

Sam Small: full house

Sarab Minney

In her solo exhibition *Open Inspection* at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia (CACSA), Sam Small subverted the contemporary art gallery. She took away its name, re-established its context and altered audience preconceptions, almost to a point of deception. The first indication was the signage. CACSA is an old villa, complete with return verandah and shrubby front garden. The large suave, brushed steel sign placed asymmetrically on the fence is the only outside element differentiating it from other houses on its street. Small replaced the CACSA sign with a large bold one, akin to that of the real estate industry, that reads:

OPEN INSPECTION

—Character Bluestone Villa—

Superbly located and retaining all its period charm, this unique exhibition home comprises 4 main rooms... (etc)

A similar advertisement was placed in the weekend real estate pages of the local paper. The effect was remarkable. People came in droves to have a peek into someone else's home. Suddenly the contemporary art gallery had currency—as real estate. Small was playing with fire. Politically she was confronting the ongoing and still unanswered problem of Australia's limited contemporary art audience. Socially she was pushing at the edges of

acceptable public and private information.

Personally she was confronting an unsuspecting audience with their preconceptions. Artistically she was establishing her own work in direct competition with the architecture and real estate value of the gallery building.

So people came, driving up in their shiny cars, some with children in tow. Most, I am told, stayed to look. I wonder what they were looking at—the “ornate lofty ceilings” or the “original timber floors”? However, getting people along was only the first step in a marketing campaign; the next was having an appealing product. Inside, Small's installation was not bright and shiny. It stood in great contrast to the bold sign out the front, and the slick advertisement in the paper. Hers was not a contemporary art marketing campaign, rather a playful and insightful exploration into notions surrounding public and private spheres.

In the first 2 galleries were 2 miniature partly built houses on stilts, far too high for anyone to see through the windows, although a warm yellow light emanating from inside the buildings was enticing. In the third gallery a pile of carpets blocked the entire entrance. This was an intriguing piece, not only because it made me wonder how Small managed to do it, but also because it took a little while to work out what it was. Suddenly I realised I was looking at cross-sections—of houses, of carpets. Everyday things that I don't see because

I don't ever look at them from Small's point of view. The carpets, now vertical, had lost their role as protectors of the bare foot from the hard horizontal.

Tucked away in the back gallery, was the most perverse work. Small had gone through the Adelaide white pages and systematically documented every residence listed under the name of Jones, and displayed a photo of each house and marking its street address on a poster-like street directory of Adelaide. This was more than just a play on the adage 'keeping up with the Joneses.' It was a thorough, organised and premeditated travesty of public information. At last we got our peek into the private domain, but by a very public means. Hopefully the irony of displaying very personal information from a public book in a public gallery was not lost on the visitors hoping to get a look into somebody else's home.

The most impressive part of Small's exhibition was the constant traffic. Her work became a performance without the artist being present. Watching people confidently approach the gallery as though entering someone's home was fascinating, even without the knowledge that at some point it was going to become obvious to them this was not an open inspection. And then there was the awkwardness, the shared awareness of having been tricked, and the resulting discomfort. Sam Small's installation was not easy, but very clever.

Open Inspection, Sam Small, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, July 7-29

Sarab Minney is an Adelaide based writer and experimental installation and performance artist. Most recently she has performed and exhibited in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

