

SundayLife



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The star
who faked
his way to
Hollywood

Libbi Gorr's
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Gulpilil's Travels

The double life of
Australia's most
unconventional actor

Plus
The perfect
cocktail party

From
underwear
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Gulpilil is asleep and the atmosphere is tense. Playwright Reg Cribb says, "We have to be patient. Back home David is at his best." How is he to work with? "It's been a battle..."



KING DAVID

He vanishes from film shoots. He demands \$10,000 to speak. He lives in a humpy one day and a hotel the next. **Claire Scobie** tracks down the enigmatic David Gulpilil.

David Gulpilil is a man unleashed. Exuding the air of a 70s rock star, he strides towards me in Levi's and a brown suede waistcoat. His taut arms are like twisted steel, his gnarled hand swallows my own. He is late and his manager, John Cann, ashen with stress, tells me there's time only for photos; David has to get back to rehearsals for his one-man show, *Gulpilil*, due to tour Brisbane and Sydney later in the year.

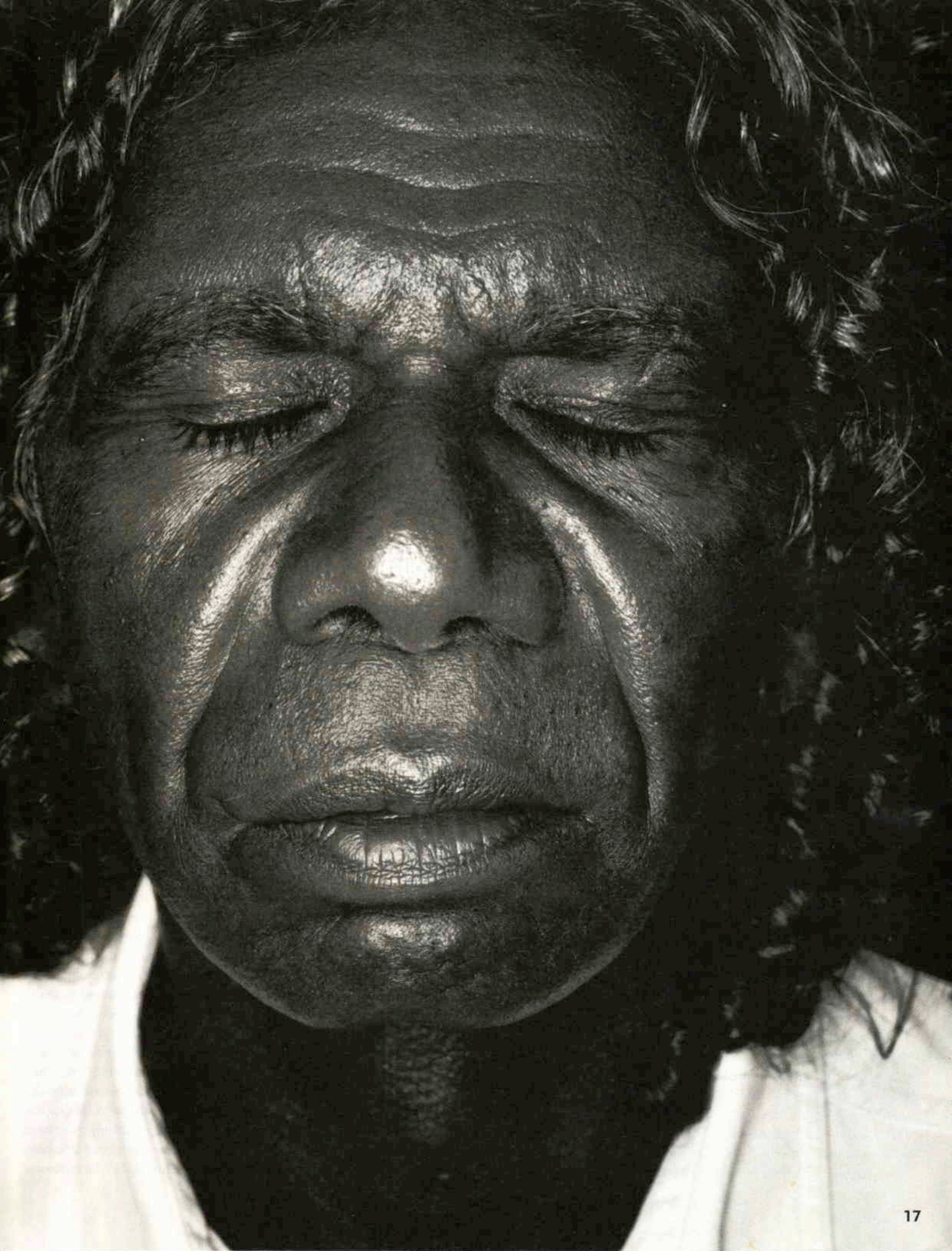
Interviewing this charismatic actor, an international icon of black Australia whose portrait is this year's Archibald Prize winner, was never going to be straightforward. Gulpilil is known for vanishing during film shoots and in the city disappears to the pub when his minders are momentarily distracted. His reputation goes before him: volatile, charming, unpredictable, soft as a puppy. He is a man who straddles two worlds – traditional Aboriginal culture

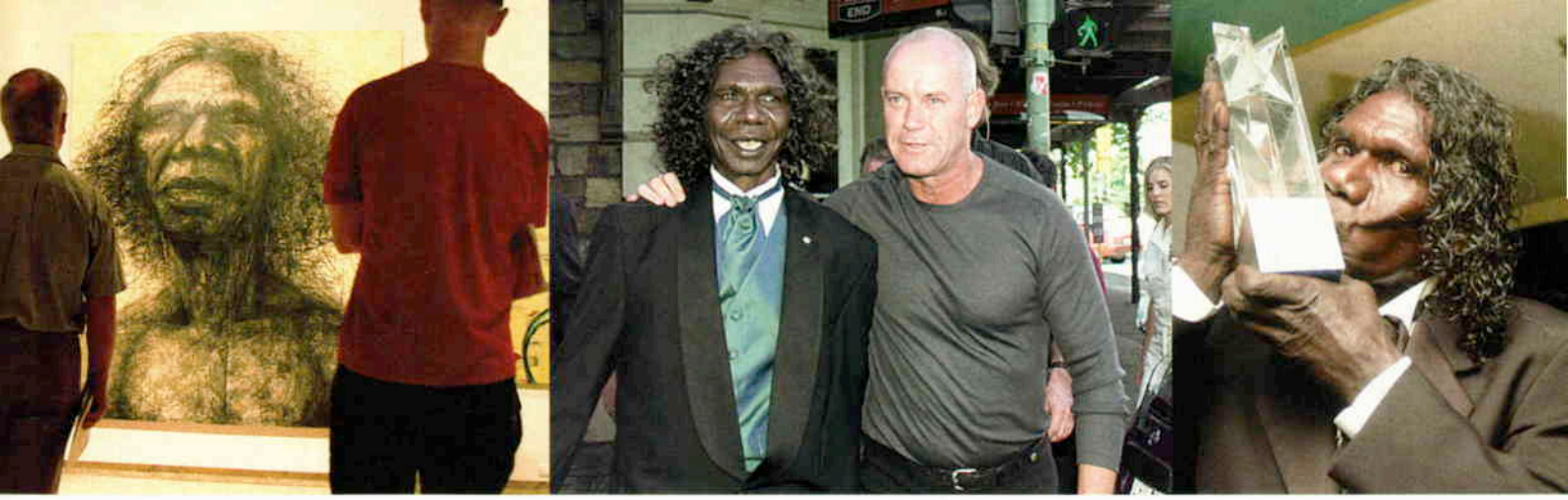
on one side, show business on the other – a fact that is neatly summed up in his play's opening lines: "Left side, my country. Right side, white man's world. This 'tippie toe' in caviar and champagne, this one in the dirt of my Dreamtime."

"I don't like cities, I'm a bush man," he says in deep, rumbling tones, bounding up the steps towards the photographer. Close up, his craggy face is like a map of the world framed by shoulder-length curls flecked with grey. But once the camera is on him, the 51-year-old actor is transformed. With eyes burning intensely, he performs like a wild man, whooping, gabbling stories of how he rescued his wife from the jaws of a crocodile. "You wanna hear how I lost my finger?" He holds up a truncated index finger to the crowd that has gathered. "It'll cost you \$50," he roars. "You gotta come to my show to know how ▾

"To understand me, you have to learn about my land, my language," says David Gulpilil; (inset) in the 1971 film *Walkabout*.

RANDY LARCOMBE/FAIRFAX PHOTO LIBRARY





“He is a complex soul,” says director Rolf de Heer. “In *The Tracker*, he spends half the film with chains around his neck. He wore them like this badge of honour, proud because he was showing what had been done to his people.”

I done it.” He is a whirlwind and then he is gone, whisked away back to rehearsals.

Since he was plucked out of the bush by English director Nicolas Roeg and cast in 1971’s *Walkabout*, Gulpilil has achieved what many would think impossible. He was flown to London and presented to the Queen holding spears and wearing a lap-lap, then on to Cannes and Los Angeles. He has starred in a rosary of films – *Storm Boy*, *Crocodile Dundee* and Phillip Noyce’s *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. He’s co-starred with Richard Chamberlain (*The Last Wave*) and Dennis Hopper (*Mad Dog Morgan*). In 2002, he received an AFI Best Actor Award for his stunning performance in *The Tracker*, Rolf de Heer’s challenging film about white settlement, and last year he picked up the inaugural Don Dunstan award (as part of the Adelaide International Film Festival) for an outstanding contribution to the film industry.

Despite such an acclaimed career, Gulpilil lives in a humpy cobbled together with corrugated iron and plastic sheeting, with no electricity or running water. “I’ve travelled a lot but Ramingining in Arnhem Land where David lives is the most foreign country I’ve ever been to,” says de Heer. “He is a complex soul. In some ways, highly sophisticated and very smart; in others there are things that are beyond his cultural reference ability. In *The Tracker*, he spends half the film with chains around his neck and I expected problems. But we couldn’t get the chains off him. David wore them like this badge of honour, proud because he was showing what had been done to his people.”

For years Gulpilil had a car called Never Ending Story and organising to meet him starts to feel like that. Our interview, arranged for the following morning, is cancelled at 11.30pm. His manager calls to say Gulpilil won’t talk “unless he’s paid \$10,000”. (*SundayLife* doesn’t pay its interviewees.) Cann’s parting words are: “Come if you want. I’ve given up.”

Gulpilil and some of the crew are staying out of Adelaide and away from the temptation of city pubs – usually he lives in an alcohol-free community. I arrive at a rustic farmhouse at 9.30am the next day. Gulpilil is asleep and the atmosphere is tense. Cann lights one filterless Gitane after another; playwright Reg Cribb, who co-wrote *Gulpilil* with the actor, says, “We have to be patient. Back home David is at his best.” How is he to work with? “It’s been a battle,” sighs Cribb. “There’s a lot of suspicion from David about white people. He doesn’t realise that with this play he can own something artistically for the first time.” Gulpilil feels he’s been ripped off throughout his career: he barely received a cent, he says, for *Walkabout*

(one report put the sum at \$1000); he took a fee of about \$10,000 for *Crocodile Dundee*, which made more than \$400 million at the box office.

Gulpilil appears in a ragged jumper. He seems withdrawn and vulnerable and eyes me warily but as he sips sweet black tea, words tumble out in a back-to-front manner. He speaks 14 tribal languages; English was the fifth language he learnt.

“My play is the true story about how I cope all alone,” he begins. “Its message is to understand everybody... For people to understand me, you have to learn about my land, my language.” He fixes me with a defiant glare. “I live in a humpy house. The Australian Government has to wake up and look at how people like me are living. The Prime Minister is doing his job for [white] Australia; why can’t they look at what’s going on in black Australia?” He draws angrily on a cigarette.

He was born under a tree on his father’s land, Gulpulul, NT, in 1953. Details of his childhood are hazy but at about eight he saw his first white man land in a plane. He says he thought it was a ghost and fled. His mother (a “wonderful woman, soft and gentle”, says family friend and author Richard Trudgen) suffered from leprosy and “would get around the bush with a wooden leg”. His father was a ceremonial dancer who died from gangrene after having his foot amputated. Gulpilil was then brought up by his uncle, dividing his time between the bush and the mission school in Maningrida, becoming an accomplished dancer who won prizes at eisteddfods. He worked briefly as a stockman in the area.

He was 11 when he saw his first film and 16 when cast in *Walkabout*. Until then, Aboriginal roles were mostly confined to group scenes and extras. So when Gulpilil was cast as an empowered, sexual hero, it made international headlines. When not acting, he would tour with a troupe of performers in Australia and, occasionally, Europe. In about 1990, he returned to his community. Those who know of his fame are quick to knock “the spoilt blackfella” (Gulpilil’s words) off his pedestal. “He’s in a no-win situation,” says Rolf de Heer. “Either he is ripping off his community or he is being ripped off by white people.”

Gulpilil is a Yolngu, once regarded as a race of fearless warriors. Today, his people face a bleak future with mortality rates four and a half times the national average and spiralling levels of alcohol and substance abuse. “I’m waiting for the government to say sorry to me,” says Gulpilil. “For all of Australia and for my people.” He gets up suddenly. “I’ve been battling through drugs and alcohol, everyone talks about drinking, smoking ... say that Gulpilil crazy one. But,” he lifts up his shirt to reveal



From left: Craig Ruddy's 2004 Archibald-winning portrait; with co-star Gary Sweet at the premiere of *The Tracker*; winning Best Actor at the AFls in 2002; Gulpilil in the outback last year; (below) in Adelaide for his one-man show.

a sleek, muscled torso, "I never put on weight; I'm a thoroughbred."

Gulpilil's exploits in the "raging" 70s are legendary. He partied with John Lennon in London and performed in Central Park with Jimi Hendrix. He met Bob Marley in Hawaii and Marlon Brando in Hollywood. His acting (and drinking) mentors were his *Walkabout* co-star John Meillon, who'd be on set "shaking, couldn't stand", and Dennis Hopper – "mad, really mad one; it was whisky and marijuana and kissing cameras," Gulpilil laughs. "Dennis Hopper comes from the heart, that's where acting is. I mean, drinking and smoking – everyone does that." He throws me a look. "I have to join in whitefellas' corroboree sometimes."

By the mid-80s, the stress of living "whitefella way", homesickness and depression had taken their toll. He was rarely offered film roles, occasionally performing traditional dance for tourists and sleeping rough in Darwin parklands. In 1987, when Gulpilil should have been receiving his Member in the Order of Australia for his service to the arts, he was in jail for drink-driving. A second stint in jail followed 13 years later, with the magistrate saying that Gulpilil had given Australia and his people a lot but he could have done more if he'd stayed away from the grog.

"I must be stupid but I learnt in jail." Gulpilil becomes serious. "Jail was shocking. It was very hard; the number of young Aboriginal kids in custody." He slaps his hand on the table, agitated. "One little black fellow, hanging himself... But they look after me. I have to wash the dishes, 252 dishes. That was my job, clean up, inside out, clean up the drugs, clean up the fingernails..." he trails off as his mobile rings.

It is his eldest son, Jida, who is in his early 30s. David has three children – two sons and a daughter, Phoebe, 13 – from three women; only Jamie, 19, lives a traditional life with him. "I need a big mob of wives," he laughs, winking. Some 15 years ago he took a tribal wife, Robyn Djunginy, a talented artist. He thrusts photos into my hand – Jamie and David carving spears; Robyn, proud and severe in a turquoise dress, with David sitting behind like a tribal chieftain.

Gulpilil's crew are hovering anxiously, waiting to leave. He ignores them and fetches a green shirt embroidered with "Australian Crocodile Tracker". "I'm a crocodile tracker," he says. "This year making a tele-feature film with me as the Crocodile Hunter, maybe we get Steve Irwin along... Next year doing *Ten Canoes* with Rolf de Heer. It's an Aboriginal story about before white men came."

Gulpilil wants to keep talking and we decide to finish the interview on the trip back to Adelaide. I drive. Gulpilil talks, his giant fingers wrapped around my microphone like a horny claw. How did you learn to hunt? "I born with it.

I'm part of the wilderness ... I go hunting for crocodile, turtles ... I do fishing with spear." Every day? "You got to get up in the morning and finish about 4 o'clock. I don't get paid for that." Gulpilil frequently returns to this gripe about "the hole in his pocket" and that he's owed a house by the government (construction on his father's land was abandoned because it was difficult to reach). "He can't manage money," says ex-partner Airlie Thomas, who lived with him on and off from 1991 to 1994. "He lives in a culture where everything belongs to everybody. He could have unlimited money and he would still not have enough."

When asked about his homeland, he melts. "I miss it, I love it, lonely, no city, no nothing ... I can feel the spirit of the land, message coming through my body. Maybe my son calling me." He pokes my arm. "I feel it there. Or sister calling me, I get a message here." He touches his leg. "My father is there somewhere. I sit on the land and start singing. I feel the spirits around me." He gazes out the car window.

In *Gulpilil*, which received a standing ovation every night at last month's Adelaide Festival, his humpy is re-created on stage and a real fire burns in a tin drum. The performance closes with him daubing himself in white paint and, while he invokes the spirit of the crocodile, beginning an eerie hunting dance. It fills the theatre with an atmosphere of wildness and stillness. As he leaps, the flames cast shadows behind. His wailing song lifts the rafters as if sounding a call to the ancient spirits to come home.

But in the car it's the struggle between black and white Australia that concerns him. "I cry for my people," he says. "I want change, make it equal between balanda [white, and] Yolngu people." He motions towards the road ahead. "Just like this bitumen, you know, one lane, one way. Black and white, one red blood. I want same like that, because I am your first-class man from country of Australia called Aboriginal." □

David Gulpilil, Two Worlds by Craig Ruddy is part of the Archibald Prize exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW until May 16 and at the Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne, November 6 to January 9, 2005.

