

A window to a new world

Dan Rule

Published: September 29, 2010 - 3:00AM

FROM our vantage, the trams and traffic and pedestrian flotsam and jetsam of Gertrude Street flash by as if on film. The late morning streetside is awash with commission flat corner kids, heavy-fringed fashion types, workers and wanderers; they shift in and out of frame.

Advertisement

Through headphones we listen to a soundscape of traffic and conversations and accents and languages; a din of intimate moments, giggles, debates, hollers and background noise.

Set inside the shopfront of Gertrude Street florist Mr Lincoln, artist and occasional practising dentist Sapna Chandu's new audiovisual installation, *Short Stories #1: Versions of Contemporary History*, is a "documentary in real time".

With the front window of the retail space performing the function of a screen, the work merges the live streetscape with a detailed world of field recordings and multi-accented conversations about Australia. A screen mounted to the ceiling, meanwhile, provides a laconic dialogue of subtitles.

"It's really about trying to highlight just how many different perspectives and different realities there are in contemporary Australia," says Chandu of the show, which runs as part of the Melbourne Fringe Festival.

"I'm interested in the various screens we view supposed reality through ... and kind of challenging our projection of cultural identity through the media."

As we watch people saunter by, Chandu's soundscape - which consists of a handful of vignettes recorded on local and international travels - gives a distinct impression of eavesdropping. We hear Australian travellers arguing over the validity of their *Lonely Planet* against the backdrop of a Hindu prayer call and ensuing thunderstorm; we meet an Indian puppeteer recalling his time living on the Gold Coast, doing a mean impression of an archetypal ocker accent in the process; we stumble in on a loose conversation about Germaine Greer and John Howard's contrasting public analysis of Steve Irwin's legacy.

It's a simple, but nonetheless eloquent, study of the vastly different cultural entity we, and others, understand Australia to be. "Each of the pieces address different points of view, so often there is a lot of tension between them," says the 34-year-old.

For Chandu, who exhibited as a photo-artist before moving into installation, working with sound provided the perfect medium for the project. "I think we're so over-stimulated visually these days that we forget to listen," she says. "Sound is just so immersive compared to a photograph. The experience becomes so fresh again; you can smell the atmosphere and the weight of the air.

"I was just travelling and recording and taking video, but when I got home and started compiling the material, I realised that the sound was just far more interesting and rich. It was able to capture such a different sense of perspective."

In this sense, the work's setting in culturally and socio-economically diverse Gertrude Street was no mistake. "It's a street that has such a deep history and has changed so much over time," says Chandu. "Even in its present context -

with the housing commission towers and the arty, fashionable, more elitist stuff on the other side of the road - you just have a huge amount of very different people who move through the one area. There's just such a huge disengagement from one side of the street to the other."

She hopes that her work can at least offer a point of reconnection. "Having the audience look back out onto the street is a way of trying to re-engage them with others," she offers.

"It's a way of trying to get people thinking about some of these different experiences and perspectives."

Short Stories #1: Versions of Contemporary History runs at Mr Lincoln, 2/102 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, until October 9. Free. melbournefringe.com.au / sapnachandu.net

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/a-window-to-a-new-world-20100928-15vxm.html>