



Uncanny lightness

Escaping the rays outside, JOHN McDONALD discovers an intriguing series of illuminated shows at the Perth Festival.

With the mercury touching 40 degrees for days on end, a major attraction of the art component at this year's Perth Festival was its display in airconditioned rooms. "Light" was the overarching theme of the festival shows, although it was a relief to get out of the glare of the sun and into an environment where illumination was provided by electric bulbs and tubes.

The keynote was set by Jim Campbell's *Scattered Light*, a large-scale installation by a San Francisco artist known for his innovative multimedia work. The piece, which was viewable at night in King's Park, consisted of 1600 light bulbs suspended in the form of curtains. As people moved around behind the makeshift wall, their shadows were transmitted by the bulbs, which dimmed and flickered as each ghostly shape flitted past.

Elsewhere there were vast, immersive audiovisual installations by Italian artist Grazia Toderi at the John Curtin Gallery, kinetic works by Brisbane artist Ross Manning, and a film by local artist Michele Theunissen at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA).

A show titled *Luminousflux*, at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery of the University of Western Australia, brought together light-based works by practitioners from Perth and abroad. The theme might even be extended to include the Art Gallery of Western Australia's major exhibition, *Picturing New York: Photographs from the Museum of Modern Art*. After all, the Greek etymology of "photography" means to draw with light.

One of the most engaging events was *My Name Is Raj*, an interactive installation by Canada-based filmmaker Srinivas Krishna. An elaborate homage to popular Indian film director and actor Raj Kapoor (1924-88), this multilayered piece was both a reflection on post-colonial history and a playful look at the

way movies tap into parts of the collective psyche, inviting forms of self-identification.

Entering a shopfront on Beaufort Street, viewers were greeted with a wall covered in old black-and-white studio portraits shot in Delhi and Bombay (now Mumbai). In these photos, people posed in various guises that were forms of wish fulfilment, projecting a wealth and status that were simply aspirations, if not fantasies.

Kapoor made films that tapped into the same wellsprings of personal and social fulfilment, touching the hearts of millions of viewers in the pre-Bollywood era. Krishna invited viewers to have their own portrait taken and their face inserted into one of the two Kapoor films he was screening, *Awaara* (1951) or *Shree 420* (1955). The results were comical but thought-provoking in the way they gave concrete form to our constant, almost instinctive habit of seeing the characters in films as versions of ourselves.

One could conceivably see the cinema, like photography, as another method of drawing with light. The Chinese refer to the movies as "electric shadows" (*dian ying*), and this captures the fleeting quality of the experience. After two hours in the realm of shadows, we are propelled back out into the light. Although in Perth, the transition is softened by two open-air cinemas at Somerville and Joondalup Pines, where one sits on canvas deckchairs, watching a film under the stars.

Science tells us that light can be both a wave and a particle, but in terms of our perceptions, the greatest paradox is that light is virtually eternal while seeming the most ephemeral thing in the world. It's worth bearing this in mind when visiting various festival shows, because most of the work may be assimilated with great rapidity. Ross Manning's installations at PICA are clever, low-tech idea pieces, but they hardly sustain





long contemplation. One has to admire his chutzpah in creating Calder-style mobiles of coloured fluorescent tubes turned in air by small electric fans attached to the ends.

Manning's co-exhibitor, Michele Theunissen, better known as an abstract painter, has given us a film that lasts 26 minutes, but this long, slow vista of African people walking across a landscape never delivers a moment of revelation.

The group show, *Luminousflux* is just as easily absorbed. The standout work is Dan Flavin's *Untitled (for you, Leo, in long respect and affection) 2*, (1977), from the Kerry Stokes Collection. A grid of fluorescent tubes made to stand in a corner, this piece has a simple majesty but, again, it doesn't require extended examination.

Among other contributions, Brendan van Hek has created a tangle of different-coloured neon strips, intended to capture the chaotic vitality of a big city. Rebecca Baumann has used light reflected off a range of materials placed on the floor to throw delicate, shimmering fields of colour onto the wall. These are attractive works but the appeal is largely decorative. Baumann's *Reflected Glory* has potential, if only it could be built on a larger scale, like the works of overseas audiovisual artists such as Mariko Mori or Pipilotti Rist.

The importance of scale is vividly demonstrated by the best of the festival exhibitions: Grazia Toderi's all-encompassing video installations at the John Curtin Gallery. In a series of spacious, darkened rooms the viewer encounters six monumental projections, with neither beginning nor end. Such timelessness is usually a pain with video, but in this instance it is vital to the effect Toderi is seeking.

She has hit upon the idea of the eternal nature of light, suggesting that if she turned her projector to the sky rather than the gallery wall, a stream of images would be beamed into the next galaxy. It's a fanciful

thought, but this work gets its impact from an artful blend of cosmic fantasy and topographical observation.

In *Rendez-vous* (2005), we watch a NASA space module slowly revolving against the circular patterns on the ceiling of a baroque cathedral designed by Filippo Juvarra. Although only the module moves, we feel as though the entire scene is in motion. Wheels turn within wheels, with the soaring space of the architecture substituting for the infinitude of outer space.

Toderi says that the formative event of her life as an artist was watching the moon



**PERTH FESTIVAL: GRAZIA
TODERI, ROSS MANNING,
MICHELE THEUNISSEN,
LUMINOUSFLUX,
MY NAME IS RAJ**

PICTURING NEW YORK
Art Gallery of Western Australia,
until May 12



→

landing in 1969, at the age of six. She can still remember the sense of wonder that the entire planet could be united by a single broadcast, arriving from previously uncharted territory. One might also look to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), as a source of inspiration, in the way that a vision of the cosmos is conjoined with the innermost depths of the mind.

Toderi notes that the astronaut is the loneliest imaginable human being but also the one who has the extraordinary privilege of viewing the world in its entirety. One thinks of the title of a science fiction novel by the Strugatsky brothers – *Hard To Be a God*. It's exactly the conceit one finds in *2001*, or William Eubank's confusing cult movie of last year, called *Love*.

In *Empire* (2002) Toderi shows us the continent of North America viewed from a satellite by night. We see the United States as a vast, twinkling sea of lights, and Canada as a thin border of illumination on the edge of a

void. Each pulsation of light is a sign of life, a cypher for a city in which hundreds of thousands of people dwell. It is an inversion of what we see when looking at the stars from the earth, wondering what mysteries lie at the origins of those sparkles.

Toderi brings the focus closer to the ground in *Orbite Rosse (Red Orbits)* (2009), a dual screen projection that displays a nocturnal panorama of her home city, Turin. The work is a constantly changing light show, punctuated by short bursts of

luminescence and washes of colour, with everything bathed in fiery red glow.

I've left *Picturing New York* to last because it is not actually a festival exhibition but this is no reflection on its quality. The second in a series of exclusive AGWA exhibitions drawn from the holdings of New York's Museum of Modern Art, it is a thoroughly fascinating collection.

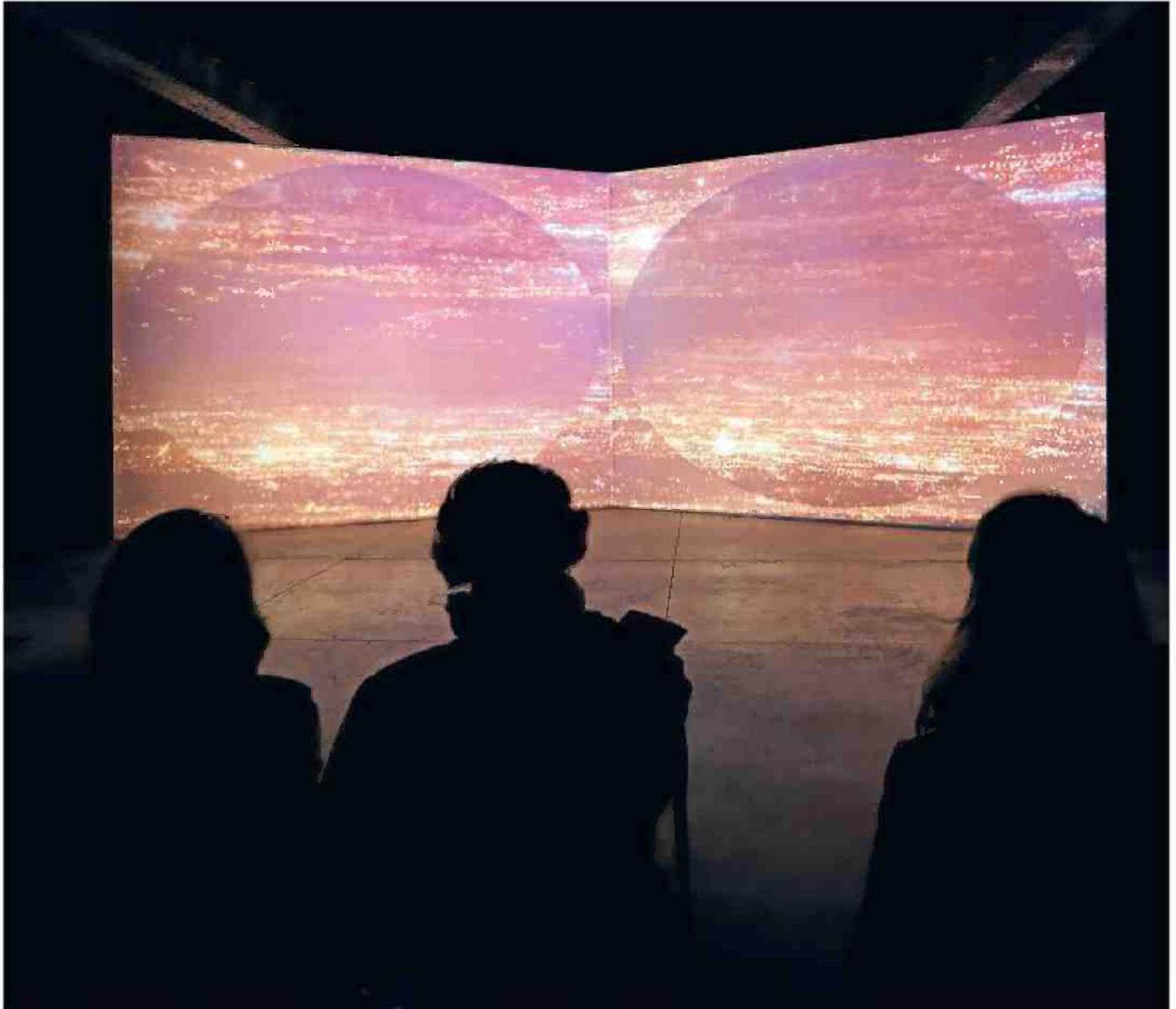
With the possible exception of Paris, there can be no other city that has been so

relentlessly trawled over by photographers, both amateur and professional. New York's changing skyline, its energy and inclusiveness, its diverse populations and powers of constant reinvention make it an ideal subject. The nature of the medium means this show can include classic images by all the greatest photographers who turned their camera on Gotham's streets and inhabitants. The roll-call includes Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Diane Arbus, Helen Levitt, Weegee, Gary Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, and just about anyone else you care to name.

No less interesting are the amateur and anonymous snaps that have captured some aspect of life in the metropolis in one miraculous instant. *Picturing New York* deserves a full-scale review, but for the time being you'll have to accept enthusiasm in place of criticism.

johnmcdonald.net.au

→



Beam-scape ... a video projection piece, *Orbite Rosse*, by Grazia Toderi; (left) a 1914 Brooklyn Bridge image in *Picturing New York*.