



CAST AWAY

Mathieu Gallois' installation floats in the gallery space like a dream. It is based around the concept of illusion - entirely apt given Gallois' history as a special effects model maker at Sydney's Fox Studios.

The work consists of a 'set' - a generic desert oasis complete with a plushly decorated tent, palm trees and sand. This vignette sits upon a large stage-like platform with a curving back.

After documenting the work in the guise of a 'regular' film set, Gallois painted the entire scene in Chroma Key blue. Chroma Key (or 'bluescreen') is a film compositing tool that enables the superimposition of objects and actors in the studio into a separately-filmed background scene. Because of its monochromatic hue, if Gallois' installation was filmed using this process, the entire installation would be replaced by the input feed (normally the background) and conceivably disappear. This is an efficient metaphor for the idea of the desert oasis as a mirage.

The production of believable special effects in cinema increasingly rely upon the use of expensive new digital technologies. This includes the creation of digitally created environments and weather conditions as well as creatures and actors: witness the *Jurassic Park* films, or the latest instalments in the *Star Wars* saga. Digital technology can create a convincing 'fantasy' reality (like a city in outer space), or an extreme, but terrestrial reality (a tidal wave or tornado). It allows the simulation of realities far removed from our current physical experience of the world. The Rome of *Gladiator* looks uncannily like the desert planet Tatooine in *The Phantom Menace*. The only difference is a symbolic leap.

The forthcoming movie *Pearl Harbor*, costs US\$130 million. In addition to digital special effects it uses real warships, and real 1940s bombers to create a convincing simulation of the physical environment during the Japanese attack on the US Navy base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in 1941. It seems to record on camera something physically present.

Gallois' works have, so far, been characterised by a certain ambition of execution, and tread a thin line between real things and their screen-based equivalent. He has exhibited as art a working *Wheel of Fortune* quiz board; he has employed Rod Quantock to re-create his *Captain Snooze* character in a performance work. Perhaps most startlingly, Gallois built a new project home from sparkling white styrofoam and situated it on a housing lot in a new estate in Sydney's south.

These works point to the paradoxical distance and proximity to the physical experience of the world that contemporary cinema produces, and the psychological effects that this might induce. Commentators have suggested that the crash of the FedEx plane and its crew into the Pacific Ocean in *Cast Away* is frighteningly realistic. I thought the attack by giant alien arachnids in *Starship Troopers* was pretty convincing too.

Chris Chapman

OASIS ONANISME

Back in 1998, at a new housing estate on the outskirts of Sydney's urban sprawl, Mathieu Gallois used polystyrene sheeting to construct an exact copy of a solid brick house which existed two hundred metres away from his installation site. Titled *Frontier*, this shiny shell of domesticity had an eerie presence. The house shimmered with the same newness as the freshly laid maze of suburban streets that circled the site, but it also had a certain obsolescent or even tardy quality, as though it was just the discarded packing foam from a real dwelling. Surrounded by empty plots of land, that were punctuated with "For Sale" signs, palettes of building materials and surveyor's pegs, *Frontier* was suspended in nowhere land.

Was *Frontier* a celebration of Australia's suburban settlers and their humble hopes for the future, or was it a critique of home ownership and late capitalist colonisation of the landscape? Was it an effigy of authentic Australia, or was it a harsh commentary on consumer culture? When I asked Gallois these kinds of questions he offered me evasive answers and uncertain smiles. In the end, I guess he wasn't trying to make a point or take up a position. Instead, he was using vernacular motifs of marginal existence to evoke a general sense of ambient alienation.

More recently, in a work titled *Flight 934-B*, Gallois has effected a similar mood of detached suspension by photographing the passengers on a transcontinental aeroplane. His portraits of the people travelling on this particular flight were ultimately arranged on the gallery wall according to the seating plan of the Boeing 747, recording each individual with an attentive snap shot but diluting their individuality within the regimented allotments of the aircraft. In the same way that diverse aspirations and desires are seemingly homogenised in suburban streets of identical houses, the aeroplane brings together different lives on different trajectories and suspends them in a non-space where dusk and dawn follow each other in a seamless cycle of twilight.

The current exhibition, *Flesh*, is perhaps the purest manifestation of Gallois' subconscious concern with alienation and suspension to date. While *Frontier* and *Flight 934-B* flirted with themes such as suburban marginality and supermodern speed (themes which have been extensively discussed by recent cultural theory) *Flesh* offers the viewer a simple fantasy in the form of an Arabian tent by an oasis. As the cliché of cartoons and constructed film sets, this scene would shimmer as a mirage or glisten with *frisson*, but Gallois has cooled the tableau of temptation down by completely coating it in dusky blue paint.

Because blue is the complimentary colour of flesh tone (a principle that makes it the favoured background hue in Chroma Key special effects), Gallois' *mise en scene* floats in a space that seems ambivalent to human life. As much as the content of the installation might promise titillating possibilities, the stage set withdraws from the viewer, quietly folding in on itself. Once again, it is not so much a pointed criticism or analytical position that underlies this work and determines its meaning. Instead, Gallois has created an ambient sense of alienation which functions as a pure block of sensation.

Stephen Zagala O'Connell



Mathieu Gallois

Flesh

Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, South Australia

Mathieu Gallois' installation, *Flesh*, was shown at the Experimental Art Foundation from 1 February to 3 March 2001.

Image front cover: Mathieu Gallois, *Flesh*, 2001, Chroma Key paint, wood, aluminium, fabric, sand, trees. Installation view, Experimental Art Foundation. Photo: Michal Kluvaneck. Image, above: The work in progress, Installation view. Photo: Alan Cruickshank.

Mathieu Gallois: www.gallere.com.au/gallois

The work was created with the generous support of Bunnings Warehouse and Solver Paints, Adelaide.



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The Experimental Art Foundation is supported by the Commonwealth Government through the Visual Arts Craft Fund of the Australia Council and the South Australian Government through Arts SA.



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