

*With a View to Paradise*

# Valerie Sparks

Linden St Kilda Centre for Contemporary Arts  
26 November – 19 December 2004  
by Ulanda Blair

*Below: Valerie Sparks  
With a View to Paradise Gallery 1, 2004  
Light-jet print  
200 x 85cm  
Image courtesy of the artist*



The 19th century family home that now houses the Linden St Kilda Centre for Contemporary Arts boasts a grandiose history ripe for site-specific installation. With its imposing staircase, intricately decorated fireplaces and ceiling-to-floor bay windows, this Victorian mansion demands attention in its own right – an appeal that was recently heeded by digital artist Valerie Sparks.

*With a View to Paradise* presented four large-scale photographs of the Linden interior, which was rendered strangely unfamiliar through digital manipulation. The usually bright and airy gallery spaces were garbed in gaudy, early 19th century French wallpaper that featured assorted visions of a Pacific tropical paradise. From the window panes and cornices sprouted palm trees and succulents; along the skirting boards lay cobbled rocks and ferns; and enfolding the windows and doorways was a floating seascape panorama, replete with a lush, mountainous backdrop. Packed with pictorial detail, colour and visual depth, the prints were installed sparingly, creating an uneasy tension between the stark, light-filled interiors of the actual galleries and their re-presentation as heavily concentrated, curiously claustrophobic spaces.

A photograph displayed in the Linden entrance depicted the space around you, albeit walls transformed. Here a grey-on-white, hard-line tropical vista sprung from the skirting board, its palms spreading across the lemon-coloured Victorian wallpaper that was supposedly pasted above. Three other impressions of Linden showed the walls adorned with sultry island fantasies, their stark European light belying their supposed Pacific origins. Above the entrance to Gallery One was a skerrick of distressed, digitally produced wallpaper suggestive of Linden's domestic past.

*With a View to Paradise Gallery 3* was arguably the most remarkable print in the series. The faux wallpaper was rose-tinted like idealisation itself and depicted a misty mélange of colonial flora that could just as easily have been appropriated from a kitsch 1970s tourist brochure bearing the exhibition's flippant title, as from a piece of décor favoured by bygone French aristocracy. In this photograph a view of the dense shrubbery and stately architecture of Linden's real exterior could be seen through the Gallery's bay window – confusing the eye with its partial and not-quite-perfect incorporation of the familiar into the foreign. Mobilising an uncanny amalgam of two-dimensional and three-dimensional space, realism and replication, familiarity and exoticism, proximity and distance, Sparks's slippery imagining of a colonialist paradise rested within one's grasp and yet eluded it.

*With a View to Paradise* placed the authority of a white, mythic, pre-immigration Australia, along with its socially retrograde concept of the exotic, within a perspective of historical and cultural relativism. Eschewing the simple temptation to disregard Linden's history and to treat the space as a tabula rasa, Sparks explicitly engaged with her surrounds, and in doing so interrogated an area of social, political and historical contestation. Like a hazy, part-forgotten memory, or a dream image slipping out of consciousness on the moment of waking, *With a View to Paradise* explored a weird and wonderful place and I feel all the better for having been there.

**Ulanda Blair is a Melbourne based writer and is Gallery Coordinator at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces.**