THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOU AND ME

Georg Baselitz
Lothar Hempel
Richard Larter
Li Jin
Moya McKenna
Tim McMonagle
Tracey Moffatt
David Noonan
Motohiko Odani
Aida Ruilova
When the curator, Bala Starr, first told me the title of this exhibition, *The difference between you and me*, I thought that she had borrowed it from a song of the same name by the American duet, the Indigo Girls. This turned out not to be the case; another of those occasions that abruptly reminds me of the perils of inhabiting a private world that orbits around the twin suns of art and music. You think you’re on the same wavelength but, at best, you’re in the same ballpark, seated at opposite sides of the stadium.

In bringing together 37 works by 10 artists from 6 nations and 4 continents, this exhibition risks broadening the gulf that distance, language, time and culture can create. Certainly, there is no intention to bind these diverse artists, media and images in one reassuring ‘Family of man’. In fact, the curator and the artists seem at ease with their differences.

There was a time, at the height of the modernist avant-garde, when artists’ attitudes might have been summed up by another song title: the Kinks’s, *I’m not like everybody else*. This aggressive insistence on the artist’s unique character made for a very negative conception of difference; the irreconcilable difference of a failed relationship. Now, as the intriguing array of visions in this exhibition suggests, artists and audiences alike find that difference can be the very thing that brings us together. These artists are fascinated by what people do, how they look and what their lives might mean. They invite us to share their fascination and admit that a fundamental aspect of our own identity is our habit of comparing our own lives with the experiences of others.

This exhibition also makes some fundamental statements about the character of the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the University of Melbourne. Our ambitions are international. We build our knowledge out of global relations and experience. Our campus, and the activities of staff and students, seek a constant dialogue between Melbourne and the rest of the world. We reflect on the past and present, we seek the latest developments in contemporary art and the historical foundations that propel them. We welcome diversity and take pleasure in the challenges that it presents.

The one common ground that we can be sure of is in this exhibition is that its realisation rested on the mutual commitment of all participants. The staff of the Potter have worked together to conceive and execute an ambitious project. Artists, their representatives, and public and private lenders have supported this vision and helped enormously in meeting practical challenges.
The difference between you and me

Bala Starr  
Curator, the Ian Potter  
Museum of Art

In the most direct sense, _The difference between you and me_ is an exhibition that presents contemporary images of people. The exhibition was developed by drawing together artworks that concentrate, in a variety of ways, on what it is to be an individual. The final selection of works provides evidence of artists scrutinising the immediate space of their worlds and using the figure as a measure of depth and field.

Artists have the means to pictorially distinguish themselves and others around them as to personalise new and open identities. Tim McMonagle has painted a picture of himself in the bath, titled _One long day_ (2004). In another work, a variation on an earlier picture, he has painted himself with his girlfriend, Felicity. McMonagle wants us to become completely involved in his painterly sensibility, finding a personal connection with the sensations of the painted surface and identifying with the relationships being tenderly depicted.

McMonagle limits the pictorial focus of his paintings, rarely moving far from domestic and urban scenes that are close at hand so as to pull us back to the surface of common physical experience. He is unlikely to introduce motifs that are unfamiliar. Mood and feeling are moderated through drawing and linear brush-strokes, but the overall painterly treatment remains emotionally expansive. Rather than the issue of whether or not the work shows a proper likeness to a person, it is the structure of the whole painting that is at the core of its figuration. The intensity of _One long day_ revolves around its approximate centre. It is the artist’s pink face and legs and the bath water in which McMonagle is floating that have received most of the artist’s attention and now, in turn, receive most of ours. The painting perhaps conveys something of the potential endlessness of thinking, of thoughts floated but nevertheless restricted (by the domestic boundaries of the bathroom, or maybe exhaustion, or too much heat).

Li Jin’s ink drawings also show people in low-key everyday activities. His works convey something of the temper of daily living, but it’s a lived experience culturally less familiar to non-Chinese eyes. We can’t read the writing that features so strongly in his work. But there is an ambiguous poetry visible between Li’s figures that reinforces their subjective interioity. His figures seem isolated, excessively alone with their thoughts. The minimal insolation and restrained yet frank brush-strokes mask or at least pace our realisation of the subjects’ alternating moods; sometimes hot, sometimes sweet–sensual, anxious, cold or hurt.

One of the premises that underwrites this exhibition is that artworks communicate at the level of our feelings, by evoking empathy and emotional recognition in the viewer. And this implies that art has a special capacity for harnessing something unique about individuals.

Moya McKenna’s small _untitled paintings_ (2004) and her sculpture, _Come and go_ (2005), which includes a short film, suggest an intuitive, self-reflective approach to making art. Without constructing an actual figurative presence, McKenna’s work conveys the sense of an emotional life. Her works are modest in scale and format, her techniques formal and economical; paint, for example, is judged as much through time and method of application as for its substance.

Each of the artworks in _The difference between you and me_ is specific in the way that it represents the human figure and its associations. At the same time though, the works are ‘full imaginative worlds’ unto themselves rather than definitive, singular perspectives on what it is to be human. For these artists, dreaming is okay, soulful is okay, psychological perceptions are okay. It’s okay to let go of the concrete.

How might we otherwise account for Motohiko Odani’s video _Romper_? Its mood is delicious–decadent–primitve. The animism in this work is close to that found in the intricate narratives of Tracey Moffatt’s _Innovations_ series; some of her most unusual work, and perhaps the least concerned with ‘the photographic’. Aïda Ruilova’s video _Fever_ no includes only a very narrow range of visual and audio information, yet it feels deep. It is fast, short, textured and aggressive, without apparent beginning or end. Like a bad mood, this work signals choice, and difference even defiance.

The artworks in this exhibition are made between 1965 and 2005. It follows that they are made by artists of different generations. Works by Georg Baselitz and Richard Larter provide historical touchstones for the contemporary work in the exhibition. How do artists mediate images of themselves and others independently of historical and political commentary?

The figure in Georg Baselitz’s _Der Dichter_ (The poet) (1965) is monumental, but the painting has a subtle emotional range that is both youthful and immediate. It’s a picture of a man carrying his baggage with him on his back, a backpack of sorts. Years ago, one might have said it was a rucksack, like a soldier’s. At the basis of this ambitious work is the idea that figurative painters cannot disguise their own histories, but, rather, can do nothing else but carry it along like baggage for all to see. In Baselitz’s painting, the man’s limbs (and head) are too small and flimsy for the weight of his body and the pack. He is broken down with fatigue, or clumsiness, with only his eyes raised upward.

Moya McKenna’s work inspires a similar question: what can we hold ‘inside’? Or, can we hide what is inside? (Isn’t what is _outside_ easier to comprehend, to know?) In relation to his own work, Lothar Hempel has commented that, ‘The self here is fluid and dynamic, a social metaphor. It doesn’t have a beginning or an end’. Hempel’s images of the self are private and singular, but situated in the world and made of shifting parts. His paintings, titled _Fieber_ (Fever) and _Praying mantis_ (both 2004) show individuals living in the fullness of ours. The painting perhaps conveys something of the potential endlessness of thinking, of thoughts floated but nevertheless restricted (by the domestic boundaries of the bathroom, or maybe exhaustion, or too much heat).
of the present; these individuals are nonetheless strange and unusual. How do we make sense of these works? Hempel has commented that these pictures of people are ‘representations of principals rather than characters’.

I see a relationship between the material complexity of these works of Lothar Hempel’s and Richard Larter’s enamel on board paintings of four decades earlier. Larter’s paint was applied using a syringe (see *Dithyrambic painting* and *Dithyrambic painting no. 7*, 1965). Both artists use materials and processes to stimulate fresh conceptions of figurative motifs. Larter’s models look as if they might be dreaming colour into space. The specific physicality of his paintings blurs distinctions between interior psychology and exterior physiology. It also challenges a narrow reading of historical accounts of an opposition between abstraction and figuration, expressionism and pop art.

Like Lothar Hempel as well, perhaps, David Noonan’s practice locates the individual—in Noonan’s case often an imagined ‘image of the artist!’—through an engagement with culture. Noonan holds his course as an artist by adopting the rhythm and pace of certain embedded impulses and registers within broader cultural expression, often drawn from cult media. Here his work shares a poetic resemblance with Aida Ruilova’s. Noonan pursues a contemporary, utilitarian notion of selfhood.

I have asked Stephen Zagala to write an accompanying catalogue text for this exhibition. He works in the areas of art theory and visual anthropology, and is currently located at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University in Canberra. When I first met Stephen, during the 1990s, he was actively involved with artist-run spaces in Melbourne, where he worked closely with his artist peers. One of his central interests since that time has been to explore a necessarily creative interrelationship between the tasks of writing about art and making art. I think that his sensibility might lend itself to this show’s emphasis on the feeling of interpersonal relationships.

Maybe at the heart of The difference between you and me is a riddle, to be approached first visually and physically through the work of the artists. Perhaps we could ask Stephen Zagala to solve the riddle for us but, I suspect, like me he’s probably not quite interested in this task. The difference between you and me is not an exhibition that propositions difference for its own sake, but rather that difference is a necessary part of creativity and that these ten artists have a detailed understanding and feeling for its full terms. Though we might say of course that, above all, the difference between you and me is personal.
Every Friday night, on the fringe of Canberra’s central business district, amateur car enthusiasts gather to revel in their passion for petrol-powered fantasies. Their informal but habitual congregation transforms an otherwise unremarkable street corner into an outdoor theatre. Duting the winter months, when the icy grass crackles underneath, smoke from burning rubber billows beneath flared wheel fenders before rising in lyrical plumes through the still night sky. On a summer evening, while the last rays of sun flicker through pine trees in an adjacent park, the fumes spill across the sticky asphalt affecting the dramatic ambience of a horror film’s haunted forest. These automobiles come with their own lighting effects; black neon illuminate the car interiors like DJ booths, while the undercarriages are fitted with lights that flash to the subwoofers frequencies of onboard entertainment systems. Spinning wheel rims sparkle through the smoke like a stripper’s tassels, and multiple layers of baked enamel paint accentuate the customised curves of car bodies like shimmering lyca.

Living in Canberra over the past few years has often given me pause to contemplate the pageantry and concrete poetry of petrol-heads. While Canberra’s status as the capital city of Australia is somewhat impaired by its relatively small population and rural locale, there can be little doubt that it is the car capital of the nation. Its wide smooth streets and dry weather have helped make it into a motoring mecca. Amateur hot dogging on a Friday night is only the tip of the exhaust pipe. Monster trucks do their demolition performances at the show grounds, vintage cars are proudly displayed on the lawns of the Parliamentary Triangle, rally cars parade their way to club meets in the surrounding mountain ranges, and the annual Street Machine carnival draws people from around the country for a weekend of wet T-shirt competitions and drag racing. Witnessing these events often takes me back to a series of artworks that I saw over a decade ago in Los Angeles—another city known for its car culture. The artist, David Greene, had used an assemblage of automobile accessories to create larger-than-life lingerie items. Furry seat covers, tailor-made tarpaulins and inflated air-bags had been transformed into a range of kinky-looking car conetry, which was detailed with the frilly frisson of chrome ornaments and fluidly dice. Ever since viewing these works I’ve been inclined to see a certain transvestitism in the activities of car enthusiasts. People always assume that I’m trying to mock the machismo of motoring subcultures when I give voice to this analogy, but, quite to the contrary, I’m interested in the way that automobiles facilitate aesthetic processes of self-modification.

Admittedly, the concept of transvestitism that I’m working with here diverges from popular representations of cross-dressing, so let me make some caveats before taking this any further. As I’ve just indicated, I don’t want to evoke transvestitism as a form of ridicule. The practice of denigrating individuals by picturing them in drag is a joyless form of mockery, which effaces the imaginative creativity of transvestitism. More importantly, I want to move beyond the reductive characterization of transvestites as men impersonating women, or women impersonating men. Even though cabaret displays of cross-dressing often cling to gender stereotypes, transvestitism involves more than simply crossing the binary distinction between male and female. The burlesque performance art of Leigh Bowery makes it quite clear that cross-dressers are not just motivated by a desire to convincingly pass as the opposite gender. His fanciful adventures in attire often take the human body on a walk into the flesh-less worlds of interior decorating, industrial design or graphic illustration. Even when Bowery’s costumes are typically feminine, they tend to completely engulf the human figure, as though the aim is to impersonate an outfit rather than another individual. Various fetish-focused subcultures provide further examples of transvestitism diverging from human points of reference. Fursuits, for instance, cross-dress into animal costumes and occupy an existential realm that lies somewhere between shamanistic animism and Warner Brothers cartoons.

As for car enthusiasts, they extend their self into an automotive other, folding machinic elements into their personal wardrobes. The logos of car manufacturers are stamped onto shirts and belt buckles. The streamlined contours of sunglasses and caps resonate with headlights and windscreen visors. And sports stripes find traction on the topography of the human figure, racing down the sleeves of jackets and along the sides of sneakers. But this genial exchange between man and machine also moves in the other direction, with automobiles taking on human traits. In the process of customising a car, and distinguishing it from other vehicles of the same model and make, it develops its own personality and becomes affectionately known by a nickname such as Herbie, Betty Blue or General Lee. If I understand these dizzy pages of Deleuze and Guattari’s Plateaux correctly, they would describe this as a process of becoming; where a ‘zone of indeterminacy’ blurs the distinction between discretely conceptualised entities, facilitating the collaborative evolution of new ontological forms. Transvestitism is a force—a force of deep style—which sweeps both self and other along in a current of mutual modification. As cross-dressers open themselves up to
otherness, negotiating new kinds of intimacy with the environment around them, the world is also animated with imaginative potential. In this respect, transvestitism seems to harness a certain artistry that is fundamental to the emergence of life itself.

Over the past month or so, while gazing with fascination into the face of my newborn baby boy, I’ve been intrigued by the presence of similar processes in the formation of human subjectivity. It’s as though young Otto Zagala has been involved in an intimate collaboration with otherness from the moment he drew air into his lungs. The most obvious and amusing displays of this occur around his mouth. As the oral orifice swallows and spews, breathes and burps, gurgles and gasps, the strangeness of the outside world is continually being kneaded back and forth through the sensory folds of his own flesh. An emergent subjectivity twitches with vitality around this threshold, sucking with curiosity on the collar of his clothing, the digits of his hands and anything else that happens to make itself available. Even in these early days of infancy, a certain style of life is emerging from the baroque incorporation of otherness into self. The infant is essentially a transvestite stripped bare. The rhythmic exchange between self and other hasn’t yet elaborated itself into automobile accessories or female apparel, but the dynamic that animates cross-dressing is already in action.

In his influential study on the interpersonal world of the infant, Daniel Stern argues that this early phase of life is structured by a dialectic between ‘sharable affects’ and ‘non-sharable affects’. Long before words or even facial expressions become significant forms of communication, affects make themselves felt as kinetic patterns and contours. In the same way that people meet on a dance floor and articulate their moods through the speed and texture of abstract movements, the relationship between a baby and its parents develops within a matrix of physical rhythms that establish varying degrees of interpersonal consonance.

When Otto is shocked or hungry he experiences an accelerated affect, which expresses itself in movements that have jagged contours. By gently patting his back and introducing a slower tempo into his sensory field, it’s possible to smooth his mood. But Otto is also learning to enjoy doing this little dance with his father, and he likes to initiate the performance (in the absence of hunger or shock) by making rapid gestures that increase his own state of arousal and attract my attention. Instinctively, I play along, adding an auditory cadence to the mix by repeating a word or sound that trails off in its amplitude and stress: ‘There, there, there ...’
Moving through this cross-flow of sensual rhythms, the infant begins to experience itself as a node of temporal organisation in an other-worldly environment. The willingness to modify the self through an intimate improvisation with outside forces, along with an ability to constructively engage with the coming-into-being of new patterns and forms, are remarkable features of a life in genesis. Even more so because we will draw on these capacities throughout our lives (whether or not we come to describe ourselves as transvestites). As Stern points out, all acts of learning, creativity and love depend on our early acquaintance with emergent relatedness.

Bala Starr’s curatorial project, *The difference between you and me*, brings together a range of artworks that explore the vitality of relations on the make. It shouldn’t go unnoticed that a number of the artists in this exhibition delve into the dress-up box or make use of theatrical props. The exaggerated scale and flatness of Lothar Hempel’s figures owe their pictorial conventions to stage-set designs. Tracy Moffatt enacts personal psycho-dramas against painted backdrops. Motohiko Odani’s high-key special effects take us into the land of make-believe. And David Noonan slips in and out of a caftan. There is plenty of material here that would lend itself to a literal discussion of cross-dressing and theatricality, but I’m more interested in the forces that underlie these visual tropes. By feeling our way into the sensual cadences that give these artworks their vitality, and opening ourselves to their aesthetic contours, perhaps we can also invent our art-viewing with a little bit of productive transvestitism.

The artworks on display here approach the ‘difference’ referred to in the title of the exhibition as a zone of mutual modification between self and other. The dynamics being played out across this difference express themselves through two visual sensations that have distinct rhythmic contours.

In the first instance, the form of the figure appears as an involuted compound of affects, which vibrates around the intensity of its own presence. In Aïda Ruilova’s video piece, a young woman shuffles up and down electric guitar strings as though she is the embodiment of a musical riff, vibrating with emotions that slide between agony and ecstasy. Moya McKenna also animates the self as a bloc of abstracted affects in her anthropomorphic piece of furniture, which occupies the room with restless agitation. Working in a more lyrical register, Tim McMonagle paints effervescent individuals who sparkle with vitality and bubble with daydreams, filling the air with lively licks of colour. And Georg Baselitz gives us a weary poet, bulging with the baggage of tradition, and eclipsing the sun with his overblown pathos.
Alongside these figural forms, a more sublime visual vibration resonates through the background of the exhibition. In pictorial terms we could describe it as the ‘ground’, and juxtapose it with the ‘figure’, but it has an other-worldly rhythm, which doesn’t move to the same measure as the figures. Like a teasing bass line that promises to bring a new melody into the DJ’s mix, this sublime ground is pregnant with the possibility of new forms and patterns. The sensation of this background rhythm is elegantly evoked in David Noonan’s paintings, where mysterious entities have been summoned from the darkness by the artist’s application of bleach brush-work to a black fabric. The airy spaces in Li Jin’s watercolours create a similar sense of anticipation, suspending delicate personages in an incalculable proximity to one another. And Motohiko Odani lays a subterranean beat into his seriously weird world, allowing it to pump a pulse into the creepy critters that have evolved in this musical landscape.

These two dynamic visual contours—the intensely involuted figure and the fecund field of otherness—are interwoven in a variety of ways by the works in this exhibition. Even though one rhythm might dominate the other in any particular artwork, the two visual processes are locked together in a transverse collaboration.

The one artist included in this exhibition who I haven’t yet mentioned (but who has constantly been in my thoughts while writing this essay) is the London-born Australian painter, Richard Larter. Painting nude models has been central to Larter’s practice for over forty years. And, by maintaining a focus on this pictorial genre, he has deeply involved himself in the aesthetic exploration of the difference between self and other, subject and object, me and you. Larter’s intimate attention to others is clearly evident in the delicate way that he uses dense topographic line-work to trace every fold and facial feature of his models. In doing this, he is also producing vector maps of the painterly process itself; revealing how art can actively open itself up to a dynamic relationality with otherness. As the Dithyrambic paintings in this exhibition clearly demonstrate, these artistic lines of interpersonal vitality ultimately begin mapping a network of emerging possibility across the surface of the world, feeling out the contours of life forms that we are yet to grow into. In this respect, Larter is a master of what I would call a transvestite aestheticism, maximising the transformative potential between the involved figure and the fecund ground, and pointing us toward a future animated by imaginative empathy.

I’d like to thank Ursula Fredericks and Katie Hayne for their insights into Canberra’s car culture.
Lothar Hempel

**Biographies**

**Lothar Hempel**

- *Georg Baselitz* — was born Hans-Georg Korn in Deutschherrn, in what was later East Germany, in 1938. He currently lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany, and Inperia, on the Italian Riviera. Baselitz studied painting at the Hochschule für bildende und angewandte Kunst, East Berlin, and the Hochschule der bildenden Künste, West Berlin, between 1976 and 1980. He adapted the family-name Baselitz, taken from the name of his birthplace, in 1990. Baselitz held his first solo exhibition in 1963, at Galerie Momma & Katz, Berlin, and in 1985 he won a scholarship to study at the Villa Romana in Florence. Since the late 1970s, solo exhibitions and surveys of Baselitz's work have been presented at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands (1978); CAPC Musée d’Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, France (1983); Kunstmuseum Basel (1986); Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris (1985); Sala de Armes de Palacio Vichito, Florence (1988); Galerie Beyeler, Basel (1988); Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany (1989); Kunsthalle Zürich (1990); Centro Cultural de la Fundación Caja de Pensions, Barcelona (1990); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1993); Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1994); Galleria Azurra Moderna di Bologna, Italy (1997); and the Museo d'Arti Contemporanea di Bologna (1997). In 2004, he was represented by Anton Kern Gallery, New York, and Artemisia Gallery, Beijing.

- *Richard Lastzer* — was born in London in 1929 and migrated to Australia in 1965. He currently lives in Canberra. Lastzer's prolific exhibition history began in the mid-1960s, soon after his arrival in Australia, when he showed at the Contemporary Art Society, Sydney. In 1985, Lastzer was the subject of a survey exhibition at the University Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane. In 2004, he participated in a major survey of his figurative work, Stripperama—Richard Lastzer, presented at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne. Since 1973, Sydney's whitespace Gallery has presented numerous solo exhibitions of Lastzer's work and, since 1989, he has exhibited regularly with Niagara Galeries, Melbourne. Lastzer has also held solo exhibitions at galleries in Brisbane, Adelaide, Canberra and Auckland. Selected group exhibitions include Australian Art 1944–1970, Museum of Fine Arts, Gils, Japan (1993); and in and out of abstraction, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (1995). Lastzer's work is represented by Hetters Gallery, Sydney, and Niagara Galerie, Melbourne.


- *Li Jin* — was born in Tianjin, China, in 1918. He graduated from the painting department of Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts in 1935, and now works at the academy as an associate professor in art education. Since 1990, Jin has presented solo exhibitions of paintings and Chinese ink-wash paintings in Asia, Europe, Scandinavia, the United States and Australia. In 2004, he exhibited a large-scale hand scroll in *The Pearl* at the Seattle Asian Art Museum, Washington. Li Jin’s work has been included in group exhibitions at China Art Gallery, Beijing (1999); Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney (Something Like China pop, 2002); UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (International paper: drawings by emerging artists, 2003); Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome (2002); and the National Museum of Art, Beijing (2004). Li Jin participated in the First Chengdu Biennale, Chengdu Museum of Modern Art, China, in 2001. He first exhibited in Australia at Ray Hughes Gallery in 2001, the same year that his work was included in Australia: the drawn figure at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney. Li Jin is represented by Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, and Courtney Gallery, Beijing.


- *Feng, Peng* — The newidians, Chinese Art Museum, Singapore (2001); and the University Art Museum, University of Queensland, St Lucia, 1995.

- *Xu, Zhen* — Li Jin's art of painting, 1999.
Theo Moors – was born in Brisbane in 1950 and studied visual communications at the Queensland College of Art, Brisbane, graduating in 1975. He has exhibited widely in Australia and internationally since that time, and his work has been acquired by numerous public and private collections. From 2000 to 2010, Moors held a fellowship at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His work has been the subject of numerous solo and group exhibitions in Australia, and internationally. Moors has also been the recipient of numerous grants, awards and residencies. His work addresses themes of memory, history and the natural world.