

Writing this, I'm deciding what to get grumpier at – Liberal backbencher Danna Vale's warning about "us" (a.k.a. Australians) being outbred by "them" (a.k.a. Muslims), or *The Australian* columnist Janet Albrechtsen's spin on February 15 regarding Cate Blanchett's droll comment about Australians feeling more comfortable talking about the weather than culture.

With Danna Vale suffering sisterhood withdrawal and lying low, Albrechtsen's admonition of the Ingrate (read: taxpayer-funded) arts community is clearly the issue to stay grumpy about. Not really the issue, though; rather the flimsy pretext seized by Albrechtsen to remind everyone that a lot of arts folk who want more and more grant money to bash up the Howard government just make stuff that is out of touch with what some have described as "aspirational Australians". Met one once but, because I didn't own any Telstra shares, all we could talk about was the weather.

So what's this to do with *Writing a Painting*? Simply that with this caricaturing of government grant arts recipients is the implication that "aspirational" artists and artworks don't contribute to the community. This implication sticks when audiences or viewers encounter "hard" art which doesn't always deal with the weather.

Don't expect *Writing a Painting* to be easy. Curator Vivonne Thwaites's project is epic – the interface of millennia-old cultural traditions, Indigenous and European Australian and Chinese culture. It explores Australia's relationship with China through work by locally-based artists, Helen Fuller and Robin Best, in association with Huang Xiuqian of Jingdezhen, China, and Nyukana Baker of Ernabella. Fuller and Best are mid-career artists who have spent time in China exploring cultural traditions.

Xiuqian is 65 years old; highly-skilled in porcelain painting which is a 1000-



Above: Huang Xiuqian, Nyukana Baker and Robin Best's *Over and Under* (four elements)
Right: Robin Best – *Settlement* (seven elements)

year-old tradition in Jingdezhen, once imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution and painted propaganda images for the state, a published poet and renowned craftsman. Anangu/Pitjantjatjara artist Nyukana Baker, a weaver, batik worker and ceramic artist has exhibited in Japan, North America, UK, France and other countries.

Huang Xiuqian and Nyukana Baker have collaborated with Robin Best, for example, in *Over and Under* (four elements) where Baker's visually kinetic *punuku walka* (poker work patterns on wood) motifs coiling tubular ribbed forms are set alongside an almost absence of statement in the form of Huang's under-glaze blue and white landscape painting. Fuller's *Rag Trade* acrylics on paper also offer an extensive journey in time and imagination, as they reference Chinese calligraphic brush writing and Ernabella batik patterning, as well as rag trade recycling, to produce images which might also be Shanghai building scaffolding. With the exhibition, expect layering of meaning and intimate visual poetry. With the accompanying catalogue essays by Nicholas Jose, John Kean and Mary Eagle, expect elucidation and insights. Each writer offers informed perspectives on the nature and necessity of cultural trade and exchange; Jose addressing notions of citizenship as understood and enhanced through culture, Kean suggesting that below a topography of apparent difference flows a great river of intuitive, shared wisdom and Eagle providing a poetic context in which to understand the nature of invoking other cultures.



Writing a Painting also reveals the remarkable colonial history of the north-west corner of the city of Adelaide – the earliest area of the surveyed township settled by Europeans. It is also generally known now to be historically significant to the Kaurna people but remarkably, as Thwaites' and others' research associated with this project reveals, it was also an area (bounded by Hindley Street and Morphett Street) colonised by Chinese people from around the mid-to-late 1800s. So forget the idea that this is another pots and paper show. There's a lot going down here – and elsewhere as associated writing projects are running close by, including; *Out of site* (Annalise Rees, Stephanie Radok and Qi Zhang) tracing lines of cultural connection, at the Lounge Gallery, Fenn Place; and free Artist Floor Talks March (March 2-10). Can't complain about this project not giving back to its communities. So when you read another old Punch and Judy beatup in the papers about "us" (taxpayers) versus "them" (sponging artists), don't nod knowingly and turn to the weather page – get out to a show (like *Writing a Painting*) and see for yourself.



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