

# SUPERPOSITION: Equilibrium & Engagement

**Brook Andrew**

*What's Left Behind*, 2018  
at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

**21st Biennale**

**of Sydney**



*Tombs of Thought II (Earth)*, 2016–17

timber, brass, glass, plastic, paper  
3.4 x 2 x 2.05 m

Installation view (2017) of 'Brook Andrew: The Right to Offend is Sacred' at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Courtesy the artist; Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne; Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris and Brussels

Photograph: Dianna Snape

Best known for his work with collections, archives and ideas of memory, Brook Andrew's practice often presents a deeply researched reassessment of Western colonial histories and the realities they silence. By bringing out the alternative stories of objects, he asks us as viewers to reassess our assumptions, and to question the learned inaccuracies of history.

*What's Left Behind* is an investigation of memory and meaning through objects and their histories. Consisting of five sculptures that are also vessels or vitrines, the work presents five collections (or archives). Andrew has invited four artists to each contribute items, chosen from the collection of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, to a vitrine: Rushdi Anwar, Shiraz Bayjoo, Mayun Kiki and Vered Snear. Each vitrine corresponds to the elements of *Wuxing*: wood, fire, earth, metal and water.

*Wuxing* is a Chinese philosophical concept that describes these five elements in a constant state of mutual creation and destruction, always seeking equilibrium. The concept is very important to the curatorial approach of 21st Biennale of Sydney Artistic Director, Mami Kataoka. This conceptual framework can be understood as a metaphor for the contestation of meaning, memory and history, as well as multiple and sometimes opposing perspectives.

## Questions for Discussion

1. When was the last time you went to a museum? How were things displayed and labelled? Do you expect the objects in a museum to be authentic or real, and the information written about them to be true?
2. What is the difference between an artwork and a museum object? What happens when you mix the two together?
3. Visit a museum (or museum website). Choose an object and investigate its history, and ask: Who did it belong to? What does it represent in their life story? How does that fit into the bigger picture of their time and place?
4. Start a collection of your own: bring together 10 objects that tell a story for you.

## Reference Points

Brook Andrew's work sits within a long history of artists who have engaged with collections to investigate society and history, and to determine the aesthetic of display. Such artists include, listed next to the year of their participation in a Biennale of Sydney exhibition: Bernd and Hilla Becher (1979), Karen Mirza and Brad Butler (2016), Hanne Darboven (1979, 1990), Susan Hiller (1982, 1996, 2002, 2010), Yinka Shonibare (1996), and Dayanita Singh (2016).

In addition, for First Peoples artists, whose culture has often been destroyed or appropriated by white settler and colonial force, museum collections can hold significant materials for the writing of corrective history.

In this context, these artists might include: Gordon Bennett (1992, 2000, 2008), Brenda L Croft (1992/93), Beau Dick (2010), Jonathan Jones (2010), and Lisa Reihana and the Pacific Sisters (2000).

## Practices and Processes

A lot of Andrew's work relies on how things are presented and framed. He reinterprets historical narratives about objects that already exist, and takes historical objects, such as a photograph, and reproduces an altered image of it to make an artwork. While we can use existing images and objects as starting points, it is important to recognise the copyright of the original producer, and sometimes the provenance of the museum or institution from which it came. It is important to ask: who owns this cultural artefact? In this way, we can consider how many cultural artefacts have been acquired by museums as part of colonial processes that have dispossessed the original owners and creators.

### Collection work

Using the 10 objects you have collected, make an artwork by thinking about how you present them together. What conventions of display are you familiar with, and how can you use them to frame your work? Are the objects all the same? Consider how the combination might modify their meaning. Make some drawings of things in your collection and present them separately, and then mixed together.

### Archive work

Choose a single object and think about what it might mean in the future. Create a museum label that would explain why it is important, and a reflection of our culture, here and now.

### Sculpture

Make an artwork that looks like a museum object, but isn't. Get everyone in your class to work to a similar scale and look at the finished sculptures as a single work, like a collection in a museum. Randomly attach your label to someone else's sculpture, and consider how this changes what it might mean.

### Cultural frame:

social and political context

### Postmodern frame:

interpretation, intertextuality, challenging art and historical conventions