

Playing the Part

Brent Harrison, Shannon McCulloch



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David Attwood: There's an episode of The Simpsons called 'Homer's Phobia', where upon discovering that his new friend John is gay, Homer attempts to distance himself from gayness, as if it were contagious, by doing masculine stuff that men do. Homer is paranoid that Bart might have caught the gayness, and tries to fight it off by taking him to the Ajax Steel Mill, to show Bart real men hard at work. The joke is that the mill's manager and all his workers are gay, and during breaks they turn the mill into a gay nightclub. The joke 'works' because we know that the unseen authors of The Simpsons do not genuinely believe that gayness is something to be cured, or is something at odds with masculinity, and so satirically exposes these ideas as absurd and laughable. Which isn't to say that these ideas or beliefs do not exist. Through caricature, satire, parody etc. potentially difficult terrain is navigated and illuminated. This seems to me to be one of many places to start discussing the works of Playing the Part...

Brent Harrison: I love that episode of The Simpsons. "ZZZAP!"

Shannon McCulloch: I think satire is an appropriate way to think about my drawings. The images are all stolen from pop culture, 20th - 21st century Australian painting, propaganda images, and parody material. They attempt to bring the different ways certain hyper-masculine archetypes have been mythologised through different mediums into the same fiction. On first impressions they could be read as further perpetuating these myths but I think the inclusion of images stolen from The Simpsons, First and Second World War propaganda etc help to undermine the images authority and expose their subsequent fictionalisation.

Is that the same episode where he ends up trying to take Bart hunting, and they

nearly kill Lisa because she tries to stop them?

B: I don't think so.

I agree with Shannon with regards to the use of appropriation to subvert images and their original meanings. In my work I have appropriated memorabilia and the iconography of Ben Cousins to explore the potential of Cousins as a gay icon.

S: Nah it is that episode, Barney, Moe and Homer decide to take Bart hunting to kill a deer because "they used to send people to war to kill a man and killing a deer is like killing a beautiful man."

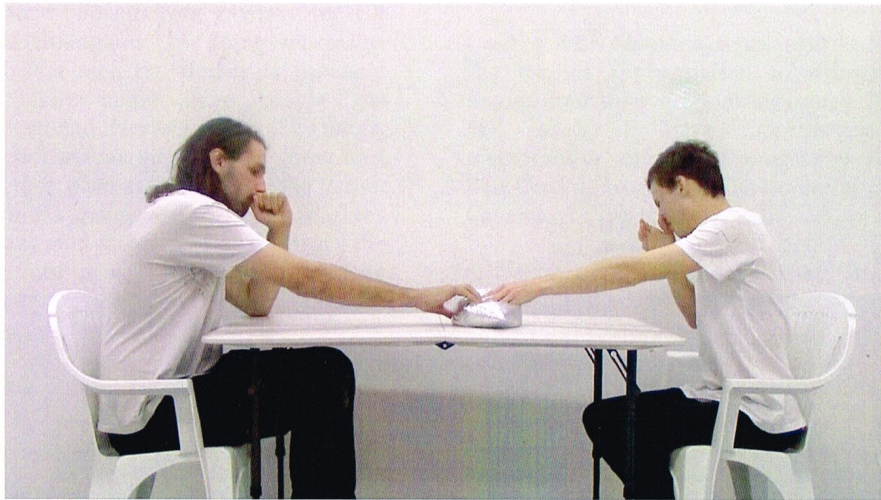
B: Oh yeah and then Bart says, something about "a bunch of guys alone in the woods... seems kinda gay."

D: I like the way you've described the process with which you've appropriated or referenced images from popular culture as stealing. It seems fitting to describe it this way when it's being used for critical rather than celebratory purposes. And its aussie af. Maybe you can both talk about how you see your work operating critically? Or is your being critical something I've misread or confused with another episode of The Simpsons?

B: I see my work operating critically by problematising elements of Western Australian hypermasculinity including the culture of the AFL and lad culture by using Ben Cousins as a point of departure. However, I also wouldn't go as far to say that my work isn't slightly celebratory of him, in performing as him and by creating essentially fan art, I think there is an element of love and adoration behind these works.

S: The fan art you create is appropriated from fan art that already exists as well though, so it's almost a parody of fan art.





S: It was important for me that I was stealing the imagery rather than appropriating in a way that other artists have. When Sidney Nolan or Adam Cullen used the likeness of Ned Kelly they made it their own, thus I think adding to the myth. I want mine to be a collection of other peoples created fictions and not my own mythologisation. I think its right to call the work critical. It's critical in a kind of cynical, humorous way.

I like the link between you making fan art of Ben Cousins and my fan art of Ned Kelly, as he obviously viewed Kelly to be some kind of hero, getting his famous last words tattooed across his stomach and ending up being a bit of an outlaw himself, or at least being a hang around.

D: The outlaw and the hang around.

B: Yeah definitely, I think the "SUCH IS LIFE" tattoo is a salute to the Australian hypermasculine attitude that "shit happens" and that men should be able to deal with anything that comes there way. When it isn't really as easy as that.

HARD OCHA

S: The pragmatic bloke. Fear and worry is sissy stuff mate.

D: I'm interested in the way you are both using celebrity as a material, in a similar way that someone like Lawrence Weiner talks about using language as a material, equivalent to wood or stone. I do wonder about how you negotiate the ethics of the use of 'celebrity as material' assuming you sympathise with this concept; is it something you think about? I guess it's different for you Brent in the sense that Cousins is alive and Kelly is not -and thus to parody him is more sensitive. Satire, trolling and the abuse of the celebrity is a practice incredibly prevalent across contemporary culture -is art more ethically obliged than other forms of commentary?

B: Yeah I would definitely agree I am using 'celebrity as a material' although for me I think it is a difficult space to navigate because I see Cousins as a victim of masculinity, and I aim to create work that is still respectful of him and his downfall but also critical of the Western Australian hypermasculine environment. I don't think that art is more ethically obliged than other forms of commentary...

S: For myself I don't feel conflicted ethically, for the most part the images I used already exist in another form and otherwise I have put myself into the image and any criticism I am directing toward a person or aspect of Australian culture they reference is ultimately also a criticism of myself.

I think what Brent says about Cousins being a victim of masculinity is a good point. I think Brent's work differs from the public criticism of Ben Cousins as a person. The media and public like to mock Cousin's fall from grace as something deserved, because of his own personal choices, but they don't acknowledge the culture that chews these young men up, and unless they hold up to the standard that same culture has created, they are spat out and ridiculed.

B: I believe that Shannon's statement about inserting himself into the artwork is also strongly evident in my own work. By performing within the iconography of Cousins, this allows for an access point to explore critical ideas in Australian hypermasculinity and Cousins life. However, in my work by performing as Cousins, I am not only exploring the way he functions as an icon or cultural reference point within an Western Australian masculine context, but I am also exploring and examining the relationship this has with Australian homosexual culture.

D: What are the other threads you see running through the show? I feel

inclined to read the goon bag drinking performance as a reference to a kind of camp/macho dichotomy...

S: The main objective was to finish the 5 litres between us in the 40 minute time frame we set, and viewing this as a kind of ritual of initiation into masculinity. The goon bag for us is a symbol of suburban, adolescent, binge drinking. It's implied within our culture that a real man can "hold his piss" and "knows how to drink". I think what is interesting about the performance is that we fail. The 5 litres is too much and not only do I vomit multiple times but we don't completely finish the wine. So in failing to fulfil the objective of the performance we fail to perform our masculinity.

D: Failing to perform an Australian masculinity -immediately conjures visions of Howard bowling terribly, Rudd pretending to like beer, Turnbull awkwardly cheering at the football... It seems to me that in these instances our public figures attempt to reflect the ideals of our national character, after all it's a condition of their job that they are liked, and their failure to do so is ridiculed and made fun of. In a more complex way than simply contributing to this laughing and pointing, it seems that the works in your show encourage a reassessment of the nature and politics of this ridicule -the ridicule itself more so than its subjects. It makes me feel kind of guilty about mocking those guys.

B: I think that's a good response, because it allows for a conversation to take place, rather than pointing out that certain ideals and values are incompatible with reality.

S: And I think its appropriate to ridicule and laugh at the idea that there is some sort of national character that public figures should try to reflect. It's not the failure to live up to these national masculine ideals that is funny, but the absurdity of there being such ideals in

the first place. I think our works try to unpack a little of where these ideals come from and examine who is falling victim to them.

D: Yeah, but man how can you not know how to bowl?

David Attwood is an artist based in Perth, and a Sessional Academic at the School of Design and Art, Curtin University.



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