

Sticky Palms
4 - 15 February 2004
ANCA Gallery

Stuart Bailey's recent installation at ANCA combines throwaway pop culture references in disconcerting assemblages. His multi-panel works employ iconic imagery such as castles, palm trees, fists, chains and coconuts, all familiar visual clichés humorously redeployed. While they were conceived while travelling through Mexico and the United States, these paintings seem to owe more to fantasy than observation.

Bailey's influences are obviously derived from various forms of popular culture: stencil art, tagging, animation, comics, cartoons and even product packaging. Despite their eclecticism, and the fragmentary style of display, the works in this collection have certain coherence when viewed altogether. The title of the show is a clue to the linking motif of the palm tree which has a distinct presence, even when absent, throughout.

For Bailey, palm trees carry inescapable connotations of indulgence, escape and the lure of Hollywood. However he consistently undercuts the overdetermined glamour of the palm tree with by accompanying them with disturbing details. For instance, *Power Plant* humorously juxtaposes coconuts and the defiant upward thrust of a fist, in the form of a placard. Masquerading as a prop of protest, *Power Plant* has no overtly didactic message to deliver, except for a vaguely obscene visual joke. Meanwhile *Package Deal* features a number of variations on the palm theme, with a nasty looking spider crouching beneath, waiting to ambush the unwary.

Using shallow, flat pastel colours reminiscent of advertising, an imagined island paradise is juxtaposed with details that suggest menace. In the wall painting *Sticky Palms II*, a dreamlike pink landscape fades to the distance in silhouette, while a tiny man is besieged by flies on the outskirts of the frame. He embodies the nightmarish underbelly of this too-perfect isle. Above this deceptively beautiful terrain, a chain hangs from the ceiling, reinforcing the idea of paradise as bondage.

Evidently Bailey is fond of playing with compositional space by painting flat, obviously fake props such as this, onto three-dimensional backdrops. This form is reversed slightly in another work which shows spiders running up the length of a gold chain nailed onto a woodgrain background. In the neighbouring painting, pink and green palms sit facing each other on opposite cliffs, divided by a massive chasm plunging to the bottom edge. Once again, the presence of the palms fails to guarantee pleasure, instead they are seen perched above a bottomless pit of despair. The spiders, chains and sheer cliff-faces emphasise the dark side of an idyllic landscape.

In *Trickle Down*, plywood, wood veneers and contact are used to create shallow, perspectival and quirky renderings of castles in a downward descending series. Through his repetitive renderings of the castle and the

palm tree, Bailey sets up an opposition between the Old World, and the New World, which both seem to be treacherous zones, in their own way.

Sticky Palms was previously shown last year at TCB in Melbourne, in another incarnation, before being reassembled differently in Canberra. At TCB, the fist was even more prominent in his major wall painting, *Sticky Palms*, which loomed over the spectator, surrounded by chains, disembodied heads and palm trees at unnatural angles. The current work seems less confrontational, although it still packs a cheeky punch.

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