

Artists share their spiritual stories at Sydney Biennale 'Embassy of Spirits'

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Rachael Kohn



IMAGE: A GIRL CONTEMPLATES TARO SHINODA'S WHITE CLAY-COVERED ROOM (ABC RN/RACHAEL KOHN)

At the 'Embassy of Spirits' exhibition as part of the 20th Sydney Biennale, artists from a variety of backgrounds explore spirituality and their own internal struggles. **Rachael Kohn** profiles the exhibition and its artists.

As Japanese artist Taro Shinoda explains the inspiration for the small room he has covered in white clay, a piece of the now-dried mosaic falls off the wall.

Shinoda's artwork, like all the pieces in the *Embassy of Spirits* exhibition, explores spirituality and internal struggle.

The destruction of the natural environment is a key issue that animates a number of works at the exhibition, which is part of the 20th Sydney Biennale.

Photo artist Joyce Campbell's large black-and-white images of a sacred creek in New Zealand where the white eel lives, are a striking example. In Maori beliefs, the white eel is the progenitor of the Maori people in the local area, but as a species it is near extinction.

The complexity of Joyce's traditional knowledge is impressive, and she hopes to revive a cultural connection and at the same time restore the white eel's habitat.

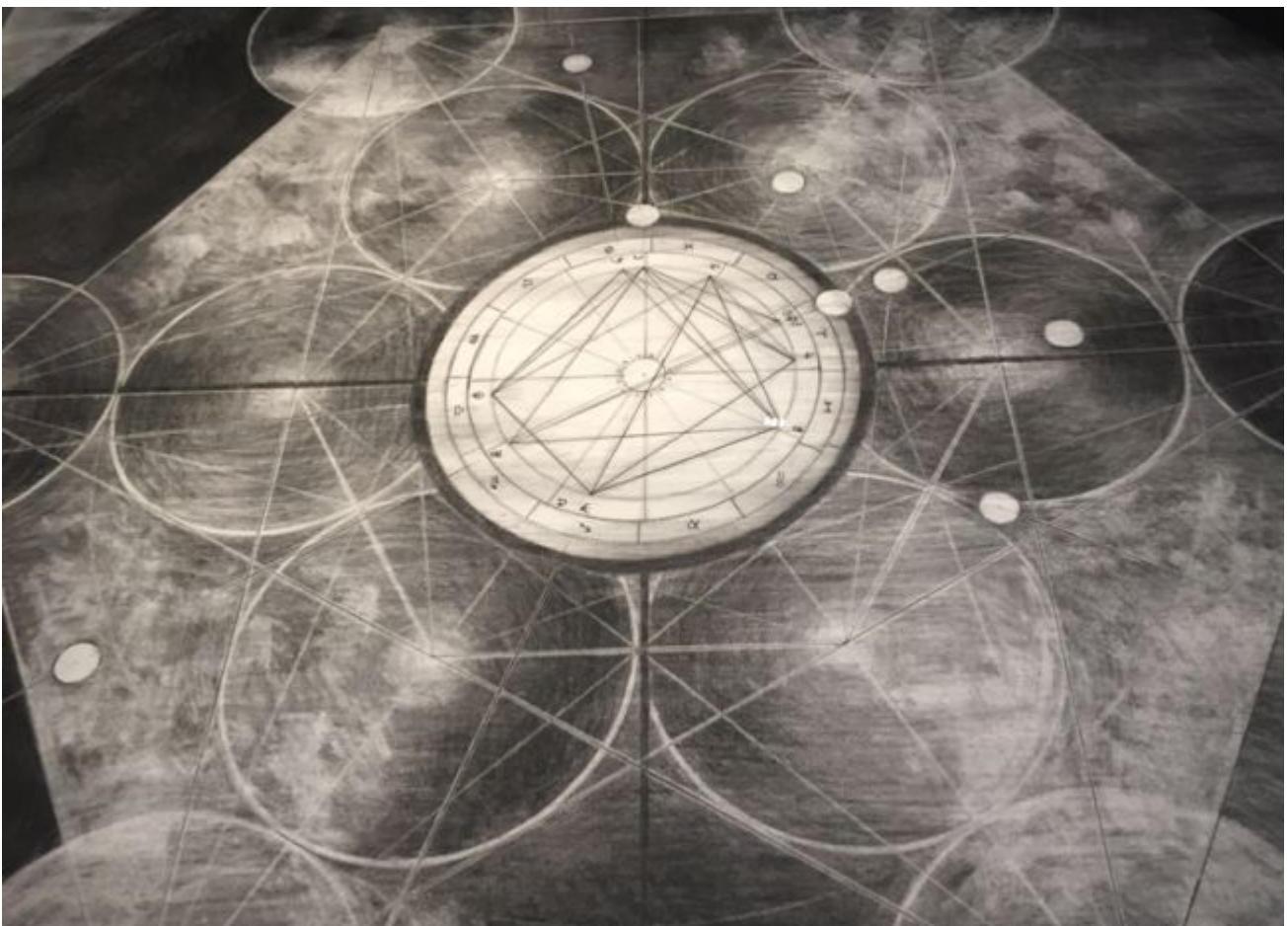


IMAGE: LIQUIDATION MAPS IS ONE OF FIVE CHARCOAL MANDALAS CREATED BY TAIWANESE ARTIST YIN JU CHEN. (ABC RN/RACHAI)

In contrast, Taiwanese artist Yin Ju Chen calls attention to the destructive nature of the religious beliefs that have caused different peoples throughout history to kill each other en masse.

In five meticulously drawn charcoal mandalas, Chen plots the astrological conditions at the time of five Asian massacres, and points to the cosmic, perhaps inescapable forces, that impact on human history.



IMAGE: THE EMBASSY OF CHROMATIC DELEGATES BY SHEILA HICKS (ABC RN/RACHAEL KOHN)

Against the dark forces of fate, cheerful colours and ideas animate veteran fibre artist Sheila Hicks' installations, which are positioned right at the entrance of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The rainbow colours, soft pillow-like textures and the arrangement of circles, sticks and flowing fringe all point to the sheer exuberance and outpouring of hope that human community can give rise to.

Her amusingly titled 'The Embassy of Chromatic Delegates' is a fanciful representation of a noisy conference of diverse participants, which evokes the many interfaith and intercultural gatherings that have become customary in multicultural societies.



IMAGE: SALWATA BY ERUB ARTS, TORRES STRAIT (ABC RN/RACHAEL KOHN)

While Hicks' work represents an imagined community, the Torres St Erub Arts Collective is a real community of women.

Their work, 'Salwata', is a 'ghost net'. Fragments of fishing nets, which break off trawlers and trap turtles, fish, and dolphins, haunt the ocean and collect on the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria and the islands of Torres Strait.

Their net is reworked and adorned with images of marine life and the flora of the islands.

Marion Gaemers, one of the non-Indigenous artists who worked on 'Salwata', told me she was responsible for making the flowers, which are on the shore and adorn the hair of Erub women.

There was only one painting on display at *Embassy of Spirits*, and it echoed the richly hued tropical oil paintings of Henri Rousseau.

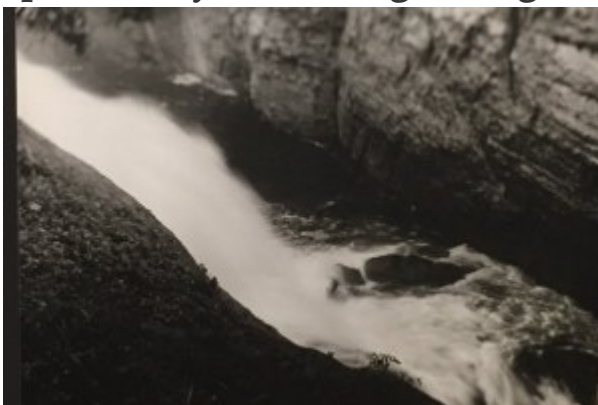
Filipino artist Rodel Tapaya's 'Do You Have A Rooster, Pedro?' is a very large canvas depicting a rural scene disrupted by soldiers with bird heads and instruments of war.

Tapaya looks beyond the Catholic-Muslim dimension of the conflict that has affected his country for the last three decades, and employs the age-old folk tales of his culture to convey universal themes of tribe against tribe and the consequences of war. Although a tribute to the spiritual inspirations of culture and art, *Embassy of Spirits* never ascends strictly into the 'otherworldly' domain, but remains grounded in the social and political forces that challenge us to find meaning in adversity.

Indeed, the artistic director of Sydney's 20th Biennale, Stephanie Rosenthal, underlined this when she described the artists' approach: 'They wouldn't question how contemporary art deals with spirituality, was that they were interested in certain things, which I then realised related to the negotiation of religion, the role of religion, the role of spirituality in the beginning of the 21st century.'



IMAGE: DO YOU HAVE A ROOSTER PEDRO? BY RODEL TAPAYA
RN/ RACHAEL KOHN



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