

Sexy, dangerous and up in lights



Brook Andrew's latest exhibition is a virtual retrospective of his extraordinary body of diverse works, and includes his iconic 1996 work *Sexy and Dangerous* (right).

By Ashley Crawford
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Brook Andrew has always skirted a difficult path between harsh political and cultural issues while producing works of captivating and often luscious beauty. At the core of his amazingly diverse practice is his desire to make the viewer consider the construction of history and power.

These issues are confronted in the remarkable survey show, *Brook Andrew: Eye to Eye*, curated by Geraldine Barlow at the Monash University Museum of Art. The show is a frenetic exploration of the various means Andrew has employed to investigate forms of identity and power.

It ranges from the iconic 1996 duraclear-on-acrylic work *Sexy and Dangerous*, a re-animated ethnographic image of an Aboriginal warrior gazing at the viewer, through to the 2006 Ilfochrome print series *Replicant*. There is a barrage of neon lights, screen-prints, photography and sculptural objects, some contemplative, others screaming for attention. As Barlow notes in her catalogue essay: "In Andrew's work, the gallery is a theatre of meaning, as well as a space of aesthetic experience and experiment: darkness and light are manipulated, the unknown is as much a presence as the known."

Andrew says he views himself as "an interdisciplinary artist who is inspired by historical local and global contemporary culture, especially in the diverse constructions of power, difference and aesthetics".

"I often employ a hypnotic black-and-white pattern influenced by Wiradjuri design as a metaphor for the often artificially induced altered state of consciousness created by our capitalist driven society," he says.

"My work also draws on global and social questions about power balance and disappeared or invisible actions and stories, the discourse of language, race and identity."

In 2004, Andrew produced his most sensual body of work, a series of shadowy male and female nudes, taken at night and set in the Australian bush.

"With the *Kalar Midday* work, I do comment specifically on the Aboriginal body," he says. "I, like many others, do this as an artist interested in Australian history and this is something many have made art about, from Arthur Boyd to Tracey Moffatt.

"The nudes are portraits of Aboriginal people, but more importantly an influence and reflection on negative stereotypes in history and the media of Aboriginal people."

Aesthetically the elegant *Kalar Midday* series could not be more different from the confronting *Sexy and Dangerous*.

"I first came across the images I used in *Sexy and Dangerous* at the Mitchell Library in Sydney. I was struck by this image and that led to an obsession with the politics of power and invisibility and how entire cultures constructed lies and fabricated histories.

"So, photography was a medium influenced by its actual invention to document. Just as war photographers and the power of the images they have created, as well as . . . Andy Warhol's images of criminals and accidents, and (the work of Christian) Boltanski."

He says he is influenced by Warhol and James Rosenquist "as far as creating work which reflects the consumer violence and construction of particular, often out of reach, social, celebrity and safe lifestyles and those which are clearly unsafe to consume . . . Western capitalist society should have a warning similar to the smokers warning".

Andrew admires Robert Mapplethorpe's "ability to create images both aesthetic, political and sexual at a cutting edge".

Photography immediately engages human emotion and thought. "Like a memory which may not be ours, but becomes ours," he says. "I think photography has the power to captivate us as witness."

Andrew's desire to mix up cultural difference is clearly seen in his screen-prints. A major inspiration for these was the work of Gustav Klutis, the pioneering photographer and major member of the Constructivist avant-garde in the early 20th century who is especially well-known for the Soviet revolutionary and Stalinist propaganda he produced.

But in his *Hope & Peace* series from 2005 Andrew utilises the extraordinary designs - and names - of Japanese cigarettes.

"Gustav Klutis was the influence for the power and style of the imagery I employ in the *Hope & Peace* series," Andrew says. "And the irony in consumer objects like the Peace cigarettes from Japan."

Swathes of the show glow with the eerie light of neon signs. Some are in Wiradjuri, such as *Ngajuu ngaay nginduugirr* (I see you) in vivid blue, elsewhere a glowing sign simply

proclaims *Buunji nginduugirr AMERICA* in, perhaps knowingly, red, white and blue. As Geraldine Barlow notes, neon is "a medium at once otherworldly, and all too much of the daily world".

In the art world, neon is a medium best known in the work of the American Bruce Nauman, but Andrew says he was initially inspired by the "real" world.

"My first neon works were influenced by Sydney and Las Vegas - I've always liked the neon in the public domain," he says.

It is, of course, an ideal medium to tackle notions of language and communication, but Andrew manages to avoid being too obvious, leaving the viewer to work out the various underpinning meanings. "I never see my work as literal," he says. "The text work is either very personal to me, or it holds up questions about the construction of place, identity, humour, politics, society, poetics and emotion. The works which may be seen as more hard-hitting reflect ideas and arguments I often hear in the public arena. So I have the influence of a vast and complex world for this."

Andrew is not, himself, fluent in Wiradjuri, a language that was all but annihilated by Western invasion and has only recently come back to life. "You can learn Wiradjuri in the NSW education system these days, it's a recent important comeback from the effects of invasion," he says.

"With other languages I use local people to translate, or borrow from the public domain from posters and consumer products. So in this case, the terms and translations sway, and are often reflections of my own inner desires on poetics of being in a complex linguistic world.

"I think the 'lost in translation' of this action is where we are always placed, even if we speak the same language, our translations can often be misinterpreted."

Brook Andrew: Eye to Eye, at Monash University Museum of Art, Clayton campus, until June 23.