remind us they are still around. What is particularly eloquent, and shocking in its own right, is the characters' absolute self-confidence, the assurance with which their values are held and invoked. It is impossible not to be deeply impressed by the categoric certainty of Laurie's account of his stepson, Michael's, motivations, for instance, or by Noelene's complete lack of self-doubt. Watching her, I was repeatedly reminded of one of Magda Szubanska's characters in Fast Forward: the chain-smoking, heavily made-up office worker whose children are abandoned to all kinds of misfortune while she wearily complains about their ingratitude.

Unlike most soap opera, however, Sylvania Waters does get harder to watch. I find it increasingly uncomfortable precisely because it demonstrates the hardness of social myths and prejudices, how old attitudes die hard. In some of the conversations, we do hear the conventional public voice of a contemporary, liberal-democratic Australia. But always insistently elbowing its way in is a much less tolerant, democratic, and pluralistic set of views. Sylvania Waters is often just plain ugly, because the ideologies which surface in 'private' conversations and behaviours are unrepentantly consumerist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and sexist. In contrast to the material sophistication of their resort-style way of life, what these people say makes them seem like they just stepped off the set of Married with Children—only this is no sitcom. The result, for many viewers I have talked to, is major embarrassment. Noelene's expression of pride in her lust for a black stripper, a pride that is actually fuelled rather than undercut by her racism, gets my vote as one of the most embarrassing moments in Australian television.

Australian television has a strong tradition of the exploitation of embarrassment—from Norman Gunston to Perfect Match to Red Faces. But it's never been quite like this. In the past, the 'ordinary Australian' has largely been off the hook. Even our sitcoms have been relatively tactful in comparison with those of other national TV industries. The Australian television industry has not produced the equivalent of Till Death Us Do Part, or All in the Family—sharply satirical but ultimately tolerant representations of lumpen regressive-ness—until now. (The closest we got was probably Kingswood Country.)

The worry is that while All in the Family relied on scripts performed by professional actors before an audience, Sylvania Waters involves members of the middle class performing renditions of their everyday life for the sole benefit of seeing themselves on TV. Where the worry turns to fascination is that the performances not only establish the differences between them and us, they also make it hard to deny the similarities.

Relief from this discomfort is on its way, however. At least one commercial channel is producing its own version of Sylvania Waters to counter the ABC, and to avoid surrendering a whole genre of television to the competition. The sharp edge is clearly going to get duller when we face an evening with 'suburbia verité' on all channels, offering us the choice of Sylvania Waters, Killarney Heights, Green Valley and Sanctuary Cove. Thank God, SBS can't afford to produce its own.

GRAEME TURNER teaches in English at the University of Queensland. He is co-author of Myths of Oz (Allen and Unwin).

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**Cultural Football**

The treasures of Angkor Wat are in Canberra: how they got there is a complicated story. Jeremy Eccles explains.

Culture as a political football is a metaphor that we don't often encounter in white Australia, where football is so much more important than the arts, education and history that it usually appropriates all the best imagery. Will we ever compare the flashing elegance of the 'Macedonian Imagery. Will we ever compare the 'Macedonian

Perhaps the first thing to insist upon is that the treasures are worth seeing for purely aesthetic reasons. The sheer youthfulness of the faces and bodies of the Khmer statuary will be my most

lasting impression of this glorious work, made between the sixth and 13th centuries AD.; the youth, and the beauty of the very human models, compared to the more stylized work being done elsewhere in Asia at the same time. The gods are the same—Buddha, Vishnu, Krishna, and so on. But the royal princess whose likeness was used for the Buddhist goddess of Perfect Wisdom is recognisably a child before she is divine; the seventh century standing Buddha has liquid drapery covering its youthfully swelling tummy; and the tenderly meditative stone Head of Jayavarman VII—both King and Buddha—forever seals in his youth a King who may have reigned into his 90s.

But the politics were there from the start. Indian traders allowed the mon-
soons to blow them eastwards, but then had to wait a few months on the other side of the Gulf of Thailand before return was possible. They had plenty of time to pass on ideas and art styles to the distinctly less sophisticated Khmers — who were probably only then, in the fifth and sixth centuries, emerging from tribalism. Hinduism and Buddhism seem to have been bought separately by the tribal leaders and the people, with the future kings particularly taken with the Hindu concept of the deva-rahja, the god-king. To have your authority backed by divine force was much better than the vote. But you had to be able to prove it. Hence, every king from 800 to 1250—and some lesser mortals—built his own temple city. Angkor Wat, the most famous temple, is but one of these: a moated area 1300 by 1500 metres which housed religious officials in a sub-division of the city named Angkor by subsequent generations. No one knows its original name. The lower, perimeter galleries of the temple housed educational bas reliefs telling stories from *The Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Priests officiated at higher levels while the King himself held Brahmanistic court with the gods in the uppermost sanctuary—possibly going through nightly fecundity rites. The whole pattern was modelled on Borobudur in Java, recreating Mount Meru, the mountain home of the gods.

What no one knows from the evidence of existing stone tablets — no other writing survives — is who the nonymous artists and craftsmen were who created these many wonders, which certainly didn’t just copy Indian models. It has been assumed that the wealth necessary to afford so much non-productive labour derived from a parallel massive irrigation system. Over 250 years, three huge barays were built to hold 75 million cubic metres of water which, in turn, allowed three rice crops a year. But some historians throw doubts on this efficiency— and no one seems to know whether an assumed Angkor population of 750,000 was held in slavery to achieve all this, or whether they willingly accepted a metempsychotic society in which only the royals were hereditary (and had divine backing) and everyone else earned their place.

How did this whole edifice crumble into the jungles? In 1298, a Chinese traveller described a going civilisation (including the then 300 year old *Reclining Vishnu* statue in bronze whose gnarled and pitted head and shoulders amazingly sit in Canberra today). Then nothing, until the French ‘rediscovered’ the temples in the 19th century and tried to tell their colonial subjects that they must have been built by a different race of giants.

It seems likely that encroaching Chams (from Vietnam) and the Thais were involved. There have been suggestions of drugs and homosexuality. The last kings’ conversion to the people’s religion of Buddhism may have diminished their power (while also producing the miraculously meditative *Head of Jayavarman VII*). Maybe all that temple building destroyed the economy, for the wonderful Bayon temple required 54 towers decorated with 216 giant Buddhist heads. Could there even have been a positive decision to relocate to Phnom Penh on that great artery of trade and communication, the Mekong?

Whatever their motives, the French did much to tell the world about the Khmer wonders. They excavated in stifling heat, they hacked back jungle trees and creepers, they rebuilt heaps of stones into temples, and they founded the National Museum. Virtually none of their research, though, was fed back to the Cambodians; the Canberra exhibition catalogue is claimed to be the first in both English and Khmer. This perhaps goes some way to explain why the Khmer Rouge, while attempting to deny the very existence of history with their concept of
Year Zero, simply ignored their artistic birthright. They locked the doors but failed to destroy it—as they set out to destroy anyone who might have an understanding of it, and anyone who might be able to organise its conservation.

This is where the Australian National Gallery came in. Eighteen months ago, Asian curator Michael Brand set out through South East Asia to make institutional links. In Phnom Penh he met Pich Keo, now director of the National Museum—the sole survivor from French days, saved because his archeology-roughened hands were mistaken for those of a peasant. Brand realised that exchanges of art were of far less use to the Cambodians than a swap of their art for Australian skills and training facilities. This became political when Gareth Evans took the deal to Prime Minister Hun Sen and also won the enthusiastic backing of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Agreement was signed last December. Amazingly, no money has changed hands for an exhibition insured for US$35 million, and few details have been worked out yet for Australia's contributions in kind.

At this stage cultural politics entered the arena. The Japanese had plans for an exhibition in 1993, but the Cambodians wanted Australia honoured first. Then the French, British and Americans wanted to take the Australian exhibition on to their countries. But the sheer logistics of choosing pieces strong enough to travel (two were left behind at the last moment because of uncertainty), constructing individual packing cases for each piece (which the Cambodians will keep), and involving the RAAF (the only organisation used to Phnom Penh airport with planes big enough and its own lifting equipment) all combined to make onward travel impossible. And, as Michael Brand insists, decisions like that ought to wait until the Cambodians know enough about the conservation of their own art to come to their own conclusions.

With all this political football in the background, at the exhibition's opening Paul Keating spoke intensely of the "power of culture to unite people and heal differences". A message from Prince Sihanouk spoke of "once again achieving the greatness of the Angkor Period in Cambodia". An older Gareth Evans than the one who backed-packed around Cambodia in the 60s looked on benevolently. But perhaps the happiest person there was Sylvie Kea Chin, a young woman who has spent more than 20 years in Australia, but who felt that now she was reuniting herself with her real culture. "My people lost their souls under the Khmer Rouge, but we always had postcards, photos and wall-hangings at home of these artworks, which kept our culture alive. To see something like the Vishnu statue here in Canberra makes me feel so strong, knowing this was made by my people so long ago". Anyone intending to be anywhere near Canberra before 25 October should go to see what she means.

JEREMY ECCLES is a Sydney freelance writer.