

Marking Beauty

Flying overland, one is granted an aerial view of twenty-first century Australia: a vast country sculpted by progress and time. Our cities centre around corporate towers and cultural precincts that feed out into suburban backyards, shopping malls and green belts. Our activity and habits are mapped out by dense configurations of roads and freeways that link our sprawling occupation. We dwell in a matrix of lines and as we move inland from the coast, these lines change. They thin out and slowly overlap with new lines as the land becomes delineated by rivers, ranges, deserts and other slowly eroding wonders.

Within this topographical snapshot, the country's inland waterways make their precious mark. Rivers, tributaries, dams, channels; these bodies of water, which have worked tirelessly to form and feed our land, thread across the country. They reflect the sun and make their beauty felt in their colour and seemingly random paths. They contribute important mark making on a rich palette of land and yet these lines of life struggle to survive as Australia suffers through another generation of drought and water becomes the new oil on the commodity block.

Perth-based artist, Tom Müller, has used the occasion of the Biennale and its timely theme - 'handle with care' - to draw attention to the fragility of Australia's water resources and the increasingly important role water plays in connecting cultures, environments and economies.

Müller's installation, *Liquid Empires* (2008) comprises three works that utilise specific geographical data from major Australian and international rivers to illustrate the world's remaining inland water levels. A selection of Australian rivers are represented in an installation of over sixty 3-metre long glass tubes, each filled with blue liquid to indicate the identified river's existing volume. Displayed in a row, this rigid and regimented 3D bar chart is antithetical to the intrinsic nature of river flows yet crisply captures the current frenzy of scientific analysis being invested into the future of water sustainability in this country.

The artist has also selected a number of the world's largest river systems and represented them in a similar gauge-like arrangement, with varied lengths of tubing to reflect a more diverse range of water levels. Arranged in a cluster, the layering of these tubes allows the audiences to view one river through another, suggesting the inherent inter-connectivity of river systems. The geographical range of rivers represented in the work also critically illustrates our shared reliance on water for survival. While depleting levels of fresh water resources has been a long-term issue for most Third World countries, it is a relatively new reality for First World countries who must now reassess their water usage and market hold. As the title of the work alludes, water is becoming an increasingly lucrative commodity of trade in a global economy.

On a formal level, the three-dimensional nature of Müller's works in this exhibition is also of important note. To date, the artist's largely 2D computer rendered mapping projects have dissected, charted and represented elements of the natural and built environment, compressing information and reducing subject matter into abstract forms. These illustrative diagrams, which have taken the lives of trees and the stars as their source, have used the modern computer language of vectors to describe nature in an artificial world. Like these earlier 2D works, Müller's new installations reduce the living and breathing into skeletal lines of precision and order, offering a beauty that possibly transcends its endangered source.

While these new works demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of visual language and a focused investigation into universally adopted processes and protocols, they also continue Müller's pursuit of the politically provocative and timely. To this end, Tom has previously issued worldwide passports on-line (*World Passport*, 2000 -), released a limited edition of 24 carat credit cards complete with instructions for melting (*Gold Card*, 2006), and opened a supermarket for limited edition works (*Supermart*, 2004). *Liquid Empires* continues the artist's interest in connectivity and the circulation of value and meaning through global systems of exchange.

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