Contemporary Art Quarterly | vol 27 no 2

Artlink

$13 aus $14 nz
$13 can $10 us

The South Issue: new horizons

contemporary art without frontiers

South Africa

South America

Australia

New Zealand

Juan Davila

Pat Hoffie

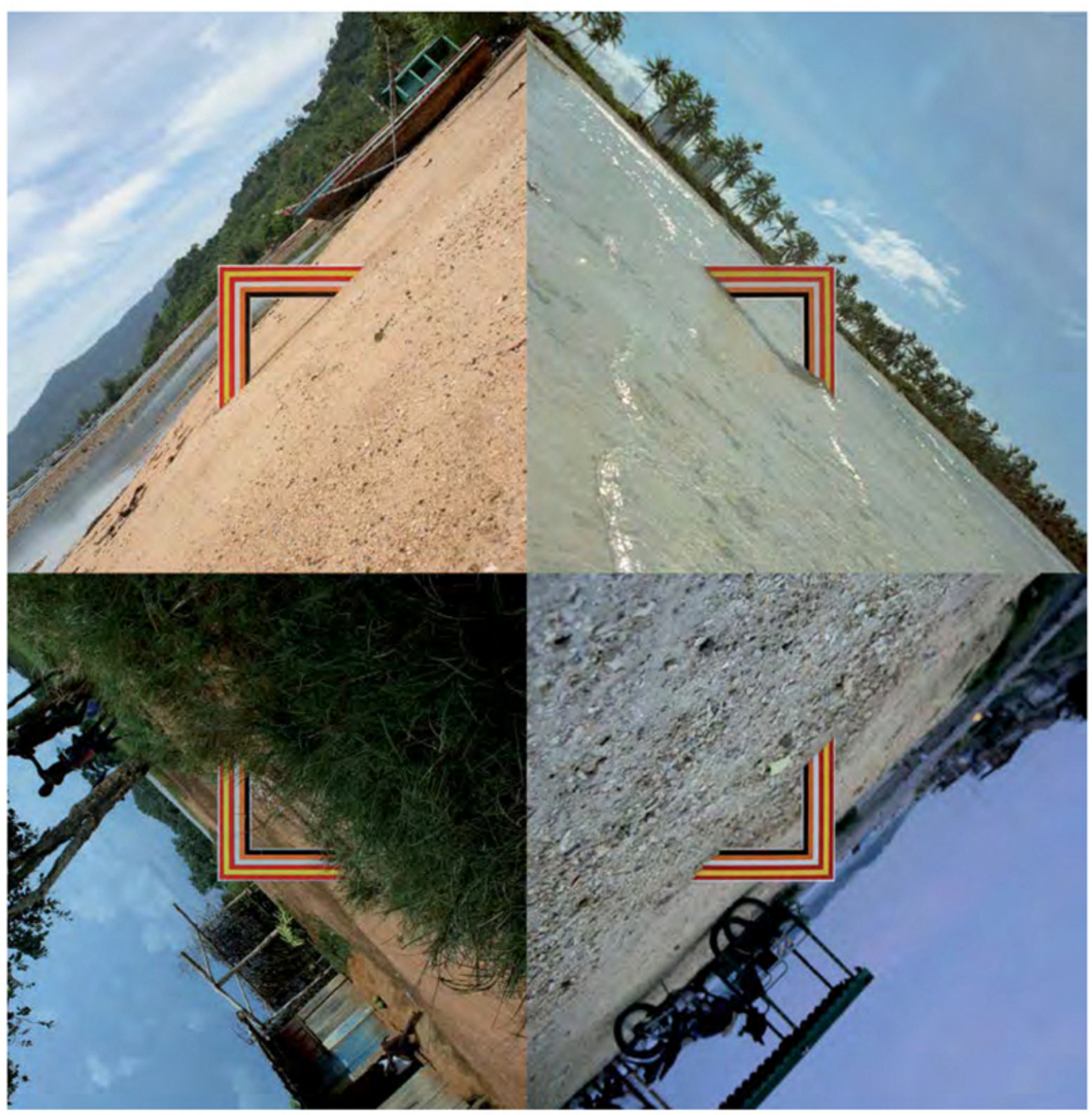
Jim Allen

Matthew Ngui

James Geurts

james geurts 90 degrees equatorial

ian hamilton



In certain configurations the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide can be an intimidating place for the uninitiated. It's not unlike entering a sacred shrine, with the white walls, often unadorned, adding to a sense of unease. In James Geurts' exhibition a narrow passageway, dimly lit, leads from the bookshop into the main gallery. There, on the floor, arranged in a line diagonally across the room are four square light boxes depicting scenes from four 'sites of interception'. Attention, however, is soon drawn away from these floor pieces to four large digital projections whose visual rhythms, combined with the harmonic hum of the accompanying sound sculpture (a collaboration with local sound artist Michael Yuen using frequencies from the projectors) induce an almost trance-like state.

James Geurts *90 Degrees Equatorial Project 2* 2007, transparency with lightbox, 90 x 90 cm, courtesy the artist.

Tearing myself away from these great pulsing fields of colour, with their hints of sixties colourfield paintings and surf coast flashiness, I returned to the light boxes and stood looking down. Lights flickered in the background as I stood ruminating on Geurts' remarkable journey to the four corners of the globe. Words and phrases from the artist's diaries, and the accompanying exhibition booklet, kept recurring: 'globe', 'corner', 'right angle', 'four corners of the globe'... There are no 'corners' in a globe yet, in a subtly ironic way, Geurts has managed to give this globe of ours four colourful corners. They stick out of the earth at each site as if emerging out of the very centre of the globe. One imagines this great square thing embedded, with just the tips sticking out of places. The world's largest sculpture! It's a neat idea.

The 'corners', smallish triangles of inner lit plastic in glossy stripes of red, yellow, white, orange and black, are depicted on the light boxes in their tropic settings. The way they are presented, as foreign objects in the landscape, raise questions about the way the 'west' relates to the wider world. Perceptions of time and space are challenged. I thought of Richard Long whose best work, as documented, always induced in me a sense of walking off into the mythic distance. I thought of Robert Smithson and his huge earthworks spiralling out into the unknown. Geurts' work, however, goes a step further; it takes in the whole globe. The scenes depicted in the light boxes are of sites on or near the sea and all are places at least one step removed from the sophisticated world of the artist and where his artificial 'construction' came from. In these settings the 'corners' are impositions, objects at odds with the everyday ebb and flow of life going on all around, reminders that the West continues to impose its will on even the most remote communities.

While this may be imagined as the world's biggest artwork Geurts applies the old adage, 'take only photos, leave only footprints', leaving nothing at the sites of interception. The photographs are taken away and transformed into pieces more appropriate for a western art gallery, things to be gazed upon by sophisticated western eyes in purpose-built galleries into which few of the 'general public' dare to venture.

Geurts could have made the 'corners' more ephemeral, even biodegradable, and left them on site to be subsumed by wind and tide. But that would have lessened the impact. We need to see that they were actually there as they are the core elements of this exhibition. The other works on display either spin off them, in the form of slide shows and found objects, or, in the case of the folding catalogue of drawings, lead to them. The latter, a small folding book of drawing and images on a ledge in one corner provide insight into the visual musings that predated the 'work'. The former, including the pulsating lights and the slide show with its almost nostalgic mechanical shutter noises are extensions on an idea.

Yet, on reflection, the light shows are just as important. They are about the way light expresses the day, reflecting the rhythms of tidal movement, the changing light of tropic regions reflecting off low land and water, with hints of nearby mountains and the moving patterns of life, of wildlife and nature, tamed and otherwise. For Geurts, a wandering surfer, these are felt things, as difficult to describe verbally as the feelings of being 'in the wave' or travelling in search of the perfect location for that wave. The rhythmic patterns of the lights and the harmonic pulses come close to this experience.

There is now a strong tradition of art that deals directly with nature, gathering information from a world that is constantly changing. It's not as old a tradition as, say, painting on canvas, but it is firmly established. It is an art that deals with experience, one that imposes no laws of human construct on the natural world (in the way that Renaissance painting via laws of perspective did) but, rather, responds to the moment, maybe to a particular place or time, one that leaves a sense that the world is not there for us to manipulate but, rather, to appreciate. In this way it represents a changing worldview, one at odds with, and antagonistic to Western notions of continual development and progress. James Geurts adds to this tradition.

Ian Hamilton is an artist, administrator and writer based in Adelaide

James Geurts *90 Degrees Equatorial Project 2* 2007, transparency with lightbox, 90 x 90 cm, courtesy the artist.