



**VISUAL ARTS**  
 Ric Spencer



# Going . . . going . . . gone

Universal truths glimpsed in Colombian artist's poignant and political ephemeral works



**O**scar Munoz offers an incredibly light touch to a pretty heavy subject in *Mirror Image*, his exhibition at the Perth Institute for Contemporary Arts as part of the Perth International Arts Festival.

*Mirror Image* examines the history of the political and social conditions of his native Colombia through its representation in the media and as it will be remembered through photography. His work is poignant and emotional but *Mirror Image* is one of those shows where knowing more about the artist's specific subject matter would only add to the meaning of several of the pieces — not least the first installation you encounter at the door, *Paistiempo*, a series of burnt newsprints based on the Colombian newspapers *El Pais* and *El Tiempo*. Making subtle work based on particular political themes can at times be challenging viewing.

There is a series of short Colombian films being shown upstairs which is intended to bring more context to Munoz's work but despite being enjoyable in themselves, these didn't orientate me too much. Regardless of this, there is no doubt some universal truths are on display in Munoz's *Mirror Image*. The evocation of passing time, the nostalgia of naivety and the devastation of personal loss come to the fore in this very ephemeral exhibition.

Seemingly driven by a desire to achieve the unachievable, i.e. to hold on to the moment, Munoz invokes the transcendental nature of his materials with some flair. Video, mirrors, water, charcoal and newspaper come together in various combinations to emphasise the

optical illusion of solidity in this world.

What is integral to Munoz's process is the idea that, particularly in times of turmoil, old recollections disappear faster than new memories are created and as such consistencies of truth and identity are often lost in a maelstrom of constructed information. This is borne out in a work like *Narciso* (*Narcissus*) in which Munoz skilfully makes a charcoal print of his face, resting it on the surface tension of a handbasin of water. The shadow cast behind it makes another self-portrait on the ceramic bowl and as the plug is pulled and the water level lowers, so too do the portrait and its shadow come together — just as they both disappear down the drain.

The poetic and lyrical nature of this video work, not to mention

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the strong psychoanalytical dimension, is repeated time and again throughout the exhibition.

In *Eclipse*, for me the standout work, Munoz destroys the idea that photography captures any kind of staid reality. Recreating a camera obscura, *Eclipse* pulls an "image" of Perth's skyline through a pinhole in the wall and then mirrors this image, off a series of six mirrors, in a display that mimics a solar eclipse. This work is difficult to describe but is effortless in its manifestation.

Other pieces in *Mirror Image* create less of an impact. *Linea del*

*destino* (*Line of Destiny*) plays on palm reading and here the artist's image disappears as its reflection in water leaves the enclosed palm of the hand. The result, however, is flat and so too the major projection work, which shows a series of portraits done in water on concrete evaporating, lacks the aesthetic impetus of some of the other works but again more context may help.

As an overall exhibition though, curator Sebastian Lopez has brought the playful talents and critical insights of Munoz well and truly to light.

Speaking of light, upstairs in the West End Gallery, Brendan Van Hek brings the illuminating nature of fluorescent tubes to an installation which, like Munoz, lives by the mantra of less is more.

Like the previous West End show by Tom Muller, Van Hek's work sparsely intervenes in the gallery, preferring to construct meaning through the empty spaces as much as the pieces themselves. Light, of course, will do this and the more you stand in *A Certain Slant of Light*, the more the light pulls together the individual works.

Cultural references also align certain pieces — for instance, *Fools Gold*, written in gold neon, and *Hole in My Dream*, a single tube in a fishing net, both in reference to the band Stone Roses. Equally both, as with *End of the Road*, play off reflections of life's desires and an end game of inevitable disappointment.

The pick of the works for me is *Untitled Loop*, a beautiful, duller fluorescent calligraphy piece which almost disappears into the wall. The innocuous, almost offhand nature of the work provides a palpable tension between the medium and the subject matter and in some way illustrates our



ambivalent response to neon today. Yet neon, and indeed artificial electric light, is historically a recent phenomenon. It may no longer seem a miracle but, as Van Hek reminds us, nor should its gift be forgotten.

For that matter nor should neon's relationship with creative and atmospheric signs. Van Hek steps into the contemporary history of neon art and does so with some deference. This is not garish work but respectful and aptly linguistic in its appreciation of neon poetry.

**Mirror Image and A Certain Slant of Light are at PICA until April 5.**



Neon life: Brendan Van Hek's Fools Gold features in A Certain Slant of Light.



Reflected glory: Oscar Munoz's Eclipse uses concave mirrors to gain a pinhole image of Perth's skyline