

## DownUnder

Friday 25 January 2008

It's strange to travel for 21 hours and find myself in a parallel universe: Parramatta is the Oz version of Stratford or Croydon. The Central Business District a mini version of central London. The sun goes East North West and the water goes down the plug hole the other way but so many things are pretty much the same. That's colonialism and globalisation for you.

Having said that there are of course many things that are different: the accent, the weather (although it has been overcast and thundery quite a few times and people are complaining about how cold it is at 26 degrees!), the flora and fauna and the attitude to diversity. Or more specifically the attitude to African people.

Coming to a country that had a 'keep Australia white' government campaign up until the 1970s and an unsavory track record with regards to the indigenous people here did undoubtedly induce some apprehension in me. All the open-minded people – of which there are many – are great: very chatty, helpful, welcoming. Some people are friendly and interested in the influx of people from sub-Saharan places and some are not, some people look/comment unfavourably and some do not. It has made me feel a bit exposed in a way that doesn't happen to me in London. Going to the Queen Victoria Building Tearooms in the city or sitting in the Parramatta Park Café reading my book (currently *Nobody's Child* by Kate Adie, an account of the history of and institutions for abandoned children) can create a silent yet palpable 'disturbance' that presides (until I have left, I guess.) However, going to these kinds of places and being out about is perfectly normal to me so I carry on regardless because I am enjoying myself and am fascinated by this country: it's history and it's present which are simultaneously horrendous and inspirational.

Being at the Parramatta Artists Studios is excellent. Everyone here is forthcoming with information and ideas. There's an interesting mix of artists from painters to printmakers to multimedia artists to performers. Both the flat and the studio feel like 'home'. Having a telephone and wireless already installed is very considerate and the proximity to the train station and the shopping centres has made orientation totally stress free.

On the work front, I am making slow and steady progress – mulling over ideas and production dilemmas is very rewarding when your real life is not getting in the way. I made my first visits to the Burnside Museum and the Australian National Maritime Museum last week. All the curators and archivists have been very accommodating and I'm looking forward to delving into the collections next week. I've also taken a trip with Michael Dagostino (Parramatta

Studios Coordinator) to Newington Armory – the printmaking space at Sydney Olympic Park (<http://www.sopa.nsw.gov.au>) where he has organised a studio space for me.

Having arrived during the Sydney Festival meant that I got to see a couple of interesting projects in my first week: the Canadian company Mammalian Diving Reflex's Haircuts by Children (<http://www.sydneyfestival.org.au/>) and a welcome evening for Hi8us a UK film company who are here doing their Digitales programme with young people in New South Wales (<http://www.ice.org.au>). The Mayor formally welcomed me to Parramatta at this event which was an unexpected but pleasant surprise. There is a lot going on in terms of arts programming for young people and diverse communities as a means to create opportunities, and build respect and understanding. The Festival culminates with Australia Day on 26 January, which for some is a first settlement celebration and for others is a survival/remembrance day.

It being the summer holidays most of the galleries are closed but I look forward to them reopening in February and getting a better sense of what artists here are up to. In another month I'll have also been to places outside of the city so no doubt my perceptions of this massive country will change.

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