

# Contempora

<Education Resource>

<Fiona Hall>

<Ricky Swallow>

<Aleks Danko>



# Contemporas to Contemporas Fellow

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In 1996 the Victorian Government established the Contemporas program with the aim of fostering and promoting contemporary art practice in Australia. The Contemporas exhibitions were developed from an invitational prize in which five participating artists were selected and a winner nominated. In the first of these exhibitions held in 1997, Fiona Hall received the award. The winner of the second Contemporas award in 1999 was Ricky Swallow. The third Contemporas event – the inaugural Contemporas Fellowship – incorporates the NGV's strategic vision: to bring art and people together. This vision establishes the contexts through which the NGV works to broaden its audiences and outreach programs. The Contemporas Fellowship comprises an intellectual residency of two years and a touring exhibition of new work produced by the Fellow during this time.

In July 2002, Victorian artist Aleks Danko was announced as the recipient of the first Contemporas Fellowship. Danko's two-year residency with the NGV culminates in the exhibition *SONGS OF AUSTRALIA VOLUME 16 – SHHH, GO BACK TO SLEEP (an un-Australian dob-in mix)* which builds on his *Songs of Australia* series. The exhibition opened at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia and tours to Bendigo Art Gallery and Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery.

This resource gives a brief background to the two former Contemporas winners Fiona Hall and Ricky Swallow and profiles the current Contemporas Fellow Aleks Danko. It also raises issues and topics for discussion which are relevant to studies of Art, English and Politics and to dialogues concerning the nature of art competitions.

#### IMAGES L-R

##### Fiona Hall

born Australia 1953

*Dead in the water*

1999 (detail)

polyvinyl chloride, glass beads,  
silver wire, glass, wood and  
transparent synthetic  
polymer resin  
106.2 x 129.1 x 129.2 cm  
(installation)

Purchased, 1999.

National Gallery of Victoria

© Courtesy of the artist

##### Ricky Swallow

born Australia 1974

*Model for a sunken monument*

1999 (detail)

synthetic polymer paint on  
composition board  
108.2 x 222.0 x 242.2 cm  
(overall)

Purchased through The Art  
Foundation of Victoria with  
the assistance of the Joan  
Clemenger Endowment,  
Governor, 1999.

National Gallery of Victoria

© Courtesy of the artist and

Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.

##### Aleks Danko

born Australia 1954

*SONGS OF AUSTRALIA*

*VOLUME 16: SHHH,*

*GO BACK TO SLEEP*

*(an un-Australian dob-in mix)*

2003 (detail)

ink and pencil on paper, stained  
plywood, sound recording,  
lighting, acrylic, vinyl  
(installation, dimensions variable)

# Fiona Hall

Fiona Hall makes works which are enticing, desirable and provocative, encouraging the viewer to unravel layers of beauty, wit, political innuendo and serious agendas. She was born in Sydney in 1953 and studied painting at the National Art School in Sydney between 1972 and 1975. In 1982, she was awarded a Master of Fine Arts Photography from the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. During her career Hall has worked as a practising artist and lecturer, and for short periods as an Artist in Residence at the Tasmanian School of Art in 1981 and the Phillip Institute of Technology, Preston, Victoria in 1990. Hall has had numerous individual exhibitions and her work has been included in significant group exhibitions both in Australia and overseas. Her work is widely represented in major state and regional galleries across Australia.

Fiona Hall believes that winning the inaugural Contemporar5 art prize in 1997 with her work *Give a dog a bone* provided her with the impetus to abandon the financial security of her teaching position and take off on her own as a full-time artist. Whilst she realised this was a gamble due to the unpredictable nature of sales in the art world, she has since appreciated the freedom both to focus exclusively on her art practice and to travel.

Hall concedes that the difficult aspect of competitions for an artist is that they involve putting one's ego on the line, but she enters them if they have the potential to make a difference to what she can achieve as an artist. She is realistic about art competitions, emphasising the elements of luck and the subjective nature of judging, whilst acknowledging that what's great today might not be considered so great in 50 years' time.

Hall, like many creative people, has a wide spectrum of interests which inform her work. The influences on her art practice have changed as her life has unfolded and revealed the world as more complex than she had imagined. Literature and aspects of science were key influences in her early career and she has an endless fascination for natural history, particularly botany. Ideas reflecting various forms of friction in the world, and social and environmental politics, now play an increasingly important role.

Hall possesses extraordinary art making skills and has mastered multiple practices including photography, beading, installation, painting, collage and ceramics. Unlike some other contemporary artists including Aleks Danko, who collaborate with specialists, she makes all of her own works. This allows her to make spontaneous decisions as the project evolves from her initial idea and chosen material. An exception to this was

her design for *The fern garden*, 1998, at the National Gallery of Australia, which involved working with expert engineers and a blacksmith, an experience she enjoyed immensely. Apart from this freedom to alter the work during production, Hall finds it intensely satisfying to become totally proficient in a skill before moving on to the next project.

A defining element of Hall's work is her imaginative transformation of everyday, often dispensable objects, such as sardine cans, bank notes and video tapes, into metaphors for agendas in life, whereby the material and the conceptual aspect of the work are melded. Whilst these material objects often metamorphose into items of exquisite beauty, they remain utilitarian and yet transcend their function by becoming signifiers, offering different ways of looking at the world.

Hall feels fortunate that her work is shown at the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Gallery of Australia, but tries hard to bring her work to a wider audience through a diverse range of outlets. She believes that displaying her work in contexts outside the art gallery is desirable – a natural history museum or supermarket, for example, could be interesting venues providing they made appropriate connections with the work.

Hall argues that although contemporary art can't change the face of the planet enormously, it should be challenging and encourage the viewer to think about issues they haven't considered before, sometimes resulting in a change of attitude.

**TEXT**

Susie May in discussion  
with Fiona Hall

**IMAGES**

*Miwulngini (Ngan'gikurunggurr) /*

*Nelumbo nucifera / lotus*

aluminium & tin

24.6 x 12.1 x 3.6 cm

*Vuyu wiri (Adna-mat-na) /*

*Craspedia uniflora /*

*billy's buttons*

aluminium & tin

24.5 x 14.8 x 5.0 cm

*Wuuloitch (Tjapwurong) /*

*Themeda australis /*

*kangaroo grass*

aluminium & tin

24.8 x 16.1 x 4.2 cm

from the series

*Paradisus Terrestris Entitled*

1996

Purchased through The Art

Foundation of Victoria with the

assistance of the Rudy Komon

Fund, Governor, 1997.

National Gallery of Victoria

© Courtesy of the artist

*Dead in the water*

1999

polyvinyl chloride, glass beads,

silver wire, glass, wood and

transparent synthetic polymer

resin

106.2 x 129.1 x 129.2 cm

(installation)

Purchased, 1999.

National Gallery of Victoria

© Courtesy of the artist





# Ricky Swallow

Ricky Swallow's finely crafted models blend images of popular culture, fantasy and scientific wonder, trapped in time and caught in a quiet stillness. A melting mask of Darth Vader frozen in motion, an isolated and eroded miniature monument of Sir Roy Ground's National Gallery of Victoria, and tables spread with specimens of manufactured marine life, all have a place in Swallow's surreal world.

Ricky Swallow was born in 1974 in San Remo, Victoria. As a child, he recalls frequently drawing and making things. This led him to Melbourne to undertake tertiary studies in drawing at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) between 1994 and 1997. He was the 1999 recipient of the Contempora5 award, and now lives and works in Los Angeles.

Swallow maintains that his training in drawing at the VCA has had little influence on his sculptural work. Instead, his drawing practice remains separate from his sculptural work. For Swallow, drawing provides a place of escape at the completion of a sculpture, or a way to capture things of interest whilst travelling and visiting museums.

Swallow's replicas of everyday objects use a variety of media including cardboard, resins, plumbing pipes and rubber. Great technical skill, craftsmanship and lengthy periods of time are required for his art-making process. Swallow believes it is important to craft his own work, rather than allowing technicians to produce his ideas. He considers that the process of crafting or replicating something requires a responsibility to continually re-treat or re-consider original forms again and again. Swallow asserts that making is a way to remain

occupied, to mark time and maintain a sense of artistry behind the works.

Swallow is fascinated by the way in which museums and galleries present knowledge. In preparing his own work for exhibition, the context in which it is displayed is carefully considered. The relationship between his work and the exhibition space aids interpretation and contributes to the mood. His latest exhibition *Killing time*, at Darren Knight Gallery in Sydney (24 February – 20 March 2004), presents a still-life carving of all the fish and marine creatures he has caught. It has been presented in isolation, spot lit against salon-style painted walls like a museum setting. He has designed this setting to allow the viewer the kind of meditation the piece commands.



Winning the Contemporar5 prize has had positive and negative outcomes for Swallow. It has allowed him to travel and continue making ambitious works without the financial pressure of having to do other jobs. However, he finds that his high profile and reputation as a significant Australian contemporary artist can at times be frustratingly indelible.

Swallow believes that the idea of prizes and competitions seems a little foreign to the art industry; however he suggests that artists are secretly quite competitive. He argues that art prizes and competitions are important as they create a form of hype that brings art to the general public. This promotes awareness and encourages opportunities for society to engage with the issues and concerns of contemporary life, reflected in the practice of the artists of our time.

**TEXT**

Heather Whitely  
in discussion with Ricky Swallow

**IMAGE**

*Killing time*  
2003–2004  
Laminated jelutong, maple  
108 x 184 x 118 cm (irregular)  
© Courtesy of the artist and  
Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney





# Aleks Danko

Aleks Danko was born in Adelaide in 1950 and studied at the South Australian School of Art between 1967 and 1970. Since then he has had 35 solo exhibitions and been included in numerous exhibitions in Australia and overseas. His work is represented in all major state and regional galleries in Australia.

When approaching Aleks Danko's latest installation *SONGS OF AUSTRALIA VOLUME 16 – SHHH, GO BACK TO SLEEP (an un-Australian dob-in mix)*, 2004, we are immediately confronted by a range of challenging sights and sounds. As we enter a protected inner courtyard, we find a black constructed house with six windows on each side, sitting comfortably between four high walls. The walls are covered with more than a hundred paintings of small red houses, with hand-painted slogan-like texts on each. The paintings resemble a cross between newspaper headlines and political posters. From inside the

black house, light flashes on and off and the pre-recorded voice of Australia's voiceover 'king' Robbie McGregor reads each visual text in a smooth, comforting voice.

*SONGS OF AUSTRALIA VOLUME 16* is the culmination of a cycle of work completed by Aleks Danko between 1996 and 2004, and is also the culmination of his two-year Contempora Fellowship at the National Gallery of Victoria. The work is unashamedly political and, like the Volumes which preceded it, draws our attention to some of the most important political, social and cultural issues of our times, including immigration, terrorism, reconciliation and environmental concerns. Each issue is presented through a variety of everyday symbols (the suburban house in particular) and with a healthy dose of irony, wit, satire and pun.

Danko's previous work in this series has included installations, site-specific projects, live art interventions, public commissions and collaborative art. The present exhibit embodies the disciplines of sculpture, architecture, painting, drawing and theatre. Danko is involved in the design and construction of all of these aspects and yet respects the greater technical knowledge of certain experts needed to finalise the project, such as carpenters, electricians and curators. He enjoys the politics of collaborative work, and was thus a perfect choice for the Contempora Fellowship, which requires a working dialogue to exist between the artist and other Gallery experts.

Danko believes that the present Contempora Fellowship is more democratic than the former system of one cash prize, and is also more productive for all parties concerned. Ideally he would like to see a system of art awards which give artists a choice of engaging in a variety of work-related placements like industrial settings and university faculties.

Installation art became popular in the early 1970s in Australia with the influence of such American artists as Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg and via the spirit of Kurt Schwitters (a great manipulator of texts), Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists of the Cabaret Voltaire. Danko talks of being inspired by these artists in particular, and by a similar anarchistic trend in British comedy which included such television shows as *The Frost Report* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

Finally, it is important to remember that Danko was born of migrant parents who came to Australia as refugees from war-torn Europe in 1948. In many ways he grew up in two cultures from the very beginning of his life. References to his childhood in suburban Adelaide are found in much of his work, reflecting some of the similarities and differences between the social and political landscape of Australia then and now. His background could also be seen as a major reason for his ongoing commitment to a questioning form of political art.

**TEXT**

Graham Parker  
in discussion with Aleks Danko

**IMAGE**

*SONGS OF AUSTRALIA*  
*VOLUME 16: SHHH,*  
*GO BACK TO SLEEP*  
*(an un-Australian dob-in mix)*  
2003  
ink and pencil on paper, stained  
plywood, sound recording,  
lighting, acrylic, vinyl  
installation, dimensions variable

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# Questions for consideration

- ◀ The recent works of Danko, Hall and Swallow are inspired by social, political and cultural issues of our time. Discuss how art can be a potent medium for expressing these issues.
- ◀ Do you think the works of these Contempora artists are only relevant to Australian society in a local context, or do they address international concerns?
- ◀ What are the advantages of artists presenting their ideas through a broad range of media and techniques?
- ◀ Do you think all aspects of the art-making process should be carried out by the artist, or is it acceptable for them to collaborate with expert technicians?
- ◀ How have artists in the past collaborated with others to complete their works?
- ◀ In what ways can art competitions benefit both the artist and the viewing public? Discuss the possible negative aspects of art competitions.
- ◀ Choose a work by one of the Contempora artists. Visually analyse the work from one of the following interpretive frameworks:
  - Culture
  - Gender
  - Historical context
  - Politics
  - Postmodernism
  - Psychoanalysis
  - Symbolism

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This education resource has been prepared by Graham Parker, Susie May, Michael Nichols and Heather Whitely, Education Officers, with the assistance of Paula Lindley, Senior Education Officer, National Gallery of Victoria.

Special thanks to Aleks Danko, Fiona Hall and Ricky Swallow for their contribution, and to Darren Knight Gallery for their helpful assistance.

#### DESIGN

NGV Graphic Design

#### PHOTOGRAPHY

NGV Photographic Services  
(except *Killing time*)