

VISUAL ART

Seeing Eugenia Lim's award-winning work in Denmark feels like a homecoming – and highlights her Melbourne roots. By *Jana Perković*.

The Australian sensibilities of Eugenia Lim



Eugenia Lim's *Diurnal Nocturnal* at the Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition in Denmark.

CREDIT: SIMON STRONG

With a practice that spans video, performance and installation, Eugenia Lim has carved a profile as one of Melbourne's notable civic-minded artists. As her concerns have gradually shifted from an interrogation of

identity to a broader exploration of solidarity, Lim has built upon the feminist performance tradition that looks at labour and its visibility – paid and unpaid, glorified and undervalued.

It's an oeuvre in dialogue with key works of Martha Rosler or Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who problematised unpaid care work, housework and “maintenance work”, finding commonality across the low-waged precariat and everywoman's unpaid domestic labour. Lim is an artist who, despite once describing her Chinese–Singaporean–Australian experience as “always never being at home”, deeply interrogates contemporary Australia. Her sustained questioning of the Australian national psyche has in recent years become an investigation of the global networks of capital and our place in it.

Seeing her work in Copenhagen's Kunsthall Charlottenborg, I was struck by its liminal, tense placement. How well it fitted in – in some ways better than in Australia – yet how notably it stood apart as a product of another continent.

The longer I stood with Lim's work on that unvarnished parquetry, the more salient seemed its Australian – nay, Melburnian – sensibility: an uncompromising political alignment and philosophical depth via her interrogation through objects.

Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition has been held every year since 1857. It is an open-submission, curated showcase of contemporary art, one of the most important in Europe, and this year one of its main three prizes was awarded to Lim.

Scandinavia is a place of bare walls and unvarnished floorboards, even in a historical gallery. And nowhere is this simplicity enacted more consciously than in Denmark, home to the world's most prized mid-century Modernism. In Kunsthall Charlottenborg, light fixtures are Poul Henningsen, visitor seating is Arne Jacobsen. It creates a studied casualness in which first-order national icons are tightly curated and knowingly displayed – not on a decorative veneer but in the quality of the utilitarian elements in the space. Robin Boyd would feel at home.

So do Eugenia Lim's installations. Like the artist herself, they have a quiet and poised presence and benefit from being experienced in calm environments. Over the past decade, as our national wealth has grown, Australian public exhibition spaces have become increasingly bold, large and loud. I have seen Lim craft bubbles around her work to enable contemplation: most notably a replica of Robin Boyd's *Neptune's Fishbowl* (1970) to host her three-channel video installation *The Australian Ugliness* (2018), which extends Boyd's 1960 polemic into present-day Australia and gives it an intersectional reading.

But the quiet Charlottenborg is an ideal setting for Lim's work. It gives breathing room to her installations and reveals their refined aesthetic. On display here are three works from the *24/7* series, created during the lockdown of 2021, which are preoccupied with gig labour, the global supply chain and the collapse of work and life into a state of perpetual stress.

Lim excavates and reconfigures everyday materials that enable this wretched, always-on existence: two cold and warm LED lights purchased from Amazon (*Diurnal Nocturnal*), a pyramid of Muji diffusers that bathe the room in the powdery sweet mist of sleep aid pills (*Olfactory*) and a life-size sculpture of a migratory bird, the white-crowned sparrow, cast from smelted Red Bull cans and Ritalin (*Sleep no more (Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii) Taurine edition*). The series is of a piece with Lim's video works with Aphids art collective, *DESTINY* (2021) and *EASY RIDERS* (2019), two carefully waged collaborations with gig workers.

Ever since Boyd pitted Australia's muddled sense of beauty against mid-century Modernist standards and found Australia lacking, there has existed in certain corners of the Australian psyche a steady belief in the superiority of

the Scandinavian ethos and aesthetics.

Lim has consistently aligned herself with this sentiment: in her work, most notably in *The Australian Ugliness*, but also as a steady advocate for sustainable and ethical architecture. Seeing Lim's works in Denmark feels almost like homecoming. Many exhibits in the Spring Exhibition share Lim's pared-back aesthetic and meditative vibe. In the next room, Serine Sinding Yde's *Arrangement, In Line* (2021), pleasingly lines up 50 discarded ballet shoes by nuances of colour; Emilie Bobek and Josephine Rán Andredottir's distorted aluminium chair *Illusion* (2021) is both a sculptural study of aluminium and a great piece of furniture; and Marianne Johnstad-Møller's untitled sculptures (2021) explore feelings and reflections as polyamide knits.

Throughout the Kunsthall the focus is on intelligent materiality, as befits a region in which "national aesthetics" often refers to "furniture design". I was impressed, but not surprised, that Lim won the Deep Forest Art Land award, which comes with a commission to create a site-specific work for a forest in northern Denmark. It takes material intelligence to look past the Red Bull cans and LED lights to see Lim's focus on air, mist, time, silence.

And yet, the longer I stood with Lim's work on that unvarnished parquet, the more salient seemed its Australian – nay, Melburnian – sensibility: an uncompromising political alignment and philosophical depth via her interrogation through objects.

The white-crowned sparrow is an American migratory bird that has been intensely studied by the United States military for its capacity to stay awake for as long as seven days straight. The bird opens Jonathan Crary's book *24/7*, whose analysis of sleep as the final frontier of late capitalism underpins Lim's own. "Sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism," Crary writes. Most necessities of human life – hunger, sex, love – have been commodified or financialised, but sleep "frustrates and confounds any strategies to exploit or reshape it".

A common perception across Scandinavia and Europe is that Australia is merely a more distant version of the US, a perception aided by our latest policies. But for all our current moral confusion, we are still a nation built on the labour movement. There is a monument to the eight-hour working day in Melbourne, which reads "Labour, Recreation, Peace". With its call for dignity of low-waged work and the sanctity of those eight hours of peace, Lim's art seemed to stem directly out of Melbourne's political history.

There is a niceness to the Spring Exhibition that reflects the optimism of contemporary Scandinavia. Very few other works in the exhibition have a political bite to them (another is Talent Award winner, Eva Rocco Kenell's *Territo Reell*, 2021).

Starting uncomfortable conversations is a social faux pas sometimes referred to in Denmark as "ruining the hygge", and in a real sense, that's what Lim's installations do. They lend visibility to the world's most-exploited labour. They implicate us in Amazon's global supply chain, even in this prosperous, privileged space. They are unafraid to bring down the mood with impolite questions – and that makes them feel distinctly Australian.

The Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition continues in Copenhagen, Denmark, and online until March 13.

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