

# Home & away

Over the past four years Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro have secured a string of traveling scholarships and overseas residencies that has allowed them to produce work from Sydney to Basel and from Japan to Nepal. **Edward Colless** tracked them down in Berlin and found a couple of nomads who admit to being just a bit homesick. Although for them, home is where the art is. Photography by **Stephen Oxenbury**.







harbourside Artspace gallery in Woolloomooloo. The impenetrably dense rectangular stack of planks, beams, metal sheets and bricks of *The Cordial Home Project* occupied the bare gallery space the way a massive sarcophagus squats in a sombre crypt, as if the matter of the house had been saved from disappearance and dispersal by being collapsed and compressed like a neutron star into its own tomb.

The jpeg provides a striking analogy for the sort of reduction that happens in both these cases, although the transport of the house and the caravan (along with the latter's ironic narrative of immobility) are along a one-way street. There is a trade off: to price their own work the artists had the house revalued by an estate agent who suggested that, while the materials were worth nothing, the site on which they sat as an artwork was worth almost a million dollars. But just as there's no value in buying such a work at that price, unless you're buying the land it occupies, there's no unpacking of this material that will return its original form. No return to form, and no redemption or resurrection. The original is decomposed and then recombined as a new value-added object but which, like the shredded human brain or nervous system in a cyborg, flickers with disconnected lingering sensations and spasmodic residual memories of its former life. If you believe in ghosts you may want to treat *The Cordial Home Project* and *Flatpack* with caution.

Perhaps with this sort of intuition in mind, Cordeiro and Healy's work has often drawn comparison with that of **Rachel Whiteread**, who is famous for her monumental casts of the empty interior space of domestic rooms. Whiteread used the doomed fabric of derelict buildings – walls, ceiling, floor

*They use their own nomadism for the subject as well as the substance of their art.*

This page: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *flatpack*, 2006. Entire caravan, euro pallets. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.

Opposite page top and bottom: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *flatpack*, 2006. Entire caravan, euro pallets. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.





Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *Package Tour*, 2003. Photographed by Liz Ham, Lambda print, 105 x 144cm, (framed), edition of 10. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.

– as formwork or moulds and then, when the cast was set, would flay this material from it like a dead skin or husk to reveal the ghostly negative of the space it had contained. However, the mute melancholy tone of these memorials to lost spaces, these fortifications of the void, is quite opposed to the exuberant humour with which Cordeiro and Healy displace and reconfigure their signs of transient occupation. *Deceased Estate*, for instance, is a pile of all the miscellaneous disused furniture, homewares and art materials that the artists found in a warehouse studio they squatted in, two years ago in Germany. True, the title invokes the solemn sentiment of custodial duty to an inheritance – even if that’s the passing on of junk and litter from previous occupants. But tied up in a web of orange rope, this enormous cluster of dead leftovers is also a hilarious overstatement about good housekeeping and simultaneously, with a cruelly comic edge, is a caricature of the refugee family’s bundle of possessions stacked on the back of a truck or cart in the form of a monstrous spiky seed pod conveying the genetic code of its owners. This is black comedy, and it’s entwined in the ironic connotations of the caravan as well – on one hand as a luxury supplement to a comfortable middle class suburban household, and on the other identified with those who are dispossessed of homes or homelands: gypsies, circus troupes, the impoverished, exiled, expelled, the misfits. In a word, nomads.

But if nomadism is the fate of the outcast and the evicted, then there’s no piety or homesickness in Cordeiro and Healy’s image of it. Take the broadside joke of *Package Tour*, for Sydney’s Sculpture by the Sea program of 2004, in which a centurion tank – its phallic gun barrel haughtily erect – takes up



residency on impossibly expensive real estate, and settles in with *ad hoc* home extensions of a verandah, backyard barbecue and garden plots. It would take an army to force this illegal occupant to leave the territory it has hijacked. And yet, the domestication of the tank is as disconcerting as the mysterious photos found in the ruins of Kabul showing that city's former rulers, the violently pious Taliban warriors, decked in flowers and make-up. This tank on the headland is an ambiguous thing. It may be an obsolete command post overrun by those it once subjugated ... or defended. It may be the result of squatters taking over a war relic left by an enemy in flight. It could be a hallucination. Or it might be a trap.

Keep in mind that this tank – like *The Cordial Home Project* – is in effect the nomad artists' cheeky invasion and occupation of prime real estate, at least for the duration of the show. Art offers Cordeiro and Healy a temporary home. "We are the wasp," says Healy, "that implants its eggs in a host insect." And Cordeiro adds, "Our art is about spaces of transit, where you cross between territories, or between life and death." Being this kind of artist is to find oneself inhabiting a false world, not quite real but not fully fantasy, and to find ways of living in that in-between state. Perhaps like the couple in the fake log cabin kit home Cordeiro and Healy installed in Sydney's Martin Plaza in 2003. Swathed in a sexual embrace, they seem to ignore the dead stares of the stuffed animals crowding around them, just as they don't notice our envious gaze in at them from the business of the street outside. ■

Works by Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy will appear in a group exhibition titled *Strange Cargo* at Newcastle Region Art Gallery from 20 October to 3 December, 2006

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This page: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *Tollgate*, 2004. 2 Giclee prints, 38 x 46cm, edition of 10. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.

Opposite page top and bottom: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *Maintenance*, 2004. Photographed by Robert Firth, 3 Giclee prints, 71 x 94cm each, framed, edition of 10. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND GALLERY BARRY KELDOULIS, SYDNEY.

