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Grotesqueries: Adelaide Biennial 2020

BY **Miriam Cosic**

Leigh Robb's absorbing curation,
'Monster Theatres', is both artistically
and politically coherent



Installation view: 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Monster Theatres featuring 'Internal Interior' by Erin Coates and Anna Nazzari, Art Gallery of South Australia; photo © Saul Steed



Installation view: 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: *Monster Theatres* featuring *Understudy* by Abdul Abdullah, Art Gallery of South Australia; photo © Saul Steed

Monsters still surround us in the 21st century, most of them of our own making. Endless wars, anthropogenic global warming, the continuing trials of racism, the creep of surveillance technology, rising authoritarianism, the dilution of democracy, and now the terrifying rise of a worldwide pandemic. And add to that their magnification through clickbait journalism and social media.

Leigh Robb, curator of this year's 30th iteration of the Adelaide Biennial, has chosen monsters as her theme in a tight, ambitious exhibition that is both artistically and politically coherent. Titled *Monster Theatres*, it addresses our present-day fears. Our most pressing annoyance right now – the physical restrictions imposed to combat the monster coronavirus – has been partially dealt with by a **virtual tour** of the exhibition.

“With their individual projects,” Robb writes in her introduction to a catalogue that is almost an artefact in its own right, “these artists have harnessed the evocative power implicit in the notions of both the monster – fright, horror, dread, strangeness – and the theatre – drama, exaggeration, spectacle, tragedy – to conceptualise and deal with the great anxieties of our age.”

She outlines the linguistic derivations of her title words. “Monster” comes from the Latin *monere*, which means to warn, and *monstrare*, which means to show. “Theatre”, too, has multiple layers: the Greek *theatron*, which means a place to behold, and *theaomai*, which means to see. “Today the word may also imply a communal or dramatic space for spectacle

and storytelling; an operating theatre for examination, dissection and potential healing; or a theatre of war, where nations and ideologies clash, sometimes violently, and all too frequently.

“Yet a theatre is also an arena – an active social space, a potent testing ground for new ideas, as well as for new resonances between artists and audiences.”

By commissioning only 23 artists or collectives, Robb has allowed each of them the space to go large. The result is arresting. A roomful of fanciful objects – colourfully painted dolls, mannequins, animals, and strange creatures situated in a forest of tree stumps and scraps of furniture and underlit to throw grotesque shadows on the walls – in Judith Wright’s dark work, *In the Garden of Good and Evil* (2018). Inspired by Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”, it is a meditation on lost children, those who come to harm and never reach adulthood.

Wiradjuri artist Karla Dickens’s installation, based on her poem *A Dickensian Country Show* (2019), also takes up a room and its exterior walls. It is a busy hang of dozens of vaudevillian posters, interspersed with sculptural objects. Each item contains a reference to centuries of mindless and deliberate racism in Australia: white people wrangling Aboriginal people in freak shows; a murky melange of tigers, lions, koalas, Sturt’s desert peas, barred enclosures and shooting targets. Dickens’s work also features a portrait of Pauline Hanson surrounded by images of blackface, circus posters and much more.

A video work by Erin Coates and Anna Nazzari, with drawn and sculpted accompaniments, was particularly creepy and yet deeply moving. I read *Dark Water* (2019) as another allegory, though couldn’t put a finger on what it was an allegory of, and so returned to view its surreal beauty several times. In it, a woman grieving for her mother goes to inspect a watery environment that has manifested in her basement, after experiencing some small-scale Alien-style emanations from her own body. She swims down deep into the increasingly sea-like space and encounters a fateful biological entrapment. I will say no more for fear of spoiling the psychological experience for others, but it is wonderful in the literal sense of that word.

More conventional, painted works were also deeply troubling. Brent Harris is a New Zealand painter and printmaker who studied and continues to live in Melbourne. His *Grotesquerie* (2001–2002, 2007–2009) is a series that is eye-catchingly cartoon-like: semi-monochrome, flat and linear, verging on abstract. A dominating rabbit-headed figure and a gold-haired young woman interact amid trails of something oozing. In others, a black silhouette in meditative stance is placed against a bright red ground alongside washed grey walls. The works are superficially attractive until they become more threatening and one realises that they are personal psychological explorations.

In Polly Borland’s *Morph* series (2018), photographs of nude bodies are printed across an accordion-like Dibond screen. As one walks along it, the sides that connect to form the photographic image dissolve and shift into plain-coloured alternatives. Alongside them are a series of surreal portraits of the human body in fuchsia pink and dark grey, or pallid skin tones. Each one is distended or extended with the addition of distorted phalluses or inner organs.

Aldo Iacobelli is an Italian artist who now lives in Adelaide. His works of thickly applied paint reminiscent of van Gogh’s swirling applications, often with an object attached, are deeply political. One is titled *The world economy is the most efficient expression of organised crime* (2019). Another, an untitled work in progress, consists of a sketchily painted white skeleton, topped by an actual skull, on a violet-green background. On it, in the same faint white as the skeleton, is a text in Italian: a diatribe against the American occupation of Naples during World War Two.

So much more of *Monster Theatres* is as absorbing, the works too large to describe comprehensively here. Julia Robinson’s *Beatrice*, for example, a huge purple-and-metallic,

tentacled being made of silk, steel, foam, copper and more, is in the Museum of Economic Botany, located in the nearby botanic gardens. Perth-born Abdul Abdullah, a seventh-generation Australian descended from Afghan cameleers, has made an intriguing model of a person who sits dressed in cool clothing, his back turned to advancing viewers. Only once you're abreast of him do you see that his face is that of an ape: a potent comment on the continued othering of non-European people in a postcolonial world.

And so on. Strangely, the two big guns of performance art, Mike Parr and Stelarc, both in their seventies now, left me unmoved. Stelarc, who continues to explore extensions of the human body, sat up high in the middle of a giant, moving, metal structure, assuming a semi-horizontal position. He seemed to be in command, except that button controls were available at ground level for visitors to use. Moving towards the Singularity? *Star Wars*-style weaponry? Whatever.

Parr's performance piece, which went on for a week, was even less interesting. He read at a small wooden table, with a lamp, the book and a watch his only props. After the first reading, recordings of previous readings started up, causing a dissonance with the reading of the moment. After Marina Abramovic's bladder-challenging marathon, *The Artist is Present*, which she performed over 736 hours and 30 minutes at MoMA in New York in 2010, it takes more to impress than Parr offered in Adelaide.

There was also an installation of Parr's performance videos in a darkened setting that, dear reader, your correspondent braved twice but failed to survive. The first time, it was the sight of him vomiting a grotesque black liquid. The second, it was the sight of oozing blood as he cut himself in geometric patterns. Decades after the heyday of performance art, it was difficult to find a message in the artist's blood.

The curator's small side exhibition of famous historical grotesqueries is an excellent backgrounder. Its prints include Dürer's *Knight, Death and the Devil* (1513), Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (c. 1799), Odilon's *Anthony: What Is the Point of All This? The Devil: There Is No Point!* (1896), and more.

And then there's Dürer's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (c.1498). As much as any piece in the biennial, it seems terrifyingly prophetic, as we come to grips with flood, fire and plague in our own anthropogenic apocalypse.

The 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia is temporarily closed, but many of the works can be observed via a [virtual tour](#). Miriam Cosic travelled to Adelaide as a guest of the Art Gallery of South Australia.



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