

ANNE ZAHALKA: Leisureland

How do you spend your precious down-time? Australian leisure has come quite a way since the Sunday drive, (although it seems cruising the esplanade is still popular for some car-enthusiasts). It's a case of 'each to his or her own' when it comes to serious leisure... not that we all have equal access to the same leisure choices.

What we create in our society to celebrate, to enjoy, and lose ourselves in, might reveal much about our various sub-cultures, yet do we have much say in the matter? Depending on one's location, rural or urban, the availability and commodification of leisure services differs significantly, as acclaimed Sydney artist Anne Zahalka discovered during her 'Leisureland' project.

Over a period of four years, in a total of ninety photographs, Zahalka recorded the festivals and events of regional centres and small towns in addition to the elaborate simulated theme parks of major cities.

Documenting everything from Bingo to techno-gyms, her aim has been to explore how leisure has become a commodified experience in Australian culture and how it provides a form of escape and release from the demands of our working lives.

While the Gold Coast offers a smorgasbord of leisure activities, boasting the greatest number of theme parks gathered together in one place in Australia, it is also, like most major cities, host to the underbelly of leisure in the form of leisure-related excess and addiction.

Although her work is non-judgemental, and based on purely factual documentation, it inevitably encourages us to observe the spectacle and façade of these constructed environments in the form of mass entertainment. "Theme parks are of particular interest to me because of their highly constructed and illusionary nature and the way they are thematically created within a defined area", she says. "It outwardly exhibits its fakery and produces strange hybrid spaces where landscapes are simulated and juxtaposed against the real one".

Her leisure-scapes are funny, paradoxical pictures and as she points out, we do engage in some pretty strange activities within the leisure arena.

"Robosaurus" 1999, for instance, depicts an orderly audience of happy families enjoying the spectacle of a 'car-nivorous' robot monster as it chomps and burns automobiles. In "Woodchop Stadium" 1999, muscle-men practice the bygone labour of chopping wood in a simulated landscape under acoustically enhanced conditions. "Rock Climbing Gym" 1998 documents the psychodrama of scaling a sheer wall studded with colour-coded footholds. A familiar experience for locals and tourists to the Gold Coast is depicted in "Sea World, Bermuda Triangle" 2001, ie. riding into an erupting flame-sputtering smoke-filled volcano.

Zahalka's images cause the viewer to ponder, be amused, (and perhaps mildly embarrassed) about the way our fun is packaged.

“As an artist working within these weird worlds I'm interested in exposing them for the viewer”, says Zahalka. “People become completely immersed in the elaborate fantasy world on offer ... and I enjoyed the process of being a spectator to the viewers' pleasure, as well as witness to the event”.

Zahalka recently gifted to the Gold Coast City Art Gallery the stunning suite of photographic images she documented here as part of her *'Leisureland Regional'* series. The works, *'Sea world, Bermuda Triangle' 2001*, *'Backdrop, Warner Bros, Movie World' 2001*, *'Aqua Racer, Wet'n'Wild Water World' 2001*, and *"Big Brother Eviction Night, Dreamworld"* present what may become a nostalgic record of obsolete Gold Coast theme parks.

"Leisureland Regional has toured for the last two years and finally come to rest. I wanted all the regional galleries to have the works that had been made during my visits because they are about the place and the people who live there and are a document of the things they do there. Perhaps in ten years these theme parks may not have survived and will be replaced by new creations and curiosities as the demand for more innovative and state of the art leisure environments continues to grow. These images may be a useful record”, says Zahalka.

Ironically, Big Brother, and other 'reality' TV game shows are based on 'unreal' conditions in which ordinariness becomes compelling and celebrities are created and extinguished overnight. Zahalka recalls the photographing of Big Brother Eviction Night as one of the more fascinating ritualised spectacles she has witnessed.

“I think my most surreal experience during the making of Leisureland on the Gold Coast was visiting the house of Big Brother and looking through one way glass into the set with the house guests getting ready for eviction night. Meanwhile the crowd was beginning to assemble down the hill and on the other side of the fence were lions from Dreamworld roamed around the grounds. Later that evening I witnessed the cult of a Big Brother eviction night where high school students paid over \$90 to wear pyjamas and rabbit ears and scream for their favourite tenant!”

Continuing her exploration into both real and artificial worlds, her latest 'Wonderland' series departs from her earlier documentary approach as she constructs dream-like landscapes like film sets, in which fact and fiction meld together. Her work titled, *"In Strangers in a Strange Land, Pinnacles Desert," 2004* from this series, is currently featured in the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Exhibition on show at the Gold Coast City Art Gallery.

Anne Zahalka was the recipient of the prestigious Leopold Godowsky Jnr. Color Photography Award in Boston last year. Her recent international group exhibitions include *Supernatural Artificial* at the Metropolitan Museum of Photography in Tokyo and *Photographica Australis (2002)* in Madrid which toured throughout Asia. Her works are held in most major public collections in Australia as well as numerous private and corporate collections in Australia and overseas. Anne Zahalka is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney and ARC One in Melbourne. **Judy Anderson**

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