



el emental worlds

tom müller

PERTH INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS
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perth cultural centre james street northbridge tue-sun 11am-6pm fridays 11am-9pm tel +61 8 9228 6300 info@pica.org.au pica.org.au



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THE VISUAL ARTS AND CRAFT STRATEGY

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ON GLOBALISM, AND OTHER ISSUES

As I write, it's raining. Not little spatters, nor the humid drips that atom the surface, lifting dust and relieving nothing, but the torrential rains of a once remembered time. Rain that drenches, with shoes tipped up and water poured out, clothes wrung dry, and a frenzy that accompanies nature gone wild. But more than anything else, it is the smell of the rain that is so evocative: water and dust, and the heavy, humid feel of the air following the calm. These sensations now feel part of a past Australian experience as in many places water becomes an increasingly rare and precious commodity. Growing up, I was given a rain gauge, and every Christmas the *Weekly Times* published a chart into which you recorded your annual rainfall. This was before computers, and the yellowing news-sheets were kept and filed, testament to the ever-decreasing commodity. Tank water, bores, and the vital levels of rivers and aquifers were always part of a way of life for rural Australians. More recently they have become a topic of equal concern for those on the urban periphery of our island. As rivers dwindle, salinity increases, dams lie empty, and ecologies die, the subtle balance between nature and mankind is made starkly visible.

On my flights to Perth, (perhaps the last great Wild West frontier), where Swiss-born Tom Müller has settled, you see small geometric squares, abstract and randomly distributed. Many newcomers to Australia comment on these patterns, unaware that they are man-made stock dams, dug to catch any of that scarce resource that all too seldom falls as rain. Usually empty, their raised banks, and rings of evaporated water levels are a formal design motif, more abstract expressionist than human functionalist.

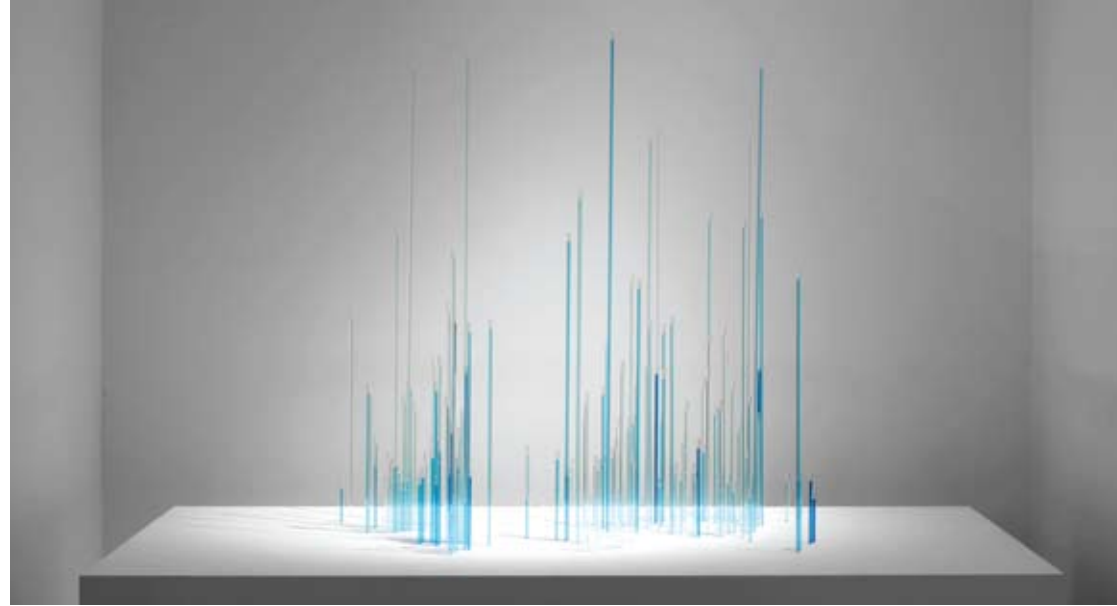
So too the colours. At such altitude, blues are crystalline, and the earth and sky meet almost in whiteness. Striations of rich ochres, reds, browns and blue – endless azures – are the palette inextricably linked with our notion of the West, no matter how much our mythology of coasts rhapsodises on white sands meeting oceans of blue.

The aerial view also reveals winding patterns and forms, not unlike many of the abstract maps of symbols and signs that characterise the Aboriginal peoples' depictions of land and place. Waterways and estuaries appear sinuous, as are the shadows of undulating topography, dotted with occasional vegetation.

Müller's practice draws on these aerial maps, unrelenting colours, topographic chartings, and data made visible. Müller's visual library starts from trying to make sense of the landscape, through ordering and re-ordering forms drawn from the natural world – water, ice, crystal formations and stars. But he uses them in a manner that often abstracts their organic state to a series of symbols and forms, statistics and value – and the interpretation of data is a subjective art, open to the desires of time and place. Müller has his own agendas: in a cool and refined aesthetic, he draws attention to the increasing complexity of cross-border cultures, and cross-cultural borders, while concerned for localised themes that are becoming more and more complex universals. Water, scarce resources, and the delicacy of our self-defined and self-imposed nation states can sound somewhat earnest, but he imbues these topics with a wry irony and aesthetic rigor that makes them far from dry.

This is a land of vast natural and mineral wealth. A land that has been cleared, mined, logged, and polluted. Artists like Müller, particularly having come from a different continent, an 'old Europe' (in this shifting cultural context), are all too aware of the fragility of natural wealth. Müller's mappings aim to expose the cross-border exchange that results from a globalising society dealing with finite local resources.

In earlier works, Müller explored man-made systems and global mappings. World international airport runways were reduced to abstract composition in a chart of intersecting silver lines and geometric patterns. Border crossings, connections, and meetings were abstracted to a minimalist metaphor, proposing a world unhindered by national borders. So too, Müller proposed an international passport issued online for the 'global citizen', *World Passport*, an ongoing project begun in 2000. The passport now has six languages, holders from the Ukraine to Morocco, and official disapproval intent on stamping out illegal immigrants and traffic in passports. And Müller's limited edition of 24 carat gold credit cards, *Gold Card* (2006), recognised everywhere came complete with instructions for melting down, rendering art back into exchangeable commodity. Each of these projects laid bare the circulation of people and value around global systems of exchange.



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For his PICA exhibition *Elemental Worlds*, Müller returns to environmental concerns. He portrays the geographic data of the world's largest river systems with clusters of vertical glass tubes rising from a horizontal base. Each is filled with liquid blue, the different strengths indicating the varying health of the waterways. Water is captured, contained, and fixed in a series of vertical lines that contrast with the organic meanderings of the original watercourse, carved out over centuries.

As ice-caps melt and sea levels rise, Müller creates an iceberg with a difference. Subtly illuminated from behind, *Façade for Iceberg* (2008), is a seemingly temporary structure. With precision cutting, sheets of white acrylic have been cut and faceted together, creating a solid and impermeous mass in the place of the disappearing icebergs. Behind the slick precision however, timber structural frames support the edifice, their natural finish a sharp contrast to the man-made polymers again underlining their transitory antecedents in nature.

Precious Alliance (2008), a giant skeletal outline of a precious gem, is scientific in its formation and reminiscent of science journal graphics of old. Hand drawn in coloured chalks onto a black wall, *Precious Alliance* and *Cluster Lustre* (2008) both reflect Müller's fascination with the universal language of design and the intrinsic structure of mineral formations. Abstracted to a series of lines and geometric structures, the drawing of *Precious Alliance* has a stark beauty and is far from its earthy beginnings, a relationship that Müller refers to in the work's title and transient nature of the subject's render. Embedded into the wall, *Cluster Lustre*'s illuminated white mass could be the map of another planet's star. However it is from closer to hand: it has the form of quartz crystals, dissected, charted and represented in two-dimensions. Reduced to the abstract, the star-like crystal formation comes from deep within the earth, perhaps a reference to the mineral wealth upon which this country is founded. Relationships between nature and our global economy are never far away.

Mondo Grotto (2007) again fuses natural forms and global exchange. A circular projection that follows the play of light over abstracted surface striations, the glass tubes of *Liquid Empires* have been inverted to form clusters of stalactites reminiscent of subterranean caves and mineralised formations alluded to in the title. The circular nature of the projection reflects Müller's ongoing interest in all things worldly, as the title refers both to the universalism of *mondo*, or world, and the localised impacts of over-mining, and exhausting the natural wealth of underworld cavities and enclosures.

As icebergs melt, water courses dry, and water becomes a perennial question not only for country, but city dwellers alike, the utopianism of these projects is neither naive, nor folly. At a time when we need to search for alternative answers, Müller's proposals have a compelling and plausible ring. Abstracted, computerised, and consumerised into forms that a 21st century viewer will find all too familiar in our oversaturated mass-market economy of imagery, Müller's proposals for a global language or lexicon of images and international symbols of modernist art that makes sense in different countries, to different people, is far from fantasy.

Rebecca Coates
November 2008

Rebecca Coates is an independent curator and writer based in Melbourne.



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LIST OF WORKS

1	<i>Façade for Iceberg</i> , 2008 acrylic, timber 620 x 330 x 120 cm	4	<i>Mondo Grotto</i> , 2008 circular projection with sound dimensions variables
2	<i>Cluster Lustre</i> , 2008 acrylic, MDF panel, plaster, light 33 x 50 x 0.3 cm	5	<i>Precious Alliance</i> , 2008 chalk 320 x 160 cm
3	<i>Liquid Empires</i> , 2008 glass, water, dye, timber 60 x 120 x 240 cm	All works collection of the artist Cover image: <i>Façade for Iceberg</i> (installation view). Photo: Tony Nathan	