delhi and Tokyo have come together to establish a cross-cultural forum between Australia and Asia and Director of Utopia@Asialink Nathalie King is very excited about the exhibition which is part of the Melbourne International Festival.

"Utopia is nomadic venture and it evolves and shifts and responds to visual arts initiatives across a variety of visual art institutions," explains

King, "From what developed mainly as a research project we are now an incubator for cross-cultural ideas."

Indonesia and China are potentially the next cultural partners to be joining the Utopia clan and plans continue to expand and grow.

"Melbourne is a pivotal centre with plenty of contemporary art spaces and a diverse artistic spectrum," says King, "And because Utopia looks at the local and also considers the global, within that context we're engaging with local geographies and its nuanced, intimate publics."

The five cities in partnership are represented by members who are key practitioners or have come from strong visual arts based practices. "We all work in different cities, so we're more of an international circuit so we try and find other events to meet where we are in situ."

Intimate Publics is an international exhibition of video works that delve into the revelatory world of intimacy within public spaces at Fehily Contemporary Gallery from Thursday 13 October – Saturday 5 November.



Yum yum! A delicious concoction featured in the Smart, Alec exhibition

Photo: Louise Blyton

Sweet hat is tops

By Heather Bloom

Melbourne's hat store Smart, Alec is celebrating with a "From the neck up" exhibition, Smart, Alec brought together eight contemporary Melbourne artists and asked them to create a unique work using one of Smart, Alec's top hats. Running from October 19 to November 23, "From the neck up" is a stunning display of what can happen when you give artists the opportunity to let their imaginations run wild.

The eight artists involved each pulled something different out of the hat (pardon the pun) in their designs, from a *Phar*

Lap inspired piece to a wired cactus hat that is constantly lit up.

Owner of Smart, Alec and the man who devised the event, Michael Albert says, "I deliberately pick artists for this exhibition; they think differently to milliners and try new things that someone trained in the industry wouldn't."

Now in its second year, "From the neck up" is playing into the "Old Fitzroy" ambience, and achieving great success.

"We're very lucky to be where we are," says Albert, "There's definitely a market for hats in the area (Smith St) and an untapped one at that."

Of the seven magnificent

creations on show the clear winner was the top hat covered in hundreds and thousands, a delectable piece of art that looks good enough to eat. Artist Louise Blyton was proud to invoke a feeling of childlike innocence and comfort with her top hat. "When I see a great hat on someone, I have a saying: sweet hat" says Albert, Louise's design is the epitome of that saying, it really is a sweet hat."

**From The Neck Up
Smart, Alec
71 Smith Street Fitzroy
Oct 19 - Nov 23, 10am- 6pm**

Derby with a difference

By Milla Carter

We've all got that picture in our head; girls on girls, whizzing round in lycra and the retro-rockabilly paraphernalia that goes with it. But VRDL have battled hard to tone down the spectatorship of the sport; contracting players in the league to gain approval by their media officer before being interviewed by the press and through coverage by sponsors such as *In-press* magazine. "The first rule of Fight Club is you don't talk about Fight Club," says one ex-Victorian Roller Derby Leaguer (VRDL).

Ironically, it was a journalist himself who invented the sport.



Photo: Ben Grech

Look out! Moving in on the competition

"...sportswriter Damon Runyon noticed when skaters collided, the audience loved it. He suggested changing the way the game was played could increase audience attendance...and Derby evolved into the sport it is [today]." [VRDL website]

VRDL goes on to allude to a correlation between, 'the 80s, [when] theatrical elements [in Roller Derby] were devised similar to professional wrestling, and eventually the public interest waned.'

But as our source says, "that's not why interest waned. Look at Big Brother, it ran for six years, then hit saturation point. A wrestler will note the similarities [between Roller Derby] and they are just as frustrated at the pub-

lic perception that it's not a real sport; those muscles are real!"

"Theatrics are important. They can also detract, but to keep a league going you have to have bums on seats. If you are not entertaining, then people aren't going to buy those tickets. I don't watch VRDL matches anymore because I know who's going to win by a mile, even if their uniforms are less provocative." Like *Fight Club* itself, "feeling like you're a rock star with the costumes and fans makes the hard work of training worth it."

The growing alternatives to VRDL, South Sea Roller Derby (SSRD) and Melbourne Northside Rollers (MNR) hope to give bouters greater freedom: "VRDL want to create a legitimate sport. That's fine, but they still have a lot of influence through media control of and an unofficial blacklist over those other two Victorian leagues. Those leagues are generally composed of women who left VRDL because they couldn't keep up with the required training attendance and found it unfamily friendly. MNR are filling the gap VRDL left for people who want to play the sport but not make it their whole life and SSRD allow children at practice. They both still keep their personality and their outfits."



Photo: Ben Grech

Thou shalt not take Derby's name in vain

Upcoming bouts:

VDRL-Saturday October 29, Melbourne Showgrounds, doors open 4.45pm, bout 5.45pm, tix \$25 through moshtix.
SSRD-Saturday, November 5, Springers Leisure Centre, 400 Cheltenham Rd, Keysborough, doors open 6:30pm, wheels

down at 7:30pm, All ages welcome, alcohol available for 18+, Tix: \$10 adults, children \$5, under-5s free.

Visit www.northsiderollers.com to sign up for an expression of interest.