

Fiona Hall: Force Field

Jeremy Booth felt the force, finding much to admire at the City Gallery's showing of these works by Australia's Fiona Hall in the windy city.

A WILD DAY IN WELLINGTON

Even the most ardent of Wellingtonians comes to grips with the sheer brunt of the natural elements felt on occasion. No matter the run-down boutique charm of Te Waha o te Ika a Maui – the mouth of Maui's fish, on this occasion, standing outside City Gallery Wellington with inverted umbrella in hand, I began to question my allegiance. Staring down the eye-socket of a giant beaded skull, I followed a group of beleaguered tourists into the building.

Fiona Hall: Force Field was one of City Gallery Wellington's trans-Tasman offerings, and may have left visitors wondering why they had never encountered this artist's practice before. The exhibition offered a treat in the unending winter before heading to Christchurch Art Gallery over summer, and stood to lend a new appreciation to the wondrous fragility of our edge of the natural world.

(UN) NATURAL WONDERS

Wandering the four thematic spaces that divide the show, the visitor's everyday toils are traded for the guise of inquisitor: a mysterious collection laid out before them. The exhibition surveyed over three decades of Hall's work, with a particularly heavy front end, accentuating the recent sculptural delights from the artist's practice and pitching them against older works. The spaces had the feel of an awry, mischievous natural history collection, fantastical in its detail and delicacy, bizarre in its contortion of evolutionary givens, and taxonomic in its fanatical and eclectic museological arrangements. As curator Gregory O'Brien (2008a) pointed out, many games are being played.

Hall is one of Australia's most celebrated and unique contemporary artists and creates a metaphorical language of many facets, written in many scripts. Underpinning this language is a series of binary tensions between the physical and the conceptual, the organic and inorganic, man and nature. These tensions are lyrical, exerting a subversive schoolyard humour at times, and playing out through material and form. Her fascination with human sexuality and the natural world draws comparisons with the female surrealist artists of the early modern period (Hart, 2008, p. 206). Evident within the work shown was a wealth of research, empathy and the artist's genuine dedication to her subjects. This brings a critical level of accessibility to the work, as the exhibition carefully plotted a balance between the artist's enthralling technical abilities and meaningful meditations on issues that can seem old hat.



Figure 1: City Gallery Wellington with banners.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: JAMES ANTHONY RUTHERFORD.

BECOMING CONVERSANT

In Hall's perception, *Force Field* is, "the overall system of nature – a part of an entire matrix, not separated out in the way humans like to think it is" (cited in O'Brien, 2008b, p. 68). As I viewed the exhibition, the artist's holistic conception of her subject matter conjured a great many meanings, threads and associations. Curatorially, a degree of order was given through thematic groupings, initiating a series of conversations and dialogues between certain works. The most palpable included the concept of territory, idealist, utopian and dystopian notions of the environment, the destruction of natural habitats and species through human consumption and colonisation, and the increasing dislocation of man from the natural world.

While this could seem overbearing to the unwitting passer-by, for the artist these threads are tangential, unwinding from the same source of observation and for viewers it proves the same. Visiting the show unfolded much like a museum trip – the more penetrative the enquiry the more thought provoking, complex and at times sobering, the findings. And herein lay the exhibition's beauty – it presupposed nothing, yet offered as much as visitors could carry.

FEELING THE FORCE

Eventually trading the exhibition halls for the persistent and blustering southerly it became clear that, amongst other things, a flip-sided notion of beauty had prevailed. "Darkness", as O'Brien (2008c) writes, "has its fecundity just as the greenest of days has its rot," seems to fit amicably with the thought of Hall's conceptual position. The exhibition inspired admiration and wonder in the natural world anew, as well as respect for its fragility, and a grasp of our own collective footprints.

Jeremy Booth is an artist, writer, and Fine Arts graduate of Massey University. He visited *Force Field* as part of a Postgraduate Diploma in Museum Studies in 2008. Jeremy is currently Communications and Publications Manager at Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington.



Figure 2: Fiona Hall, *Cell Culture (2001-2002)* (detail). Collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

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