

## expat reverie

### greg hooper: the states



The States  
photo  
Sharka Bosakova

IN THE NO-FIT-OUT SPACE THAT IS THE SHOPFRONT COMES THE STATES, THE THIRD WORK FROM GRISWOLD, PIRRIE AND FOLTZ. THE SHOW IS BILLED AS EXPLORING “THEMES OF GLOBALISATION, DISLOCATION AND IDENTITY FROM AN EXPATRIATE POINT OF VIEW”—GRISWOLD AND FOLTZ BEING EXPATS FROM THE USA AND PIRRIE AN AUSTRALIAN LIVING IN DARWIN, A TOWN SPLIT BETWEEN PERMANENTS AND TRANSIENTS. SO IT’S STATES IN GENERAL AND ‘THE STATES’ IN PARTICULAR.

We enter to Sarah Pirrie, in the role of usher, handing out largish palm cards printed with some of Craig Foltz’s poetry and a few dot point instructions. Things like “cross out the words you don’t agree with”, “tear up the card into little pieces and scatter in the middle”, “read the words out loud.” Instructions differ a little from card to card.

Centred in the space—let’s go with the architects and call it a void—there’s after-party flotsam: election style paper rosettes in red, white and blue, junk on the floor, a chocolate wheel ready to spin. I imagine stale beer and peanut shells in a plasticised paper bowl, occasional piles of crushed chips testifying to jogged elbows and brief apologies. But the design doesn’t go that far. Instead there are nostalgic images—maps of the USA from before it got the U, a projection to the front street-side window of birds, fish, the beach, a landscape from the air. A banner hangs with vaguely readable somethings about the dimpled ocean, transparent membranes, fibrous sheets. The scene is down-home and

small scale. A rally for the Party faithful at the community hall but now it's late and the last to leave are feeling very tired and sort of used.

Erik Griswold announces, "Welcome to the States", and Alison St Ledger begins wordlessly singing "Amazing Grace" to a seamless accompaniment by Nicholas Ng on erhu. Über-chestnut done ecumenical gospel lite. Post-fundraiser music for a slightly depressed and unpleasantly sobering politico remembering the feelings they had about political change before they went into politics and changed themselves instead.

Into the second song, "If not the Past", which has text delivered by Craig Foltz. Foltz's voice throughout the concert is not always as distinct as it could be, maybe problematic acoustics of the space or maybe speaker placement issues (the speakers face away from the audience and toward the performers). Not sure, and a shame because snippets that are clear, "if not the past then perhaps a soundbite of the past", have me wishing for a better listen. Music stays down tempo, this time though it is more Carole King à la "It's too late baby, you've got a friend", music I developed a deep, gut-level avoidance response to in the 70s.

Segue into overlapping vocals and a rising hysteria—the mood shifts to performance/conceptual/radio art, Eric Salzman's Nude Paper Sermon from the late 60s, snippets of culture as new, foreign and rushing past. Stop, and Pirrie-the-usher wanders about pulling down bits of bunting and dumping it on the floor to a slow blues soundtrack of melodica and erhu.

Then it's trumpet, voice and erhu again sounding out a listless blues. I find the concert lags a little here, sounding a bit like a late afternoon bluesy jam after a few too many beers. I can see how conceptually that fits with a theme of displacement and decline—the expat vision of neither here nor there, the learned helplessness of untappable power, the fading glory of Old Glory.

Break for some audience participation. Foltz spins the chocolate wheel and we all get to follow the colour-coded instructions on our cards—chance and selection in a party atmosphere. And then the final titled work—The Party's Over—talk and music, serious and reflective, ecstatic—if I could be bothered—but I can't. Again the work totters at the

edge of release, but pulls back, goes no further.

Last, but not least, leave them smiling with a tootling up-beat salsa. We've had some sad times, some audience participation, some fun and some flagging, but let's forget about it now, put the past behind us and move on. Give ourselves something to look forward to, the next country, the next state. Moving along. Getting there.

The States, creators Erik Griswold, Sarah Pirrie, Craig Foltz, vocals Alison St Ledger, Craig Foltz, keyboards Steve Newcomb, Erik Griswold , Chinese strings Nicholas Ng, trumpet Peter Knight; Shopfront, Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, Brisbane, Oct 1-3

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