

PROBE: explorations into Australian computational space

exhibition essay

The word 'probe' in English is both a noun, as in, for example, a space or medical 'probe', or a verb, as in 'the journalist probed the mind of the leader'.

The essential idea common to both usages is that via the probe or the probing action, we are able to see the unseeable, to access previously uncharted terrains. There is always a clarity of intent associated with the word 'probe' -- the idea that the journey will be worth the effort and that there will be a result, but not perhaps the result one expects.

So it is with this exhibition. The artists are probes themselves as they explore deep into their culture. Such is the task of art, to see the unseeable and by doing so, reveal something new about the space and time we live in.

However here, at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, the artists are probing a particular and relatively new global terrain, that of the digital. Their explorations make incisions into the fabric of digital culture itself.

The accelerating technological nature of the world is mirrored everywhere. Scientific research is now most often conducted on fast and powerful networked machines, as computational space takes over from the traditional laboratory to create massive, data-heavy simulations of nature. Equally the computer has, for many artists, replaced the classic space of the artist's studio.

Artists are working more and more across media, producing images, videos, CDROM and net.art from within their digital studio domain. This studio extends out over the internet, stimulating new dialogues and pathways for global culture, and potentially making of the internet a permanent art zone.

This extended, cross media attitude is spawning new genres -- strange hybrids in the outerworld of what has come to be known as 'new media art'.

Through their digitally produced works, the artists in ***PROBE*** touch on many issues, including those to do with the simulation of reality itself. Patricia Piccinini's work 'Protein Lattice' examines the nexus between advertising, consumer culture, the image of 'woman' and biotechnology. Brenda L. Croft's series 'west/ward/bound', goes to the heart of reconciliation between black and white Australia through the re-presentation of her personal history. Beijing-born Australian Zen Yipu takes us on a wild ride around Japan's urban fringes, weaving elements of the fantastic into the city-scape, while Jen Seevinck, in the computer animation 'blue in the bluebird' creates a virtual Australian landscape, in muted hues.

Leon Cmielewski describes his work 'Dream Kitchen' as an interactive animation. It moves inside domestic space to reveal the hidden treasures and strange narratives

nestled into the apparent clean surfaces of white-goods dreamland. And finally, Justine Cooper's installation and video work 'RAPT' allows us to see the unseeable as we travel into the artist's own body -- scanned using Magnetic Resonance Imaging technology and reworked in deep dataspace to create a poetic vision of the world we literally live inside.

Every technological development brings with it new artforms. **PROBE** shows some of the ways Australian artists are exploring deep inside global computational space, with all its complexity and strange disconnections, wild and vivid connections and most interesting, its new zone of emergent, mutating and febrile interconnections.

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Canberra
August, 1999.