

my own private NEON

my own private neon oasis is a contemporary art project inspired by a suburban location. Situated 20 minutes south of Brisbane's CBD, it is a place where conspicuous individual consumption clashes with indeterminate collective impulses. For *my own private neon oasis*, Sunnybank is a kind of muse.

The increased settlement of Asian migrants, particularly since the 1980s, has significantly influenced the Sunnybank community providing the area with a distinct cultural identity. The project has been motivated by this culturally dynamic location, where the generic architecture of the shopping centre and connected public spaces are continually recycled and re-adapted. In-between public spaces, such as alleyways and parking lots, have become sites where economic activity, developing cultural practices and identity are co-opted regularly. In these discreet areas everything is foreign: noticeboards, authentic foods and street fashion are specific to the area. Immersed in this ambience, not knowing

the language, it's easy to be a tourist in your own backyard.

Spatially, the precinct consistently undergoes renovation. This has been most apparent in the building programs of the shopping centres. Replacing orchards in 1975, Sunnybank Plaza is a suburban shopping mall that was originally fronted by a parking lot. Navigating between this field of paved bitumen and the mall was once simple and banal. However, as migration and capitalism expands and updates itself, this field has gradually disappeared. Since the early 1990s, the plaza has expanded into a chaotic mix of multi-storey car parks, with the introduction of a network of informal streets and alleys between pilotis, lean-tos and pop-up structures. Likewise, Market Square opened in 1971 and was originally designed by William Job & Associates with a green courtyard that was replaced by car parking, which has progressively been reclaimed for extensions.

OASIS

Louise Rollman

The precinct acquires urban qualities which come about through a series of conflicts and contradictions. Transforming the mass and scale of the shopping centres is a practice that mirrors development throughout South-East Asia and is perhaps effortlessly transplanted onto existing suburban forms. Robin Boyd termed this *The Australian Ugliness*, where a pervasive ambivalence of the national character is articulated. For Boyd, the lack of a definitive architectural style and the application of 'featurism' corresponded with a 'mixed up' national identity.

Brisbane, in particular, maintains an accelerated cycle of obsolescence, unable to recognise itself. The city has understandably gained a reputation for disregarding its past, the most notorious example being demolition of multiple heritage buildings by the Deen Brothers (their motto: 'All we leave behind are the memories') during the era of Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen. The situation has

been precipitated through a somewhat unique combination of factors including a unicameral legislature, Queensland being the only Australian State to have no upper house or senate for legislative review. During this era, this assisted the rise of political and police corruption; and economic booms due to mining, tourism and migration, have enabled the city to continually alter its skyline and transform its urban fabric.

At Sunnybank, buildings are squeezed in to resolve an immediate need. There is no sense of permanence in the constructed world. Everything is flexible and undergoing permanent transformation. Access has been redirected into multiple entrances and it's not the simplest place to navigate. But rather an exploratory space populated by locals and destination tourists, economic and social activity.

Culturally, it has a distinctive vitality emerging from the social and economic



arrangement of space. And, quite literally, physically internalised through the consumption of food. The somewhat chaotic and imperfect development of the built-environment also manifests within the interiors as a maze of restaurants, cafes, many of which are open late night including yum cha, multiple butchers that are clearly visible just metres from each other, home wares and two-dollar shops that continually replenish stacks of imported plastic receptacles. Instead of just one major supermarket, there are no less than four, not counting the numerous Asian markets. As a suburban precinct, it doesn't quite sleep and in fact, offers broader choices than its inner-city counterparts – a new, hybrid micro-urban reality.

I grew up in the area and feel most at home in any Little Asia. For me, there's a familiarity in otherness. When I'm stressed or homesick overseas I instinctively gravitate to Chinatowns, and rituals, especially to mark an occasion, inevitably

involve sharing a Chinese dinner. But I don't really know this aspect of my culture. My parents aren't Asian and my familiarity isn't knowingly guided by any traditional principles. Nor should it be. And whether second or third generation Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, Caucasian or otherwise, I appreciate that I'm not alone in this experience. So, how does one reconcile identity?

Diasporic cosmopolitanism and globalisation, which in a sense brings the world closer, can also raise barriers between people. One can encounter Sunnybank as an insider and outsider: you can be an individual and part of a social impulse and simultaneously feel connected and disconnected. It's exciting and isolating. Whether you're Asian or not, one can engage with Sunnybank and be apart from a broader community beyond its perimeter. In parts of Sunnybank you could be anywhere in the world; well, any Asian part of the world. While motivated by individual or

personal relationships with society, forging a social bond is based on distance, from each other, from 'Antipodeans', from Asia, from traditions. This, thereby reducing people to a mixed group not quite able to define its hybridity collectively.

For *my own private neon oasis*, this fractured position, in all its fragmented discontinuity, is central. The project has sought to explore and make visible this position, however tenuous, through a series of site interventions concerned with initiating a dialogue that bridges distance. Its aspiration is not to wholly make sense of it, but for the moment relishes in the nonsensical, messiness of a culture of flux. *my own private neon oasis* set out to contribute to this visceral cacophony punctuating the suburban sprawl south of the city.

Visiting from Seoul, **Choi Jeong Hwa** conceived two eye-catching site-interventions. Both invited reaction. *Wind* burst with a

- p 12 Women at Oasis swimming pool January 1950 Image courtesy of Brisbane Images, Brisbane City Council, image number BCC-B54-703
- p 14 Oasis swimming pool May 1956 Image courtesy of Brisbane Image, Brisbane City Council, image number BCC-S35-9311085
- p 18 June 2011 Photo: Russell Shakespeare
- p 19 **Choi Jeong Hwa** *Wind* 2011 Nylon tulle Photo: Russell Shakespeare



shock of fluorescent colour spanning the pedestrian footbridge between Sunnybank Plaza and Sunny Park. Fundamentally it signalled change. For some commuters, travelling under this bridge defines their only experience of Sunnybank. Consisting of almost 800 linear-metres of fluoro yellow and pink nylon tulle that weaved across the zigzagging switchbacks of the footbridge, it introduced something bright into an otherwise grey experience of traversing under and over the bridge. It was at once dramatic and fragile.

Coupled with *Earth*, a small maze of 3,500 bright red plastic fruit bowls, Choi redirected the consumption, desire and value of these familiar items. Situated at a corner of the intersection of Mains Road and McCullough Streets, amongst trees where the shrieking, acrobatic Rainbow Lorikeets flock at dusk, competing with and drowning out the monotonous drone of the surrounding traffic. Similarly, sitting at the boundary of a pocket park, *Earth*

brightly screens the surrounding traffic. In a constantly changing and decaying natural world, Choi creates organic forms utilising his favourite material – plastic. Choi has a ‘plastic heart’ – he loves plastic. It is a shape-shifter: artificial and unnatural, changeable, stretched, squeezed, moulded, rapidly consumed, everywhere, wasted and recyclable. Borrowing from the continually replenished stacks of plastic receptacles manufactured and imported from China, their purpose was switched from functional into an experiential maze, exaggerating their colour and decorative moulds for the eye to simply enjoy.

The projects by Tessa Zettel and Karl Khoe of **Makeshift** reference cultural and location-specific histories to create contexts, which invite a re-consideration of ideas that have lost their value in contemporary societies. They investigate expanded notions of sustainability (or conceding that this term has become co-opted, ‘sustainment’, as used by design

theorist Tony Fry, which focuses on critical reflection).

Contributing to the ‘Sunnybank Wall of History’, located at one of the entrances to Sunnybank Plaza opposite the Formosa Asian Market, *The third pool at The Oasis* reimagines the past and future lives of Queensland’s most beautiful garden. This wall, with its smattering of images obscured by furniture and vending machines, is very easily overlooked. Their addition, a motion light box (commonly referred to as a ‘moving waterfall picture’ that sometimes decorate the walls of Chinese restaurants), has been adapted with a collage that superimposes other ‘gardens’ onto a photochrome of The Oasis. Closer inspection of the digital collage reveals images borrowed from the ‘Sunnybank Wall of History’: a small group of people photographed with a pile of pineapples and an old clothesline; chickens, a solar panel, a boy spear fishing and a monk practicing tai chi.

- p 20 Choi Jeong Hwa June 2011 Photo: Louise Rollman
- p 21 **Makeshift** *The propensity of things 2011* 15 September 2011 Photo: Yan Chan



In layering images of The Oasis, collapsing the past, present and future, they recognise that the past lives of Sunnybank, both backyard and agricultural, are also 'beautiful' and resonate with other ways of living in Sunnybank today.

The propensity of things also redirected the disposition of things. Specifically, it explored how we position ourselves in relation to the spaces that shape our daily life by introducing a series of hybrid tai chi workshops into unexpected locations: the aisles of Choice Value (one of the home wares stores fronted by stacks of plastic receptacles), one of the main passageways within the Plaza and amidst the Formosa Asian Market, opposite the 'Sunnybank Wall of History'. They imported a foreign practice into the surroundings, an extraordinary encounter, which slows the mind in a place driven by consumerism.

On the contrary, *Hologram Holiday*, directed by **Thea Baumann** with the

support of multiple collaborators, introduced a concoction of hyperactive stimulus. It was a multi-part new media installation that consisted of a recorded performance featuring a Hologram Hostess; dreamy, exotic soundtracks; the words 'Beyond' and 'Paradise' in neon; and hologram manicures which could trigger augmented reality experiences prompting an interactive swirl of tropical fish and neon fumes, all coupled with elements of live performance. The work crystallised within the glamorous and intimate prism of the beauty salon, a space usually occupied by women. Supplementing the iNails salon, which has a complete glass front making it an unusually visible private place, Baumann generated a space where hyper-real and virtual worlds collide.

For Baumann, *Hologram Holiday* resides with the id, a Freudian term for the unconscious impulse seeking to enhance pleasure. It explored ideas relating to

utopian fantasy islands, science-fiction, constructions of exotic illusions and desire, as well as darkness, albeit very brightly, dystopia and apocalypse. In Baumann's work, *Hologram Holiday* is the id/third level in a developing meta-narrative entitled *Metaverse Makeovers*. Applying, revealing and reflecting the infinite, *Metaverse Makeovers* places contemporary perspectives on beauty, makeup as an artform, and mediated forms of embodiment under a seductive lens.

Eunjung Hwang also addresses fantasy and the subconscious, but in a very different way. Her projects start by creating hand-drawn characters derived from dreams and subconscious imagery. These characters are developed into animated digital videos. Presented across multiple screens at Sakuraya (a café popular for taro teas) *131 Characters* is a series of simple, bold and bright animations exploring the complex reality and 'sur-reality' of Sunnybank.

- p 22 **Thea Baumann** *Hologram Holiday* 2011 (detail featuring the Hologram Hostess) Image courtesy of the artist
- p 23 **Eunjung Hwang** *131 Characters* 2011 (digital still) Animated digital video, 16 minutes Image courtesy of the artist



Primarily, her drawings explore the unexercised images of fragmentary realities. Fantasy narratives unfold as the characters act out their roles within a structure influenced by dream logic. It's an organising principal, formalising a broader, non-linear and allusive narrative that we're familiar with through our own imaginations, unconscious dreams and everyday experiences. Each appealing episode uncovers a fun, innocent and/or naughty character, sometimes a ghost or spirit. Rather than rely on linear narrative, Hwang's animated drawings are meant to be enjoyed like the rhythmic structure of musical scores.

As the project was timed to coincide with the Moon Festival, which is widely celebrated throughout Asian cultures, architects **Donovan Hill** designed a temporary pop-up structure to frame the full moon. *The Lantern* reclaimed rooftop car parks, partly mimicking the architectural syntax of the area, particularly the lean-

tos and extensions at Market Square. While maintaining a relationship to the street, the structure's façade was composed of translucent plastic so that by night the structure was illuminated like a Chinese lantern. Open to the sky, *The Lantern's* elevated position took advantage of the panoramic views and vistas. As Sunnybank is typically traversed across and focused on the ground, the location provided a lookout drawing attention to the broader horizon across the infrastructure of the shopping centres in the foreground to the surrounding vegetation and peaks.

It also introduced a bamboo garden into this usually utilitarian space. The terrain or lounge in-between was composed of sandbags laid like stone blocks. And the two halves of *The Lantern*, originally conceived as moving scaffold, defined a memorable territory or room to appreciate the rising moon and enable events. It interjected with an idea that the rooftop car parks could be

reclaimed differently: for gardens or public spaces that accommodate flexible social programming. As well as a space to admire the rising moon and share moon cakes with friends and family, *The Lantern* was HQ for artists-in-residence by day and open to reprogramming, notably incorporating a scaffold lookout for Brisbane-based artists-in-residence Boxcopy.

Utilising *The Lantern* as a base-camp, artist-run-initiative **Boxcopy** set out to explore Sunnybank. Reflecting on individual experiences of place, they explored sites of interest in Sunnybank through words, sound, photography and video. Acknowledging their position as outsiders removed from specific cultural anchor points, they took as their starting point the ideas and aesthetics of the pioneer and frontier exploration. The title of their project, *1769 - 1782* refers to the years that American frontiersman Daniel Boone spent exploring the Kentucky wilderness.

- p 24 **Eunjung Hwang** *131 Characters 2011* (digital still) Animated digital video, 16 minutes Image courtesy of the artist
- p 25 **Donovan Hill** *The Lantern 2011* Steel scaffold, stained ply, Ampelite sheeting, lamps, sandbags and bamboo 12 October 2011 Photo: Morris Weyer



As part of their project, they added a red windsock to *their Lantern (or Fort)*. Anita Holtsclaw surveyed skill testers, i.e. ‘the claw’ and tested her skills as a ‘hunter’ of mass-produced cultural artifacts contained within each arcade machine. Anastasia Booth hired a ‘mycube’ (a mini shop front for start up retail entrepreneurs) and exhibited objects within this space, including a model of *their Lantern (or Fort)*. Working as an unashamed interloper, Daniel McKewan’s contribution consisted of a series of maps ranking the various shops and restaurants of Sunnybank in an ongoing process of orientation. Tim Woodward met up with a local friend to enjoy a Peking Duck each. Channon Goodwin produced a video log that recorded the process of travelling, exploring and making artworks in Sunnybank. While Boxcopy researched, surveyed, mapped, collected information and uploaded documentation to boxcopyinsunnybank.tumblr.com, a nodal agency that traced the arc of their

residency, the public was also encouraged to participate by contributing and exchanging information, suggesting undiscovered places or experiences in the area, or any points of interest.

Intersect focused on the integration of cultures and identities in Sunnybank. Its designed form was generated through a light-hearted approach conjoining the Chinese dragon and bamboo, with the Australian kangaroo and native sarsaparilla vines (*hardenbergia violacea*). The use of bamboo is significant. Bamboo is viewed as a symbol of traditional Chinese values. It represents virtue, moral integrity, resistance, modesty and loyalty. It also stands as an example of loneliness and elegance among others. Light and tough with elasticity and bearing capacity, it has the capacity to reflect people’s souls and emotions. With this material, **Christina Cho** and **Hyojin Kwon** twisted an interconnected form. Situated within a breezeway and suspended from Western-style steel scaffold, the emerging

designers created an experimental form that embodied curving dragon spines. The gradual material transformation was a symbolic gesture representing the embracing of each other’s culture and traditions.

While *my own private neon oasis* and each site-intervention expressed a reverence for the locational muse, the project was not uncritical. Driven by overwhelming consumption, car parks are regularly reclaimed to expand economic footprints. Ideally, there should be scope for broader re-adaptation and reactivation of in-between public spaces. Through the production of visibility, a ‘de-constitution’ (pulling apart precedents) of that atomistic space has come about in order to look beyond it, to see other possibilities. Reclaiming differently may include establishing a more direct relationship or front to the street, developing up to take in the broader horizon and differently for gardens, details which have been lost

- p 26 **Donovan Hill** *The Lantern* 2011 Steel scaffold, stained ply, Ampelite sheeting, lamps, sandbags and bamboo 12 October 2011 Photo: Morris Weyer
- p 27 **MakeShift** *The propensity of things* 2011 15 September 2011 Photo: Russell Shakespeare



through the conflicts and contradictions of development, or public spaces that accommodate flexible social programming.

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Simplistically, Sunnybank may be defined by an intersection surrounded by commercial public space consisting of shopping centres and car parks. However, the imperfect suburban ugliness and wild mix of developments is liberating because it breaks all the rules and clears the way for new concepts. There should be more of what it already is: less Western and more Asian, more foreign, cultural exchange and opportunities to learn, at least one garden, more hyper-development, more lean-tos, more belvederes, more 'mixed up' and contemporary, more worlds colliding, more 'sur-reality', less banality, and definitely more old school neon and bling, more breaking with convention and more breaking the rules. Sunnybank, where more is better, has yet to fulfil its peripheral potential.

p 28 **Donovan Hill** *The Lantern* 2011 Steel scaffold, stained ply, Ampelite sheeting, lamps, sandbags and bamboo 12 September 2011 Photo: Shantanu Starick

p 29 June 2011 Photo: Russell Shakespeare