

Contained

An exhibition by Cecile Williams

Entering the Central TAFE art gallery you pause on the step and look for the work only to find yourself drawn in for a much closer look. This is *Contained*, the latest body of work produced by Cecile Williams. Comprising a series of dioramas based on the experiences of the artist while on Christmas Island. Situated off the North West Australian coast, Christmas Island is known for its detention centre and having a diverse cultural population of 1500 residents.

Working as an arts project officer and theatre and costume designer exposed Cecile to the islands rich history and cultural diversity along with its unique ecology. It was while exploring the Greta beach coastline, which is bombarded with plastic waste carried down by ocean currents from South East Asia, *Contained* was conceptualised.

The beach amassed in waste has a major impact on the breeding cycles of the Hermit and Marine turtles which rely on this environment as their major nesting ground. For Cecile it provided an enormous source of found materials. Among these, a clear sealed container enclosing a rolled up piece of paper was discovered. Removing the paper revealed Arabic script and a beautiful sketch of a fish which Cecile had translated at the local Mosque. The message was a good luck charm wishing an Indonesian fisherman a safe passage at sea. Drawing inspiration from the Arabic message alongside washed up plastic toys, toothbrushes, combs, figurines, thongs and assorted other waste, Cecile collected materials and built on the ideas of containment from personal relationships experienced with the local people.

Found materials were sourced at low tide and painstakingly washed, dried and sorted ready for use. Utilising the island history Cecile used these materials to retell the stories shared by the local community. Meticulously working, Cecile cut fine detail into discarded thong bases exposing the underlying layers and colours to illustrate a story. Cable ties are used to join all sections of the dioramas but are closely trimmed to resemble the neat stitching of a beautifully finished garment. The execution of minute detail has a powerful presence drawing the viewer in closely to read the

work. All dioramas are scaled down to resemble miniature scenes framed using commercial plastic containers which have windows cut into them for viewing. The overall presentation resembles individual theatrical stage sets, reflecting Mosques, Temples and shrines which have been simply lit to emphasise the narrative. Colour has also been kept to a minimum which further leads to fewer distractions keeping the viewer focused on the story within. Subtly placed on the floor within the gallery, between the large glass windows and the internal ramp, a collection of flotsam and jetsam have been placed to echo the littered shoreline of Greta beach. Stacked simply in sets and laid out in a single line the dioramas project an uncluttered exhibition allowing the viewer to experience each strong narrative.

The use of the TAFE gallery as a venue for this exhibition, I believe, disadvantaged the body of work. The nature of the dioramas as such intimate, diminutive pieces meant that they were lost in the openness of the TAFE gallery space. I feel the pieces would have worked more successfully in smaller individual rooms, given that each diorama conveyed its own narrative. This use of smaller rooms would have emphasised the detailing of the pieces rather than their being overwhelmed by the coldness of this larger space. It also would have provided an opportunity for better lighting to highlight the work. However the placement of flotsam and jetsam on the floor of the gallery enabled an immediate connection by the viewer to the origins of the concept and to the exhibiting body of work.

Cecile Williams' exhibition *Contained* has been executed with meticulous detail, using discarded plastic waste which once embodied specific memories from past experiences, and has now been given a new life imbued with social and cultural resonance.