

INDOMITE

LEONARDO ORTEGA

A U S T R A L I A - C H I L E

'Aesthetics of survival'

One could ask what aesthetics has to do with survival? When a friend recently moved into my house for a brief stay I discovered how much my survival, as an artist, depended on my aesthetic environment. It felt painful to have my aesthetic disrupted by things that seemed unattractive to me. I was unable to explain why it was so important to have things look a certain way. As a non-Indigenous Australian I relate this to my experience of place and realise how different it is to an Indigenous experience. I view my environment. Leonardo Ortega's work explores the distinction between a European perspective and an Indigenous perspective.

The notion of an Indigenous 'view of the world', as a specific and unique perspective, is an element that is being revealed through the investigations of the South Project. In a simplified way it comes down to a relationship to land that is beyond land as real estate. It is about land as 'self', something more than a quasi spiritual, sometimes 'new age' metaphor.

As we begin to understand more about gene technology we are learning that we can be genetically connected to many things. Indigenous people in Australia are faced with health problems that should shame any first world country with a federal health care system. But when you consider that Indigenous Australians have lived in countries on this continent, living in one place for over 2000 generations, you begin to understand that their 'health system' was defined by their genetic connection to and reliance on, the land. Their food was their medicine. When someone had a symptom they ate the right food to deal with that symptom - this was part of lore, story, custom and culture. When Europeans travelled to the other side of the globe they suffered without access to their natural medicines. Their plants and animals were at odds with this new land. When they moved Indigenous peoples off their land in a belief that they weren't using the resources, they deprived them of their natural medicines. Culture, land and language were all lost with disastrous consequences. In this context the aesthetics of survival has a very different meaning. So, perhaps aesthetics from an Indigenous perspective is more about 'being' rather than 'seeing'. Given my ancestral history on this land is at most 5 generations I consider my relationship to the land as necessarily superficial. This connection, is like a leaf's connection to a tree. The tree is rooted into the ground and draws its very sustenance from the earth. It is through the process of growth; the falling of leaves, the rotting, the feeding of the earth, that the leaf, becomes part of the tree and the land. There have been many dialogues about identity amongst non-Indigenous Australian artists. But I wonder why we are so perplexed by our 'identity' if we know where we come from? Perhaps it is because we don't. Our heritage has been stunted by colonialism. The technology that allowed us to move about the globe robbed us of that heritage.

Ortega's work is about more than the environment, it is about a value system that is ancient and has survived through aesthetics with the aid of culture. It is through dance, song story, painting, and rituals, both everyday and spiritual, that these values have survived in cultures all over the world. This value system can be seen as a politics of the aesthetic - an aesthetics concerned with the being of human being. When things look right and feel right at the level of survival we are at one with the planet and ourselves. Ortega is in search of an old wisdom, but he is wise enough to realise that wisdom is not necessarily old, it exists in a contemporary form in many Indigenous cultures across the planet. In his work he warns us to ignore it at our peril. He represents the Indigenous with plants as a way to deconstruct and demystify the 'noble savage syndrome' and point to another logic that exists independent of the rational Cartesian model of the world. A logic that is sustained by the land.

Dr Megan Evans | Melbourne based artist, writer and curator.

An invitation for dialogue is posed. The response is received with a series of open-ended questions. What is it to be in the south? Can we reconcile who we are with where we are? A dialectic emerges layered in mistranslations with good intentions. This is how the south-south journey begins. Formats are presented and networks are informed. The word is disseminated and the exchange is established. What is not anticipated is the collaboration and ongoing relationships that are naturally born.

South Project, Galería Metropolitana, Monash University, Leonardo Ortega, Ocular Lab and many more become the characters in this narrative. As our gaze shifts towards the other side of the Pacific Ocean for the next South Gathering in Santiago, Chile, Leonardo Ortega reminds us of the connectivity of history, struggle and upliftment between our countries. We thank you, Leo, for bringing a local Latin American perspective closer to our shores. May we reciprocate in October 2006.

Magdalena Moreno | South Project Manager

www.southproject.org 

EXHIBITION DETAILS

16 May - 24 June 2006 | Opening 17 May 5pm - 7pm

Runt Space - Rn1.21

Department of Fine Arts

Building D, Faculty of Art & Design

Monash University Caulfield Campus

900 Dandenong Road, Caulfield East 3145

Gallery Hours 10am - 5pm Mon - Fri only



The South Project at Monash University

Leonardo Ortega is the third South artist to work at Monash. Like his predecessors Gregor Kregar and Marie Strauss, Leonardo has contributed to the interest and diversity of our academic program, building professional links with staff and research students, and integrating his activities into the broader context of the Faculty of Art and Design.

The interests and ideas he has contributed have been a vital aspect of the teaching and particularly the research program, which form the core of our academic activities.

The opportunity to have artists from diverse places around the world, with fresh ideas, values, cultural experiences, skills and a differing knowledge base, inevitably enriches the faculty's academic range. Our visiting artists are always prized for the inspiration and creativity they provide. The three South artists have brought individual perspectives, original perceptions and fresh concepts; the basis for their own art has become the motivation for interesting and varied creative experiments across the student body, bringing the resources of a global art world a step closer to the student experience. Both undergraduate students and higher degree candidates have had the chance to interact with professionals selected for the interest and quality of their work.

The South Project has brought the creative resources of the Faculty of Art and Design and Craft Victoria into a partnership which celebrates and supports artistic talent and educational achievement, a partnership of which the faculty is proud to be a continuing part.

Bernard Hoffert | Associate Dean, External, Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University

Artist Acknowledgements

This artwork is my dream, but it wouldn't be possible without the help of many people in different ways. In the first place, I would like to thank you to the South Project and Monash University for giving me the opportunity to come to Australia to develop this dream and to be able to walk my path of learning in this land and to DIRAC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Chile) for their support.

In Chile: To my family for believing in me and giving me their support and help. To Juan Castillo and Claudia Zaldívar, Emilio Lamarca and HE Mr Conroy. To Luis Alarcón and Ana María Saavedra (Galería Metropolitana) for their constant trust in my work and a very special thanks to my friend Pablo Forno.

In Australia: It is very difficult to express my gratitude to many people who have helped me here and have made me feel at home. Firstly, to Magdalena Moreno for her invaluable support and advice. To the Blamey family as well as Vivienne Web and Keith Munro at the MCA in Sydney and to the Community Centre and the Health Service at Redfern. To the staff and students at Monash Caulfield, in particular Andrew Iacuone. To Tom Nicholson, Clare Land, Ash Keating and Christian Thompson and a very special thanks to Cate Consandine for her constant support and advice. To Mick Dodson at ANU. To the people at the Central Land Council in Alice Springs and the aboriginal mobs in the streets, they trusted me and showed me their lives, especially to Susan Nakamarra White, Janie Brown and Wayne Murray. To Bess and Dave Price, the Pumani family in Mimili and Iris Harvey. To Caama Radio, Steve Priestly (Tangentere Nursery), Vincent Forrester (Desert Park), Nganampa Health Council, and a very special thanks to Wiriya Sati, without her trust, help and support, the very core of this project wouldn't be possible.

I can not acknowledge everyone. To all those that have helped the project along the way, thank you!

