

## AGAINST NATURE

Daniel and Nicholas du Bern  
Wellington 2005

Representing Enjoy at *Containers Village*;  
*Next Wave Festival*, Melbourne, March 2006

Curator: Jessica Reid  
Catalogue Design: Jayne Joyce

**From the Biblical Cane and Abel**, to the ancient myth of Romulus and Remus, there have been countless tales throughout history of violent sibling rivalry, of brothers fighting to the quick and bloody death as they vie for attention and power. In the animal kingdom too, sibling rivalry is common. Puppies play-wrestle and practice their predatory skills on one another. Male lions must fight their siblings to become the 'alpha-male' of the pride, once a lion is head of his harem he will kill off the cubs from the previous generation to ensure his bloodline continues and dominates.

The work *Against Nature* opens with two male figures of similar height, build and dress walking into a pastoral scene. There's a sense of ceremony and purpose in their gait which informs us they're performing, but they exhibit a laid-back nonchalance as well. For the next few minutes the two figures fight; they wrestle, pull at each other's clothing, they chase and drag and attempt to throw each other to the ground. The two seem equally matched, much like you'd expect in a top-level athletic competition. This is no David and Goliath struggle. We know from the opening credit that the two are related, and in their mirrored appearance it's as if one figure is fighting himself. While they attack each other with earnest aggressive intent, no blood is drawn and no serious injury seems to occur.

Daniel and Nicholas du Bern have something of the look of baby cubs when they fight; simultaneously human, particularly child-like, and something more animal. Like the scuffling of baby cubs, too, there is the suggestion that the fight is playful and provides exercise for developing bodies but that some time in the future it could turn serious and could even turn deadly. We can feel affection for these characters. It is not an audacious display of masculine aggression like the booze-fuelled brawl on a post-pub Friday night. *Against Nature* is so gracefully staged that despite the cries of pain sounding real, there's a sadistic pleasure in watching the brothers' slapstick routine. Like an episode of *Jackass*, heightened by the amateurish film quality, you can feel confident their recovery will be quick and that, as their pain is seemingly self-inflicted, it is deserved.

\* \* \* \* \*

As a phrase *Against Nature* is a title rich with allusions if one is to dissemble it<sup>2</sup>. It conjures both the ideas of opposition to the construct of nature and the visual contrast of being cast in front of a natural backdrop. Like much of Daniel du Bern's work to date it raises issues relating to identity: indigeneity and a relationship with the land. It also critiques the landscape genre within New Zealand art history, how this shapes our perception of the natural. In *Against Nature* du Bern softly teases out these ideas with an almost absurd humour. The work plays with the concept of what nature is; something separate and distant, or our bloodlines and instincts, the things that unite and separate us from other people and our environment.

'[The] landscape is a hotly contested site – of physical possession, of naming, mapping and journeying, or warring and of tribal, racial and personal memory... an occupied zone whose constantly reread and rewritten histories do not lie in quiescent layers but jostle, shift, and thrust, as changing and unstable as the land itself.'<sup>3</sup>

While the above was written with reference to the New Zealand landscape, it seems equally applicable to the landscape of Australia where *Against Nature* was first exhibited<sup>4</sup>. The lands of both countries were contested as former British colonies and are subject to what some would argue is the imposition of a European landscape tradition; shaped to this artificial construct<sup>5</sup>. The paradoxical dichotomy for both countries is that they enjoy the financial benefits of tourism created by promoting the beauty of their natural and peaceful landscapes through film and advertising. Travelers from the other side of the world journey to these lands to experience this nature; a place distant and removed, a peaceful paradisiacal sanctuary incompatible with the presence of humans<sup>6</sup>. It could equally be argued that the whole concept of what is 'natural' is, ironically, itself an artificial construct. What is 'natural' is perceived as morally right, but this shifts and moves from generation to generation.







Some staunch environmentalists would argue that the presence of humans in nature is an inherently destructive relationship; that nature is a pure virginal wilderness, destroyed as soon as it is as much as observed. The vast negative impacts humans have had on the environment, and the ease with which modern day living allows one to exploit its resources, make this a fair assumption. Through his work New Zealand photographer Wayne Barrar has observed the way industry has physically shaped the landscape and the longevity of this impact<sup>7</sup>. However it's an idea which can be further explored. In Maori culture there is the concept of tangata whenua, which can be translated as "people of the land". Whenua is also the Maori word for placenta – the custom of burying a child's placenta in the ground is an expression of the literal land-people connection which exists in Maori worldview<sup>8</sup>. Being tangata whenua denotes indigeneity and therefore rights to the land and its resources, guaranteed under the Treaty of Waitangi. And the concept has been included in the Resource Management Act, a uniquely New Zealand statute that requires consultation with effected parties before environmentally significant changes can be made to a landscape.

The meaning of tangata whenua encompasses more than just the presence of people on the land. It makes an inherited connection with the bones of the ancestors who lie and once lived there. It is important to note the spiritual aspect of its meaning, that the individual is part of creation. It is therefore significant to be able to trace one's genealogy, or whakapapa, back to the land<sup>9</sup>. As a concept it can be extrapolated to observe that humans can be as much part of the land as the plants and animals that also exist there. That the land can be exploited and exhausted of its assets is an introduced concept that is foreign to the culture.

\* \* \* \* \*

The nature scene in *Against Nature* is anything but virgin. Filmed in the town belt area above Wellington on the hill of Mount Victoria, the lime-green grass has been planted and mown, the dandelions, hyper-yellow, have been introduced and a vista of the city can be seen peeking through the mist. The scrubby, nondescript plants are not recognisably native. Yet the surroundings are idyllic, verdant and lush, appealing as a site for a picnic, birds lazily twittering and chirping in the distance. The Wellington town belt is an area managed by the City Council, protected against development; it is retained for public use. The trees that predominate are introduced and deciduous: oak, elm, ash and beech. Favoured by du Bern as a site for other works<sup>10</sup>, it is interstitial space: a scene of constructed nature, including both indigenous and exotic flora and fauna. And thus du Bern locates himself within the landscape as a Pakeha New Zealander.

*Against Nature* can be read as being about play. One thinks of landscape painting; the shades of grass and tree, the considered perspective and composition, but the scene does not fit the neat categories of the ideal, the sublime or the beautiful. It is far too grounded in the prosaic. The work plays with this genre in a similar way to how the protagonists play-fight: it's as if they're role-playing; testing each other's, and their own, strength for the parts. They are placed against the setting of the land, yet allow the calm of the scenery to undermine the violence of their action. *Against Nature* alludes to a specific place yet remains outside this limitation. The oppositions in the work are at once age-old and ubiquitous, and specific to a particular act of a particular time and place.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Two other New Zealand artists who have 'fought', or more specifically 'boxed', themselves in their works are Sean Kerr in his video work *blowxblow* (2001) and Daniel Malone in a performance titled *Punch Drunk* (1998)
- <sup>2</sup> Taken from, but not directly referencing, the title of the French novel *Against Nature* (*À Rebours*) (1884) by Joris-Karl Huysman, a member of the naturalist group and later the French Decadent Movement. The Novel's decadent protagonist Des Esseintes at one point states "The age of nature is past; it has finally exhausted the patience of all sensitive minds by the loathsome monotony of its landscapes and skies."
- <sup>3</sup> Pitts, Priscilla, 'The Unquiet Earth: Reading landscape and the land in New Zealand art', *Headlands: thinking through New Zealand art*, Mary Barr (ed), Sydney: MCA, 1992, p87
- <sup>4</sup> *Against Nature* was first exhibited as Enjoy's (Wellington) contribution to *The Container Project, Next Wave Festival*, Melbourne, March 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Pound, Francis, *Frames on the Land: early landscape painting in New Zealand*, Auckland: Collins, 1983, p44
- <sup>6</sup> du Bern, Daniel, 'Locating Nature', 2003 (unpublished essay)
- <sup>7</sup> see Strongman, Lara (ed), *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers*, Auckland, Mountain View Pub., 2005, pp88 -95
- <sup>8</sup> Durie, Mason, *Ngā Tāi Matatā: Tides of Māori Endurance*, 2005, p237
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>10</sup> The same area can also be viewed in *Back to Nature* and *Panorama* (both 2003).

*Against Nature*

Daniel and Nicholas du Bern

Wellington 2005

DVD, 10' 32", Edition of 5

Camera: Anna Eady

Representing Enjoy at *Containers Village*:

*Next Wave Festival*, Melbourne, March 2006

Curator: Jessica Reid

Catalogue Design: Jayne Joyce

Printing: Print Limited, Wellington

The artists would like to acknowledge and thank

the following people and organisations for their support:

Anna Eady, Courtney Lucas, Carey Young, Kris Lane, Rachel Young,

Next Wave, Enjoy & Creative New Zealand

© Daniel & Nicholas du Bern 2006

creative  
nz

ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND / TOI AOTEAROA

*Enjoy*