

'Sweet' smell of community in Docklands

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VISUAL ARTS REVIEW: CONTAINER VILLAGE Next Wave, Shed 14, Harbour Esplanade, Docklands, until Sunday

FESTIVALS gain an admirable energy by concentrating diverse groups on a common project. You can see it in Container Village, part of the Next Wave festival. Coinciding with the Commonwealth Games, the festival bears the cheeky title Empire Games.

At Shed 14, 43 shipping containers are stacked on top of one another. Their assembly isn't orderly. They're strewn at various angles around pathways; and the second level is arranged differently. A gangway erected upon scaffolding, with eccentric stairs, connects the upper level of containers. Children love it.

Within each container, there's an artistic encounter to be had, often spilling out onto the floor and the network of passages. This yields a marvellous air of community, a shanty-town of artists.

The sense of community is heightened by the art. The works have all been created by artistic collectives, drawn from the lively artist-run gallery scene in Australia and Commonwealth countries such as New Zealand.

These collaborative groups have sprung up with a cargo ethos not unlike the chaotic assembly of containers, the result of coincidental meetings, opportunities amid waste, a rapid growth of enthusiasm and an acceptance of impermanence.

Apart from the informality of the groups, the unifying element is the containers themselves.

They narrate histories by their smell. You go into each wondering what was stored inside. The olfactory presence of the goods once stored in them provides a strange, ghostly experience, a sense of stepping into a shifting world. Some reek of leather goods, others of musty clothes or rubber or dusty furniture.

The pong of the former cargo is sometimes overpowering and subverts the installation, adding to the claustrophobia with close, dark and stale scents. You know that the container is open, but the residual scent evokes the condition of being locked inside with bags of rancid seed.

The best presentations take advantage of the prospect of living inside a container: both intimate and ghostly, challenging the viewer to contemplate survival on the threshold of this country or that. Others fail to seize the iconography already installed in the crate and interpret the container as if it were a white cube - maybe a bit feral, with corrugated walls and low ceiling - but a de facto gallery for showing art.

This is a pity, because, not only is a narrative opportunity missed, but the shabby corrugated walls hemming the narrow volume make an unpleasant gallery.

Anything with a flat-screen video monitor or other sophisticated form of projection is doomed to failure in these straitened circumstances. Only when the discourse is security, as with meta-mortal, are electronic genres justified in the context.

I adored the conceptual performative work of iTug. These NZ artists offer rides around the building in makeshift rickshaws and other homespun chariots, bolted together with

bits of bicycle wheel, wheelbarrow and vinyl chairs. The redemption of junk, the reliance on the young artists' muscle and the evocation of third-world servitude are drawn into a relation with your own passive body.

The metaphor of an artist tugging at you - for all the expressive reasons that you know better from film - is acted out with bizarre exaggeration, as you're literally tugged around the show by an artist in mock uniform. In the context, this "service" is marvellously patronising and absurd. The absurdity belongs to anarchic traditions, which make you question the communicative economy of art: like "Do I really need this?".

Many of the containers make you smile and some have poignant messages related to rights, free trade and globalisation. But one piece stands outside the containers, a rambling shanty of little rooms stitched together with cushions, mattresses, curtains and towels. Entitled Warren, this organic, sprawling slum provides an enchanting walk-through experience. The quilted internal spaces also contain subversive anti-globalisation messages, such as the cardboard logo "Brittney Smears".

The only problem with this picturesque work is that it positions the fringe-dwelling as cute, a kind of exotic cubby-house along Brazilian lines. There's such joy in its proposal of making-do with the cast-offs of the world that you're inclined to forget that poverty is miserable.

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