

# *On Rage*

## Curated by Ben Quilty

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19 May – 6 June 2009

This exhibition *On Rage* began over five years ago when Ben Quilty, in Paris on the Brett Whiteley Travelling Scholarship, met German artist Ingo Gerken. The two men shared stories about masculinity and nationhood in their own countries. Gerken's accounts of renewed Nazism in Germany, championed by young men with short hair and short memories, prompted Quilty to reflect on the state of masculinity in Australia.

Since then Quilty's work has dealt progressively with the cult of masculinity; his heavily impastoed paintings expressing the rage, boredom and oblivion of growing up as a white male in Australia.

Along with Gerken (who is exhibiting a series of works on paper where collage body parts violate watercolour splotches) Quilty has selected six other male artists to exhibit under the banner of *On Rage*—the title of a recent essay by Germaine Greer which attributes the historic emasculation of Indigenous men to rage. This rage, according to Greer, fuels the violence endemic in Aboriginal communities and is a form of passive resistance to white Australia.

Quilty says, "I read Greer's essay in terms of the meaning it had for the broader male society and their zealous rites of passage—21st's, buck's parties and head wettings. They are absurd and often dangerous initiation processes. Society has failed to find a way to create meaningful initiation processes and young men have made up their own."

In Quilty's Self portrait *Smashed #4* the death-wish of the Aussie male is played out in paint. A clean canvas is smashed against a wet self portrait creating a butterfly print or Rorschach. Quilty then scrapes back the oil paint on one canvas leaving only the embedded trace (or shroud) which bears the striking likeness of the artist. But this is more than a self portrait—the lolling head of Caravaggio's *Holofernes* and an entire repertoire of annihilated men snap into focus.

Gunter Christmann left Berlin for Australia in 1959 (more than a decade before Gerken was born there). He left post war Germany with its culture of surveillance to make abstractions which were highly successful here in Australia. Made on Australia Day this year, *Say Cheese* is painted with ochres taken from the abandoned Aboriginal ochre pits around Sydney. His now figurative paintings revive the physical trace of Aboriginal culture, a culture that Christmann believes has been abandoned.

In *Ague (Preparations)*, a video work by Todd McMillan, rage becomes a type of fever, one that engenders pathos as a lone swimmer (McMillan) prepares to swim across the English Channel. The word *Ague*, which means fever, entered the English language in the fourteenth century, having crossed the English channel from France. Through his video work McMillan set himself up as a contemporary Hamlet—impotent and hopeless.

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David Griggs lends rage a malevolence in his painting Gacy Habitat. The prison cell of Chicago serial killer John Wayne Gacy, who began oil painting during his 14 years on death row, is covered in child like paintings of clowns, Jesus Christ and fellow murderer Charles Manson.

Materials aside, there is nothing soft about Alan Jones' sculptures. In That's the way it is #2 barbeques sport three trophy heads - white, black and brindle. Jones, like Quilty, sees himself as complicit in a history of violence and dispossession. His ancestor Robert Forrester while working as a farmer in Windsor where Jones now lives, shot an Indigenous boy but was never found guilty. The fabric used in Jones' sculpture was sequestered from his mother's linen cupboard.

Leslie Rice paints onto black velvet in delicious mimicry of Australiana kitsch. His dramatic subjects however are more reminiscent of Caravaggio than caravan parks. So It Begins (Abel Slain) depicts the first murder – the slaying of Abel by his brother Cain. Rice questions the origin of the violence we inhabit.

Like Rice, Daniel Boyd uses realism and skillful execution to ensure his audience. A picture book lion, the emblem of the British empire, confronts the viewer (his prey) with a deadly stare. An Aboriginal artist from the Kudjla and Gangalu peoples, Boyd questions the heroes of empire and by both titling and labeling the work "Once upon a time" he resists the fictions of our history.

**Lisa Slade, May 2009**