



Lustre (part 1, 2, 3) 2004 104 x 240 cm Ink-jet and enamel on canvas

ALIEN CULTURE

The Far East. A mysterious world of strange customs, odd foods, dazzling colours and delightful – and repugnant – smells. A world where the Buddha meets Astro Boy, where geisha girls bow to salary men and samurai, where ultra-violent manga is read on the train on the way to pray at the nearest peaceful Shinto temple. Japan is a world of ancient customs and timeless skills. It is also a world of cybernetic innovation and surreal juxtapositions where politeness and ritual cover the extremes of bondage and pornography.

If you are a man, go to a urinal and as soon as you spray the trough an advertisement will automatically pop up on a plexiglass screen at face height. Telephone boxes are plastered with offers of exotic services and Asahi beer and Suntory whisky are available in dispensers at every street corner. Everywhere the neon flashes, giant screens battle for attention while, in a mildly hidden underworld, little girls underpants are traded for substantial prices.

It is both surreal and beguiling and Marcel Cousins has been seduced.

Cousins, took up took up a scholarship at Tokyo National University of Music and Fine Art in 1999, two years after graduating from Victoria College of the Arts. His specialty was printmaking and naturally he was attracted to the sumptuous approach that traditional Japanese printmaking, especially Moku Hanga (Japanese style wood blocks), is renowned for. Of course he was aware of the Western fascination of contemporary Japanese culture, which had been inflamed by the release of such classic manga as Katsuhiro Otomo's 1988 animation Akira and the Asiatic influence so clearly seen in Ridley Scott's BladeRunner.

The impact of Tokyo on the young artist was far more profound than he could ever have expected. In his last Melbourne exhibition, Japan was the overwhelming influence, with hints of pornography, literal and liberal quoting of advertising and garish hints of neon. In his current work he has embraced other Asian iconographic imagery, including Chinese currency. More importantly his utilization of a diverse range of media – including computer print outs, spray paint stencils on canvas and colour photo copies – has resulted in a unique and powerful language. Cousins initial reaction, as a stunned, round-eyed Westerner, has settled into an elegant, albeit confronting, series of works.

If you don't know the language, you may be forgiven for seeing some of these works as complex abstractions. Those familiar with Manga, will also see truncated curves of young women in pornographic poses, hints of hidden narratives. Blues and pinks explode across the canvas and a translation of a sound bubble says "aaaghh!" The works buzz with static as though the canvas is being received over malfunctioning wires direct to the gallery wall.

Even when Cousins' depicts his more voyeuristic images of partially disrobed Asian girls, they are rendered with a knowing humor contrasted with first-hand knowledge of the not-so hidden world of Asian pornography. The demure versus the temptress, the whore and the angel.

Experience leads to awareness and to an extent these are socio-political works. Asia, most especially Japan, is a realm of contradictions. When Cousins depicts a Chinese bank note it is hard not to notice that for a regime that has attempted to destroy its Buddhist tradition, it is a Buddhist temple that adorns the national currency.

Cousins has come of age in this body of work. It is less pop and more painterly, his meticulous stencil work rising to new heights of skill. While the central theme is clearly apparent – that of his fascination for other cultures – where this show succeeds is more in the artists' ability to create a highly personal and unique language. Many Western travelers approach a new culture via the protection of a camera lense, rather than embrace the odd, the new and the strange, they tackle 'experience' as though it were a television screen. It is fairly obvious that Cousins is not that kind of traveler; he has allowed the new into the pores of his skin, searing lasting images on his retina that are then developed into a new approach to the visual.

There is only one thing to do. Pick up an Asahi and be enveloped in an alien culture that in so many strange ways we can be obsessed – and seduced – by.

Ashley Crawford



Legal Tender (Ruby Red) 2004 enamel on linen 90 cm x 161 cm



The Peoples Faces of China 1 & 2 2004 enamel on linen (2x) 100 cm x 160 cm



The Potala Palace (light riviera)
2004 enamel on canvas 80 cm x 130 cm



Evian Girl
2003 enamel on linen 113 cm x 88.3 cm