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World without end

Artists from opposite sides of the planet make for a mesmerising double act, while two powerful shows seek sanctuary closer to home.

John McDonald

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After many years of exile from the high church of contemporary art, Ray Hughes is thinking maybe there is a god. His faith has momentarily been restored by a visit from the director of Tate Modern, London, Chris Dercon, who came to Australia last month to deliver a lecture sponsored by Kaldor Public Art Projects.

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While high-profile visitors are usually detoured past the Hughes Gallery, Dercon understood it, quite rightly, to be one of the pre-eminent art experiences to be had in Sydney. In his lecture at the Art Gallery of NSW, he announced that if no one in Australia would do a show based on Hughes' achievements, he'd do one at the Tate.



Artists enjoy the sunset at Sir John Gorge, in the Australian Wildlife Conservancy in the Kimberley. Photo: Jason Capobianco

It may be only a passing dream, but such an endorsement from the director of one of the world's leading art museums should prompt curators and collectors to pay more attention to the Hughes Gallery.

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which has always been one of those places where one should expect the unexpected.

The exhibition of photographs by J.D. Okhai Ojeikere from Nigeria and graphic works by American artist C.J. Pyle is a perfect example of the Hughes style. No other commercial gallery in Australia might be expected to host such a show, which finds affinities between two artists from opposite sides of the planet. The common element is hair – putting Ojeikere's photos of African women's hairstyles alongside Pyle's fastidious drawings of imaginary faces covered in dense, swirling locks.



Full Moon, Smoke Haze and Nightjar, by Peter Godwin.

Pyle, born in 1956, is an obsessive, self-taught artist and long-term drummer for an Indianapolis band called the Late Show. Among his formative influences, he lists offbeat cartoonists such as 'Big Daddy' Ed Roth and Basil Wolverton, but his own works, done with ballpoint pen and coloured pencils, don't have the same frenetic weirdness. Pyle's 'portraits' are more formal in style, like mugshots or passport photos. Each face is a mass of knotted and woven strands, inlaid with small, slit-like eyes.

These heads are not exactly beautiful but they have the kind of fascinating ugliness we associate with that much-abused category – the grotesque. There are nods in the direction of Arcimboldo, Picasso, the surrealists and the Chicago imagists but each drawing has its own personality. Put 30 or so pictures in one room and the effect is mesmeric.



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Ojeikere, born in 1930, is a much-respected figure in Nigeria, best known for his Hairstyle series, which has more than 1000 images.

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artist who combines the instincts of an anthropologist and an archivist. One of the oddities of this series is that Ojeikere so often photographs the back of a woman's head, giving his pictures an abstract dimension.

Even though the hairstyles are fashion statements and testaments to the subject's originality, Ojeikere is not out to shoot portraits. The women are merely the models, or the vehicles, that carry these living sculptures. The hairdos are not constructed in the studio but found on the streets, in the workplace, at parties and social gatherings.

As a subject there is much more to the hairstyles than meets the eye. To the trained observer, they are full of information, conveying messages about social and marital status, tribal or family affiliations. Some hairstyles have ceremonial significance and may be worn only by princesses.

The most elaborate examples can take a week to prepare. At the beginning of the project, in 1968, Ojeikere found that many women refused to be photographed, fearing the evil eye of the camera would steal their life force.

This show hints at that "voodoo" aspect with a discreet selection of African sculptures displayed throughout the gallery. It's also present in Pyle's drawings, which resemble portraits of spirits and supernatural beings made by Outsider artists. One suspects the associations are only skin-deep, as both artists are sophisticated technicians who have retained the same sort of enthusiasm one finds with dedicated amateurs.

There is a sense in which all good artists remain amateurs, being motivated by a passion for their work rather than profit. In the ferment of creativity the line between life and art disappears. The work you do becomes the life that you lead and vice versa.

This idea applies perfectly to Mary Tonkin, born in 1973, whose paintings and drawings may be seen in a show called *A Short Walk* at Australian Galleries. Tonkin lives in the Dandenongs, on the edge of the rainforest, and finds constant inspiration in that environment. Like William Robinson, the painter who has revolutionised our view of the rainforest, Tonkin creates a sense of space that is immersive and disorienting.

Her palette and brushwork, however, cannot be compared to her predecessor. She has a distinctive way of capturing the play of light on leaves and undergrowth in dramatic arrangements of glare and shadow.

By allowing a burst of obstructed sunlight to flatten out forms, Tonkin creates paintings, such as *Into, Kalorama*, that resemble tapestries. This is especially obvious in reproductions, when the action of the brush or palette knife is masked. No one could miss the joyous feeling in these works - an expression of pure pleasure in the landscape.

The centrepiece of the display is *A Short Walk, Kalorama*, a multi-panelled charcoal drawing, 16.4 metres in length. This is a museum piece, partly because few private collectors have a wall of sufficient dimensions, but also because it is a work of huge ambition and accomplishment

accomplishment.

Tonkin has gone out into the forest, day after day, carrying a large sheet of drawing paper and a board. Concentrating on a seemingly anonymous piece of bushland she has created a vista that is monumental in scale but intimate in feeling. By making lighter or darker lines, erasing areas and drawing back over them, she evokes the changing quality of light and the passing of time.

In regard to the Australian landscape one keeps coming back to Fred Williams' famous observation that the lack of obvious focal points – the basis of classical landscape painting – has created new opportunities for artists. Tonkin has exploited this insight more effectively than any landscapist of her generation.

Her next challenge is to leave the rainforest where she is so comfortable and expose herself to a broader range of environments. This is a reason for appreciating the talents of artists such as Williams, Robinson and John Olsen, who have never been satisfied with doing one thing well.

It's tempting to return to Ojeikere, who once said, 'I understand art as movement.' This is a fundamental truth for artists of all persuasions, even those who find an endless supply of inspiration close to home. There is nothing to be lost in stepping outside one's comfort zone, be it only for a week.

The proof of this proposition may be found in *Six Artists, Seven Days*, the AWC Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary Exhibition, presented by Defiance Gallery, Paddington. The initials stand for Australian Wildlife Conservancy, a philanthropic organisation devoted to research into native species, along with their care and management. To this end the AWC has acquired and fenced off large tracts of land in places such as the Kimberley, where scientists have been able to study environmental problems and the predations of feral animals.

Last year, five painters – Lucy Culliton, Elisabeth Cummings, Peter Godwin, Idris Murphy and John Peart – were invited to spend a week in the Kimberley as part of a project to raise money and awareness of AWC activities. The sixth artist was photographer Jason Capobianco, who has not only contributed images to this exhibition but also documented the entire week and made a film about the project. To declare an involvement, I'll be introducing the film on Saturday evening (August 24) at Mary Place.

Space doesn't permit a discussion of individual works, but the quality of the exhibition has surprised everyone. Nobody thought the show would be a flop but the results are startling.

Godwin is chiefly known for his interiors, while Peart is essentially an abstract painter, but both artists have created powerful, diverse bodies of work in response to a rugged environment. One expects nothing less from such experienced landscapists as Cummings and Murphy, while the versatile, compulsive Culliton can paint anything, and do it superbly.

The success of the show is reflected in sales, which have raised a considerable sum for the AWC, with each artist donating at least one major work. The entire project represents a unique conjunction of interests combining art, science, philanthropy and the environment

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It hardly needs mentioning that in the present climate of corporate and private stinginess, such successes are rarer than the rusty numbat. *Six Artists, Seven Days* has been a great, uplifting experience for all concerned, and next year there are plans to assemble another group of artists and do it again.

johnmcdonald.net.au

J.D. OJEIKERE AND C.J. PYLE

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MARY TONKIN: A SHORT WALK

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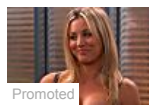
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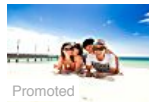
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