

Fact or fiction?

VISUAL ARTS

New World Order
Venn Gallery
Review **Gemma Weston**

The term "International style" applies mainly to architecture but it can also be applied to art. Lacking in ornament, simple in composition and embracing concrete, glass and steel materials devoid of local reference, this style of architecture that developed in Europe and America in the 1920s and 30s eliminated local character. Its influence can be recognised globally, a world language of form with no single home.

Concurrently, a trend towards abstraction and design in painting and sculpture produced a similar "international" language of art. Internationalism can be simultaneously utopian and dystopian. A shared world language can bring people together, allowing communication and understanding across boundaries but it brings with it threats of totalitarianism and homogeneity, a flattening of difference and diversion.

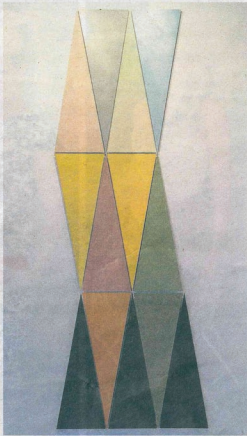
Tom Muller's New World Order works in this territory, bringing together works from three geopolitical perspectives with very similar formal languages and strategies. Muller, a WA artist of Swiss heritage, shares Venn's exhibition space with Yarra Vega, a Brooklyn-based Puerto Rican artist and Augustyn

Schwartzwald, born in Poland but working in Germany. Together, they approach a kind of contemporary International style based on reduction and abstraction.

The influences on each artist's practice are obscure as the sophisticated minimalism of the works absorbs any specific cultural references. The three groups of work share such a pointed interest in the relationship between industrial process, natural phenomena and mystical abstraction that New World Order could easily be a solo exhibition disguised by an elaborate fiction.

Muller's works explore the phenomena of light in three stages. A sleek grey tank of iridescent neon tetra fish wouldn't be out of place in a sci-fi nightclub. The glowing gas of Vertical Landscape, a sky-high neon tube emerging from a mound of marble chips, straddles the boundary between material and immaterial, suggesting a divine or supernatural occurrence. White Void, a wall painting and projection that is equal parts galaxy, waterfall and apparition, is a similarly mysterious form almost but not quite of this world.

Vega's geometric compositions are apparently drawn from Caribbean folklore but the dancing tessellations of sunset, sky and forest-coloured shapes suggest a heavily abstracted landscape rather than any narrative origins. Schwartzwald



also approaches abstraction from earthy beginnings. Cobalt I and II translate the structure of quartz crystal into forms reminiscent of brushstrokes but a Ben-Day dot effect further complicates the relationship between surface and process.

It is interesting to consider how three artists from diverse

**Landscape suggestions:
Yarra Vega's
Diamante del Norte.**

backgrounds can arrive at such similar projects and material resolutions. The increasing globalisation of the art "world", which thrives on the international biennale circuit and the art fair, with models that are as successful in Hong Kong as it is in Miami, could be responsible for the homogenising of contemporary art.

Or, it could be that the prioritising of European art history in international art schools means that the spectre of global modernism haunts us more than it should.

Another possibility is that Vega and Schwartzwald are invented personas, constructions of Muller's imagination. Their suspiciously vague biographies, which echo Muller's own so accurately, and their shared Muller-esque preference for aluminium-mounted paper lend this possibility some credence.

Entertaining this suspicion bends the reading of the work in surprising ways.

Such thoughts put to one side, the simple beauty and mystery of the exhibition complicates the more negative implications of global homogeneity. The idea might conjure up bad Esperanto or Big Mac vibes but the natural, rather than political, world lies at the centre of New World Order's aesthetic universe.

Muller, Vega and Schwartzwald each offer a sideways version of old science's search for singular truths in natural systems, a search in which consistency is a virtue rather than a vice.

New World Order is at Venn Gallery, Brisbane Street, Perth, until October 4.