

Resculpting The Past: Tatzu Nishi In Sydney

Japanese-born Tatzu Nishi, based in Germany, has forged a singular artistic practice that invites spectators to look at historic monuments and sculptures with fresh eyes. While Nishi's out-of-scale installations offer immense visual pleasure, they also oblige audiences to distance themselves from commonplace thinking about their national statuary by taking a more critical stance.

By Christine Nicholls

In 1987, Nagoya-born Tatzu Nishi migrated to Germany to further his fine art studies at Münster's Kunstakademie. To this day the artist continues to live and work in Germany. 'Tatzu Nishi' is just one of this artist's several art-names, *go*, or *noms-de-plume*.

On first arriving in Germany from his native Japan, Nishi (b.1960) was struck by the many public sculptures that commemorated (mostly) long-forgotten persons or events. It is remarkable how neglected monuments, statues, and public sculptures can become, even when they celebrate people or subject matter of national significance. The youthful artist's observation that local people often take their national statuary for granted, sometimes barely even noticing it, let alone feeling moved by it, eventually led Nishi to forge a singular artistic career.

Today Nishi's site-specific installations and interventions in Germany and elsewhere in the world provoke local citizenry into looking at their statuary, public sculptures, and architectural complexes with fresh eyes. His method involves enclosing monuments, which effectively shifts them from the public sphere into the private. The domestication of these public works raises questions about and casts doubt on their

normally unquestioned formality, gravitas, and even significance. While, at one level, this is a huge joke, it is a good deal more than that too. By placing these statues (or

parts of them) fairly and squarely back into the spectator's visual field, Nishi rescues them from permanent consignment to symbolic inertia and meaninglessness.

Nishi's *War and peace and in between* is a project sponsored by the remarkable John Kaldor, who more than any individual in Australia has brought international contemporary visual art, including public art projects, to this country. Kaldor has been introducing important trends in contemporary art practice to the Australian visual art-loving public for more than four decades now. In the early days this was particularly significant because of Australia's relative isolation from the rest of the world. While the 'tyranny of distance' has now, to some extent, been countered by globalization, Kaldor's contribution to Australians' knowledge and understanding of visual art as a global phenomenon cannot be overestimated.

Comprising two inter-related works, *War and peace and in between* (2009) is Tatzu Nishi's first Australian project. In *War and peace and in between* Nishi takes the two heroic equestrian sculptures (*The offerings of war* and *The offerings of peace*, 1923, by British sculptor Gilbert Bayes) that flank the Palladian portico of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in Sydney, and



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reconfigures them inside domestic spaces. In doing so, to quote from Anthony Bond's excellent short catalogue essay, Nishi has "rescued them from the invisibility that over-familiarity can bring." One could take this a step further by stating that Tatzu Nishi has also rescued the sculptor Gilbert Bayes (1872–1953) from what amounts to virtual personal oblivion in the Australian context, despite the fact that his statues are viewed, on a daily basis, by so many people. As with his previous works, Nishi's intervention at the Art Gallery of New South Wales not only jolts the spectator's vision but also disturbs habitual ways of thinking about monoliths and monuments that have become all-too-familiar features of the local visual landscape.

Tatzu Nishi's empirical starting point is well founded. Until I visited Nishi's installation in late 2009, despite walking past Bayes's bronze sentinels, the gallant defenders of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, literally hundreds of times, I knew little about these two allegorical works or about their creator.

Nishi's audacious inventiveness means that spectators no longer view Gilbert Bayes's heroic works from a single, or restrictive viewpoint, and no longer take

a principally frontal, ground-level-up approach to these works. Ramps have been built that lead visitors up and into enclosed, room-like structures, which Nishi has refurbished to resemble a sitting room and bedroom respectively. These elevated, temporary rooms house Nishi's installations, in which certain elements of Bayes's original works play a significant role. Newly housed within domestic settings, Bayes's originals virtually cease to be two grand equestrian sculptures of yesteryear. Mediated by their location in contemporary living spaces, they have become transformed into something startlingly 'other'.

In turn, Bayes's sculptures' radical displacement from their original socio-cultural and epistemological moorings and from their historical context leads spectators toward a fundamental reassessment of their contemporary significance. Sociologist Anthony Giddens has written about the phenomenon of "time-space distanciation"—that is, the profound reorganizing of time and space that results from globalization. This does not mean that place or locale have ceased to be important (far from it), but rather, to paraphrase Frederic Jameson, "the truth of experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place".

Nishi's *War and peace and in*

between is premised on the art of distanciation. Bayes's (formerly) heroic works have become re-actualized through being judged by a different set of criteria. The two originals are reinvigorated by spectators' heightened responsiveness to the simultaneous existence of the past with the present, and the ways in which time intersects space and place. Most people are intuitively aware of such co-existences but seldom think about it at the conscious level.

Nishi's deliberately out-of-place, out-of-scale, and de- and re-temporalized installations not only draw the viewers' attention to the specific attributes of the original works in material terms, but also bring certain ideological aspects of Bayes's *The offerings of war* and *The offerings of peace* into sharp focus. In this way the artist delivers Bayes's works back into our visual field, but more important, back into the cognitive domain. By offering audiences a truly Alice-in-Wonderland experience, Nishi obliges (rather than invites) us to reinterpret Bayes's original works. Nishi's conceptual installations work on a number of different intersecting planes: spatial, environmental, temporal, and ideological.

With respect to Nishi's installation *Peace*, we enter an immaculate, if rather soulless, middle-class living room, complete with standard contemporary

accoutrements of Australian suburban living, including a television and video, respectable furnishings, calendar, fruit bowl, pot plant, and the popular middle-brow Australian magazine *House and Garden*. With an additional nod toward contemporary Australian predilections, an unexceptional but tasteful Central Australian Indigenous artwork adorns the wall. This setting tends toward banality except—and this is a very big “except”—sitting atop the coffee table is the bust of Bayes's equestrian, brandishing an olive branch—not your typical domestic decoration! Equally disconcerting, within this otherwise rather nondescript suburban interior, there is a cabinet in which the head of a hefty horse (another element of Bayes's original *oeuvre*) appears to rear up. The profound surprise and delight reflected on the faces of the adults and children who entered this installation—and peeked inside the cabinet—were testament to the sheer entertainment value of Nishi's installation. Nonetheless it has a more serious dimension. The dramatic contrast between the unremarkable everydayness and sensibly un-heroic ambience of almost every feature and decoration

in this suburban living room, juxtaposed against the heroically out-of-place nature of the human and horse's heads, lead us to question the mundane materialism of contemporary suburban Australian life as well as the archaic, imperial, British value system underpinning Bayes's works.

Bayes's sculpture representing ‘War’ was resituated in the adjacent installation, this time in the interior of a middle-to-upper-middle-class bedroom. The effect of this is more shocking than the scenario we encounter in *Peace*. In attitude of conquest, apparently caught mid-stride, Bayes's gargantuan horse and rider stand atop the conjugal suite, adopting a triumphalist stance that is at once humorous and disturbing. The sheets of the double bed have been trampled and lie strewn across the floor. ‘War’ flaunts his staff, at the apex of which is (or appears to be) *The Winged Victory*. The rider is equipped with a bundle of swords and used spear shafts. The enemy, it appears, has been vanquished, although this is only one possible interpretation of this scenario.

The towering figures of horse and

rider dominate the work, leading us to ponder over possible reasons for such high drama in the marital domain. The ambience of this bedroom is one of warlike competitiveness, which appears to have resulted in a clear winner and an equally unambiguous loser. What gives this work its power is the disparity between the otherwise bland, unremarkable character of the room and the evocation of what appears to be terrible marital discord. In terms of impersonality of décor, the setting borders of that of a tasteful hotel room. The decorations and reading matter are cheesy, to say the least, in direct contrast to the passion evoked by this scenario. This makes Nishi's ‘war in the bedroom’ installation all the more intriguing. Whether horse and rider symbolize sexual conquest or another form of victory is ambiguous. It is apparent that this work has a narrative basis, but the very slipperiness of that narrative heightens the work's appeal. What has been going on in the boudoir? Who is this latter-day conquistador?

By blurring the boundaries between the private and public spheres Nishi challenges the widely accepted dichotomy between public and private space as an



Tatzu Nishi, *War and Peace and in Between*, 2009, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. A Kaldor Public Art Project.



Tatzu Nishi, *War and Peace and in Between*, 2009, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Exterior view. A Kaldor Public Art Project.

artificial construct (just as he does by his own frequent name changes, which suggests a certain fluidity of personal identity).

On the face of it, by creating projects in various places in the world that closely structurally parallel this one (although the content of each work differs), Nishi takes a narrow direction in his art-making. Yet he takes his underlying concept—the hermeneutics of space and time—a very long way. Moreover, Nishi realizes works that have the capacity to speak eloquently to very large, non-elitist audiences. For these reasons his significance as an artist should not be overlooked or trivialized. Tatzu Nishi is an important, groundbreaking artist for virtually the same reasons that Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was, and remains to this day, highly regarded in the theater world. A similar conceptual framework and critical aesthetics inform the work of both artists.

Brecht developed his ideas about epic theater as a means of commenting on an increasingly rigid German theater to which audiences often submitted themselves uncritically. For this reason Brecht introduced the concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (from the German *Verfremdung*, which means something along the lines of 'making strange that which is known or familiar'). This has, for the most part, been translated as 'alienation effect' although probably a more exact translation would be 'estrangement effect', or perhaps even more accurately, 'distanciation effect'. Informing Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* was the perceived need for greater audience objectivity and detachment.

Brecht's theory of 'epic theater' led him to write and direct plays that appealed less to spectators' feelings and more to their reason. Critical of 'the theater of illusion', Brecht sometimes interrupted performances or used other techniques to show the artificial, constructed nature of theatrical performances, thereby encouraging spectators to realize that what they were seeing was an *enactment* of reality rather

than reality itself. In turn this led theater audiences away from excessive emotional involvement and toward more intellectual, critical analysis of plays. Driving this was Brecht's desire for audiences to reflect on the sociopolitical meanings of dramatic works. It is worth noting in this context that Brecht was influenced by certain techniques of Japanese *kabuki*, as well as Chinese and Indian theater. From these Brecht derived ideas about the importance of 'objective' commentaries on the events or characters in a play, by characters temporarily stepping out of character, or by standing apart from the principal action and offering an alternative interpretation.

Although there are obvious differences in their chosen art forms and in the details of the approach taken by the two artists, what Brecht did for dead theater, Tatzu Nishi does for 'dead sculpture'. By requiring spectators to free themselves of lazy, cozy, undemanding reception of and conceptions about public artworks that have, over time, become entrenched within local visual landscapes, Nishi asks us to step back and deeply interrogate the meanings of these public representations. It is not that these sculptures have actually been stripped of their significance, but simply that most people have ceased to engage with that meaning. Many people lack the wherewithal or motivation to reinterpret these public works in the light of history, that is, with the benefit of hindsight. Only by becoming more rational and analytic in our responses to these over-familiar artworks can we begin to understand their underlying artistic, historical, ideological, and political implications. Nishi's *War and peace and in between* certainly facilitates spectators in attaining enlightenment about Gilbert Bayes's original artistic purposes and ideological presuppositions. At the same time, Nishi is making an unusual valedictory offering to both the late British artist and to British Imperialism.

Nishi's works or 'interventions' have been compared with those of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who in 1969 'wrapped' a section of coastline close to Sydney (the first large-scale art project initiated by the visionary John Kaldor). But arguably Nishi's work has the edge on that of the late Jeanne-Claude (1935–2009) and Christo, partly because Nishi works on a less grandiose scale, but also because of his more dialectical use of irony. When deep irony is simultaneously brought to bear on our everyday surroundings and on the past, the potential for far-reaching, permanent effects on spectators becomes possible.

To lay bare the conceptual foundations of commonplace cultural artefacts and architectural features is difficult when an artist works exclusively within his or her immediate cultural setting. Conversely, when an artist whose psyche has been formed in a very different sociocultural milieu creates artwork in an entirely different cultural context, that artist's capacity to distance himself (or herself) from the subject matter at hand—to deploy Brechtian-type detachment—becomes more realisable.

The 'otherness' of Nishi's socio-cultural foundations, the difference that informs his worldview, and the freshness of his vision were brought into sharp focus by an excellent exhibition of Nishi's large, bold, black and white paintings at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney's inner suburban Paddington. Although fully resolved in their own right, at another level these striking, monochromatic, acrylic-on-cotton-rag artworks acted as preliminary sketches or even prototypes for the three-dimensional works at the state gallery. The Roslyn Oxley9 exhibition, which took place more or less simultaneously with the Art Gallery of NSW's display of Nishi's work, was an enlightening companion piece to the latter.

Affording considerable insight into the artist's thought processes, the works at Roslyn Oxley9 complemented *War and*

peace and in between in several significant ways. For example, a fascinating feature of all of these works was Nishi's accompanying written commentary. In cartoon- or manga-like speech balloons the artist revealed, via a visually engaging mix of hiragana, katakana, and kanji, his plans and intentions for the three-dimensional interventions at the Art Gallery. Nishi's calligraphic observations were placed inside elongated sausage-like speech balloons, of necessity running along the vertical axis. These were not the classic cartoon speech 'bubbles' that most Australians can readily decipher, but rather, served to emphasise the strangeness that cohabits with the familiar in all of Nishi's artwork. To some of these written commentaries Nishi added delightfully gratuitous observations or remarks deriving from the language of tourism, advertising, and popular culture. For instance, in his *War and Peace and in between 3*, he slipped in the almost childlike, clichéd declaration: "I LOVE SYDNEY".

Nishi's unique artistic signature could be equally glimpsed in



Tatzu Nishi, *War and Peace and in between 1*, 2009, acrylic on printed cotton rag paper, 150.2 x 110.2 cm. Text: Kaldor Public Art Project; The peace sculpture is an object on the coffee table; In front of the Art Gallery a living room and bedroom are built around the peace and war sculptures. Photograph by Ivan Buljan. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

these artworks where the sophisticated and the naïve, the formal and the vernacular, the lasting and the ephemeral, as well as the East and the West (the Japanese word 'nishi' actually means 'west') coexist in charmingly disconcerting counterpoint. Given the ephemeral nature of Nishi's installations, it is to be hoped that the Art Gallery of NSW will acquire a set of these painted works for incorporation into its collection, to exist, in perpetuity, as an enduring *aide-memoire*.

With respect to both exhibitions, through his distinctive artistic practice Tatzu Nishi demonstrates that it is possible to offer a wide range of people visual experiences that are pleasurable and highly entertaining, while at the same time divesting audiences of erstwhile, deeply ingrained visual complacency. Δ

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Tatzu Nishi, *War and Peace and in between 3*, 2009, acrylic on printed cotton rag paper, 150.2 x 110.2 cm. Text: His chest rises from the coffee table in the peace room in front of the Art Gallery; Peace Sculpture; I love Sydney. Photograph by Ivan Buljan. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.



Tatzu Nishi, *War and Peace and in between 8*, 2009, acrylic on printed cotton rag paper, 150.2 x 110.2 cm. Text: Sydney Kaldor Public Art Project; The War sculpture is in the bedroom with his dirty feet; Bed; Bed. Photograph by Ivan Buljan. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.