

# Let the Healing Begin

ANNE KIRKER

A very 'cool' but emotionally affecting and instructive show, *Let the Healing Begin* is to my mind one of the most courageous to have been mounted by the Institute of Modern Art's Director Robert Leonard and his staff. While rather sensationally billed in the IMA's promotional material (no doubt to attract audiences) this exhibition of some twenty Australian and international artists integrates private confessional aspects of themselves and/or observations of others into their work, without self-indulgence or mere voyeuristic intention. Furthermore, while the media release states that the show addresses 'therapy', or to be more specific: 'Some of the works endorse therapeutic imperatives, some satirise them, others are undecided', my own way of responding is simply to engage with the imagery through the prism of one individual's sensibility and life-experience.

Therefore this review does not attempt a clinician's analysis (as I am not a psychologist and have limited familiarity with psychiatry) nor do I necessarily take the artists' stated intentions as paramount. In the realm of the unconscious,

very different operatives are at work, after all.

While it is often helpful to have a publication supporting an exhibition, in this case, none is particularly necessary as the exhibits themselves are highly articulate, in a number of ways it seems, through their actual imagery. The term 'mental illness' is nowhere overtly evident, and why should it be? Transgression from the narrow band of what is considered normal human behavior is fortunately gaining acceptance; in fact, deviation from acceptable thought patterns and activities is now considered by many to be part of the complex fabric of lives fully lived. For instance, readers of *Art & Australia's* current issue may remember Craig Judd's sympathetic piece on Dani Marti's portrait of art collector Peter Fay which in dual-channel video form is one of the most tender and beautiful exposés of old age interfaced with youthfulness (as though inseparable) through male sexual intimacy.<sup>1</sup> The work, called *Bacon's dog*, is in the IMA show and indicates the high calibre of practically all the exhibits.

They are carefully paced through three white

rooms and also extend to the institute's film and lecture black box. An early performance piece of 1978 of a screaming match between Marina Abramovic and Ulay, is one of the exhibition's first encounters, a violent 'bit for tat' which one speculates may be some ways off, as they say, reconciliation. The video is situated next-door to Californian Mike Kelley and his poster imagery of 1999 that not only takes to task the lack of an adequate health system in the United States but our lack of self esteem in the face of widespread celebrity culture. The header of the largest piece declares: 'The Greatest Tragedy of President Clinton's Administration'. Tony Oursler's well-known three-dimensional blobs (or, rather, humanoid forms) are represented here by *Blue* (2004), which in a tragicomic manner has two eyes in constant movement including crossing over each other, closing and opening.

As there are many links in this exhibition to the notion of 'looking' and 'being looked at', the Oursler is not surprisingly positioned to directly face a small three-sided chamber painted black. Here UK artist Gillian Wearing's film *Trauma* (2000) is played on a loop; the act of masked subjects (middle-aged people) giving testimony of childhood events is relentless. These events have scarred them psychologically. To enhance the work's private 'talking therapy' experience, Wearing's footage is housed in the claustrophobic chamber to suggest a religious confessional.

It is no accident with this show that, apart from aesthetic reasons, generous pauses are given between the various individual works and groups of works and furthermore, some have more muted emotional impact. In this regard it was conceptually duey to give Peter Tyndall plenty of wall space for a range of his detail *A Person Looks At A Work of Art / someone looks at something* works, which he has pursued consistently since the early 1980s, in a show that could so easily have become mawkish. I also enjoyed seeing Melbourne's Rose Nolan again, with her catchy, albeit pathetic, text placards. These, with their intentionally awkward words of protest, like *RUOK*, truly touched a nerve and reminded me of those who are destitute and homeless yet reach out to others in whatever way they can. Any show like this in Australia would be remiss without the inclusion of Mike Parr and his articulate performances and presentations on his practice. Projected large on a single wall, his *Cathartic Action: Social Gesture No.5* is as potent for today's audiences as it was back in 1977. The pink, knitted prosthetic arm (made by his sister Julie Rrap) is both witty and ghoulish; and not too far removed from Mike Kelley's later performances.

Next-door is expatriate Australian Polly Borland, represented here with colour photographs from her *Smudge* series (2010). This medley of strange apparitions of individuals disguised in all manner of painting-style regalia raises questions of conventional tropes of portraiture. At any rate, this was my 'take' on them as much as their IMA description in being 'about people unmaking themselves through carnivalesque gender-bending dress-ups'. Given Borland's overall practice, are they also such a far cry from her high-end fashion photography? The same question could be levelled at Pierre Molinier's





mid-20<sup>th</sup> century cross-dresser (himself) in fish net stockings, high heels and tantalising poses.

Obviously masquerade as a primary expressive device for individuals who are compelled to keep their secret identities just that, extends in *Let the Healing Begin* to Robin Hungerford's *Like a Mole in the Head, Part 3* (2010). The painted paper trail spewing out of the video's papier-mâché head and shoulders covering the small-stature individual, must surely resonate with those of us who feel compelled often to utter meaningless dialogue simply to fit in with Western society's democratic mores.

On this note, it was a joy to also come across a large-scale etching from London by Grayson Perry that emulates old cartography where geography is matched not merely by lines and names but by small pictures. *Map of Nowhere* (2008) is engrossing for its organic terrain populated by buildings and creatures and by irreverent words. (These apparently are based on a medieval notion of the self as a *mappa mundi*, where exterior and interior are simultaneously mapped). No wonder this exhibition has brought delight, as much as keen introspection and empathy, to such a healthy number of visitors.

1. Craig Judd, 'Bacon's dog', Dani Martin's portrait of Peter Fay, *Art & Australia*, Autumn 2011, pp. 426-429.

*Let the Healing Begin* was shown at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 5 March to 30 April 2011. [www.ima.org.au](http://www.ima.org.au)

Dr Anne Kirker is an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane.



P44: Polly Borland, *UnWed W from Smudge*, 2010, chromogenic print, 76 x 65cm. Image courtesy and © Polly Borland, and Murray White Art Rooms, Melbourne

P45: 1/ Ronnie Van Hout, *Bananaman*, 2006. Private collection, Melbourne.

2/ Stuart Ringholt, *On Wednesday He Wore a Plastic Nose*, 2003, photograph. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne and Sydney.

3/Tony Ounler, *Blue*, 2004, fibre glass form with video and sound. Installation view, IMA, Brisbane, 2011. Collection: Andrew Jensen, Auckland. Image courtesy the artist and Uplands Gallery, Melbourne; Ivan Anthony, Auckland, and Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington.



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