

## The little boat with big ideas

January 18, 2007

**Two ways of looking deep into faces provide unusual angles on life, writes Robert McFarlane.**

THE community arts organisation Big hART is showing the results of a photographic project designed to bring disparate members of the Sutherland Shire community together.

A Chinese junk has been turned into a mobile platform for a multimedia display featuring photographs and video footage of (and by) local citizens. Known as *Junk Theory*, the exhibition has been touring Sydney's foreshores since early December. Last Friday the junk arrived at Lavender Bay at dusk for a presentation to a modest but enthusiastic audience.

With its sails glowing from slowly changing projections of photographs and video, the vessel resembled a butterfly as it zigzagged through crowded moorings to reach the northern tip of Lavender Bay. A small crowd that had patiently watched the fragile vessel making its way from beyond the Harbour Bridge cheered politely as it sailed to within a few metres of the sandstone seawall.

It was the most improbable of scenes for an overcast January night in Sydney - as if a bizarre cargo cult had suddenly emerged from within the harbour city's affluent lower North Shore. Watching Keith Saunders's evocative photographs of children's faces dissolving into abstract fields of colour as Wei Zen Ho's haunting soundscape drifted across the harbour, I sensed a keen irony (considering Australia's infamous racist yellow peril taunts of past centuries) in choosing a junk for a unifying cultural symbol.

There was also a modest, though poorly displayed, series of colour photographs on shore of Sutherland locals. Seeing these pictures at night in Lavender Bay nevertheless reinforced the idea of exhibiting photography in public, and reminded me of how impressive David Byrne's photographs were when shown in Circular Quay bus shelters during a previous Sydney Festival.

Clearly photography deserves the life of the street as much as the comfort of an art gallery.

The veteran fashion photographer Denis Piel is showing several large colour prints from his *Facescapes* series at Alliance Francaise in the city. Now based in France, Piel photographed the citizens of a village, focusing on part of each person's face and then enlarging it. This creates a sometimes corrugated facescape with occasional tufts of human foliage - either from an errant beard or the arc of an eyelash. While compositionally strong, more of each face needs to be seen to fully



Blowin' in the wind ... a junk becomes a floating gallery.

Photo: Robert McFarlane

discover the subject's character. Piel has directed a film using his facescapes to show changes in French village life.

## SEE FOR YOURSELF

- *Junk Theory* will make its final appearance at Fairlight Bay at 8pm on January 25. Photographs from the project can also be seen at an exhibition at Hazlehurst Regional Gallery, The Kingsway, Gympie, from next weekend.

- *Facescapes* by Denis Piel is at Alliance Francaise, 257 Clarence Street, until January 31.

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