Jenny Watson: here, there and everywhere

*Here, there and everywhere* explores the international experiences of Australian artist Jenny Watson. Since the early 1990s half of Watson’s exhibitions have been staged abroad, in Europe, Asia and the United States. More significantly, Watson has made her international experience—travel, professional activity, emotional reflections on home and away—central to her art.

Australian artists’ engagement with the international art world has changed significantly in recent years. Colonial artists felt distant from European centres and deprived of the inspiration offered by European masters. By the mid-twentieth century, the ‘tyranny of distance’ had been mitigated somewhat but Australia’s cultural conservatism encouraged the idea that only an expatriate artist, living abroad in self-imposed exile, could fully connect with modern art. In the 1970s, affordable air travel, local biennales, blockbuster exhibitions and travel grants initiated a more confident dialogue with international trends.

Over the past two decades, global engagement has become the norm. Critics have declared an end to both the ‘cultural cringe’ and the expatriate artist. Ambitious Australian artists expect to work in international forums and to speak to an international audience. Whether in terms of aesthetics, professional opportunities or sheer logistics, young Australian artists now picture themselves as international players.
Many of the artworks displayed here have been exhibited in London, New York, Tokyo and Düsseldorf; some have never been shown in Australia. They demonstrate that Watson consistently reflects on the tensions between home and away. Always speaking as an Australian artist working abroad rather than as a stateless global artist, her voice is both local and cosmopolitan. Watson’s snap-shot observations, diary-like narratives, to-do lists and itineraries reveal the emotional highs, the everyday tasks and the dislocation of the traveller. They also reveal an artist developing personal and artistic strategies that allow her to participate in a global art scene on her own terms.

In this first room, the emotional trajectory embedded in Watson’s career narrative is revealed. An early sense of containment in Melbourne gives way to her responses to initial travels. Watson articulates both the enthusiasms of the tourist and the trepidation of an artist navigating unfamiliar and daunting systems. Fantasies of success sit side-by-side with fear of failure; glamorous destinations combine with disorientation and isolation. Images of insecurity and pressure eventually give way to a confident pleasure in the experience of international cultures.

Chris McAuliffe
Exhibition curator

Jenny Watson is the Vizard Foundation Contemporary Artist 2011.
Here, there and everywhere is the inaugural Vizard Foundation Contemporary Art Project.

The Vizard Foundation

Jenny Watson received financial assistance from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland for the production of the accompanying catalogue.
Jenny Watson: here, there and everywhere

The works displayed in this room reveal the often intense pressures Watson experienced while travelling and working abroad. Combining references to international locations and her domestic life back home, Watson indicates her global artistic practice is never separated from life in Australia. Simple, almost totemic images appear as constant reminders of home: the horse, the cat, the house. Efforts to stay connected—telephones, messages, social encounters—are also common motifs. A new video work, made especially for this exhibition, makes a significant proposal regarding the relationship of an Australian artist to the global context; rather than having to choose between two competing or imbalanced options, the artist now comfortably finds her world in the integration of home and away.

In the now globalised art world, the artist is a constant traveller. Today, the challenge facing Australian artists is not the tyranny of distance or cultural cringe but managing the personal and professional demands that arise when work is made and exhibited in multiple locations. As Watson put it in the title of a suite of drawings, it's a matter of keeping the wheels on. This means combining the determined pursuit of professional goals with sufficient introspection to manage the psychological impact of travel, while also balancing the demands of the art market and one's own creative interests. Watson declares a forgotten truth about travel; it always involves separation and vulnerability. She often presents herself in isolation, under pressure or feeling a jarring sense of separation in moments of crisis. In such circumstances, a quiet cup of tea in a New York café becomes a kind of victory; a sign of confident poise in a bustling environment. Watson also acknowledges that what is blandly termed 'professional practice' is not a solo voyage; the artist relies on gallerists, friends and local communities for hospitality, support and inspiration.
Jenny Watson: here, there and everywhere

Travel is often characterised as more than a literal journey; in myth, scripture and literature, travel is a metaphor for transformation and transition. Watson records her travels in less grandiose terms. She captures everyday observations, moods and atmospheres. Rather than presenting travel as a heroic quest or spiritual pilgrimage, Watson, like many women travellers of the past, focuses on an empathetic engagement with her surroundings. A place becomes significant not on its own terms but because a powerful emotion was experienced there. Drawings of Parisian shop windows and cafés from the early 1980s are an excited, romantic response to European glamour. Often something will catch Watson’s eye because it triggers a memory of friends, family or home. Images of horses in a Japanese magazine remind her of her own stable; a small drawing becomes a bridge between Tokyo and an Australian suburb.

Watson is not a traveller bent on conquering a territory or recounting a narrative of exploration and adventure. Noting the peculiarities of local behaviour, Watson looks for activities with which she connects personally, such as caring for animals, shopping, dining, staying in touch over the phone. This simple and human strategy fuses new experiences with motifs already established in the artist’s early work. Images of cats, horses, cafés, beds, telephones and schoolgirls thread throughout several series of drawings and prints shown here.

The peculiar risk faced by artists in a globalised culture is that they can travel anywhere but not feel that they are any place in particular. The reappearance of these familiar motifs suggests that through travel Watson assimilates the wider world into her own vision. To combat the abstract ‘everywhere-at-once’ of globalism, Watson introduces domestic motifs and routines to suggest that she is ‘always-at-home’.