

A tale of two cities

Sydney's contemporary art museum joins forces with its San Diego equivalent.

EXHIBITION STEVE MEACHAM

YOU'VE heard of *The Simpsons Movie*, now meet the alternative version. A controversial three-minute digital animation by Californian artist Kota Ezawa, it features not Homer and Bart but another Simpson, OJ, and Judge Lance Ito, the man who presided over the 1995 trial that acquitted OJ of a double murder.

"It's a truly wonderful work," says Museum of Contemporary Art senior curator Rachel Kent. "The OJ Simpson trial was played out on TV and radio as a kind of international media spectacle. Kota Ezawa has reduced it down to this very stylised cartoon. It's very simplified but instantly recognisable, crystallising the imagery of the trial. That

trial became a media circus and this is his comment on that process."

Ezawa is one of the younger, emerging US artists whose work features in *Southern Exposure*, which runs until June 1 at the Museum of Contemporary Art and showcases the collection of the equivalent museum in San Diego.

Kent has co-curated the exhibition with her Californian counterpart, Dr Stephanie Hanor. It's the first time the Sydney museum has taken part in a joint exhibition of this kind with a sister institution on a different continent. It will be followed this time next year with a second show, this time at the MCA in San Diego, featuring video works from the Sydney collection.

According to Kent, the joint initiative has an artistic potency because the two museums have so much in common. Both are in Pacific Rim cities with fabulous

harbours and a mix of old and new cultures. Both institutions are roughly the same size and have similar ambitions, concentrating on work primarily from their regions.

The result is an exhibition that introduces Australians to 25 of the key artists and works to emerge from the West Coast, and particularly California and northern Mexico, over a 40-year period.

Some of the artists are well-known internationally: Robert Irwin, Vija Celmins, Ed Ruscha and Bill Viola. Others, such as Ezawa, Glenn Kaino and the Torolab collective from Tijuana – the Mexican city on the other side of the border from San Diego – are relative newcomers.

"There's quite a strong political, social or environmental current running through the exhibition," Kent says.

For example Chris Burden's 1979 installation, *The Reason For The Neutron*

Bomb, is made out of 50,000 nickel (five-cent) coins and a heap of unlit matchsticks. "It's a play on currency and energy. An inflammatory piece, literally," Kent explains. "Burden was making this work at a time of considerable tension between the former Soviet Union and the United States."

Of course the work is still highly relevant, yet how dated the title seems. Who uses the phrase "Neutron bomb" these days? Or "Soviet Union", come to that?

Alexis Smith's 1985 wall painting, *Men Seldom Make Passes At Girls Who Wear Glasses*, is one of several works which address sexism and female liberation. The title comes from humorist Dorothy Parker's famous 1937 quip, yet Smith chose Marilyn Monroe for her illustration – and the glasses the Hollywood glamour girl is wearing contain images of macho sportsmen.

Likewise, Barbara Kruger's 1982 photograph *Untitled (Memory Is Your Image Of Perfection)* is one of a series that, Kent says, "reflects on the way the media represents the female body via advertising".

Southern Exposure, works from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, is at the Sydney MCA until June 1.