EIGHT EMBARRASSED MALES: HALF-ARSED AND ARSE-BACKWARDS IN THE BACKWOODS

Liam Roderick

Don’t worry about the world coming to an end today. It’s already tomorrow in Australia
– Charles Schulz

The trouble is that Queensland gets branded as being part of Australia
– Joh Bjelke-Petersen

In the past 25 years, Queensland has pushed a new ‘cultured’ identity of skyscrapers, museums and festivals, that seeks to replace its image of the ‘wayward and backward’ state. As Daniel Rautio notes, these conditions create an ambiguous field of old and new as historic leftovers are mixed with forever new aspirations for a (slightly) different sort of Queensland. It is the embodiment of governmental aspiration facing the legacy of the state’s authoritarian past and a long-term trend of suspicion of intellectual reflection, aesthetics and cultural progression.1 For much of the twentieth century this suspicion was central to the ‘Australian character’; while identities of other cities shifted, ‘cultural cringe’ reinforces Queensland’s ‘lukewarm’, ‘wayward and backward’ state within an upside down nation.2

Notions of an ideal Australian masculinity and a national sense of humour emerged concurrently. Focused on convictism, pioneering and the bush, early jokes were tied to perceptions of the ideal character as egalitarian, anti-authoritarian and irreverent. In the 1870s, Queensland’s government championed a manliness of morality, religiosity and intellectual development to attempt to counteract the struggles with convicts, barbarism of the settlers and perceived decline from the tenants of old-world civilisation. School boys were encouraged to adopt traits of an idealised femininity to escape such brutishness and barbarism. However, by 1900, an anti-feminine, militarist, athletic, white masculine ideal was established that all but silenced intellectual and artistic voices. To be interested in intellect, to play the fool or to avoid manly games, especially organised team sports, made one effeminate, a burden and ‘notoriously evil’.3

In Queensland, both intellectuals and larrikins – lower middle class youth who were branded as delinquents and stirred great moral panic – were caricatured as the epitome of vulgar taste.4 By early to mid twentieth century, the larrikin sensibility evolved to denote ‘authentically “Australian” characteristics of non-conformism, irreverence, lawlessness and impudence’.5 This irreverence gave Australian humour a dismissive and reductive quality of wry fatalism that shatters pretensions, but can also reinforce social conformity and inequity. David Malouf suggests that low levels of formal education in Queensland until mid twentieth century influenced people to value realism and loyalty and be remarkably suspicious of new creative forms and ideas. This suspicion leant a paradoxical quality to the rapid development of Brisbane; stuck on the precipice of modernity, Brisbane was both languid and busy.

From the mid twentieth century artist and protest groups challenged these conservative socio-political and cultural conditions. In the 1940s and 50s art and publishing groups forced new experimental ideas on the ‘insular’ population and the following decades saw groups explore creative and humorous forms of protest. Art spaces in the 80s provided ‘alternative’ forms of exhibition and support in otherwise disinterested conditions. The 1970s and 80s saw the emergence of hard rock, punk and heavy metal music, and a parallel rise in less regimented sporting sub-cultures like surfing, skateboarding and BMX riding.
These cultures – often emerging from suburban, rural and regional zones – developed as resistant anomalies to the rhetoric of idealised, dominant masculinity. Spaces were set up to experience the mental and emotional pleasures of escape and self-expression in a society that places pressure on males to toe the line.

By creating alternative understandings of physicality, musicality, ethnicity and nationhood, these scenes developed different ways for individuals to question and renegotiate their own identities and express frustration with the systems that brand them in limited ways. New, intricate relationships between pleasure, politics and identity emerged; alternative masculinities fucked with dominant ideals, authority and religiosity while producing complex politics of power, privilege and exclusion. These developments paralleled the rise of the ‘bogan’ as a “rough” person tied to hard rock or heavy metal music, car culture and beer. First used in the 80s within these ‘alternative’ cultures to identify insiders from outsiders and to be self-deprecating, its use in broader culture grew to disparagingly brand individuals, often those part of these sub-cultures, as an epitome of vulgar taste (Gibson, 2013).

Hyperbole, artifice and grossly, humorously exaggerated rage; misappropriations and misinterpretations; painfully mundane, grotesque, medieval, occult or seemingly juvenile elements; material and word play where names, titles, logos and lyrics act as signifiers for things outside of conventions or normalcy; piss taking and heckling as complex loops of ‘in jokes’ – these ‘alternative’ strategies, the ‘stuff’ of heavy metal, surf, BMX and skate cultures and their modes of resistance, are key to the artworks of Joseph Breikers and Timothy P. Kerr.

Breikers and Kerr’s individual and collaborative works are deceptively light and often quite awkward. They borrow materials and ideas from other artists and found objects to create absurd juxtapositions, assemblages, one-liners and visual puns. This rejection of traditional skill and emphasis on the ideational and material possibilities of (mis)understandings critiques the romanticised ‘heroic’ lone male artist as genius, while also playing with the history of such rejection. Today, there are, of course, multiple, and divergent masculinities in Australia; at times, the hegemonic “authentic” ‘Aussie’ returns as spectre, sometimes on sporting fields, often on TV shows. But there is also greater ambivalence towards the “tough, stoic independence” of the ideal man and the emergence of new types of mateship.

Art, as executed in Eight Embarrassed Males, collapses the “authentic” and quotidian into unexpected configurations that question notions of taste, authority and social codes. These nonsensical formal systems and exchanges play with the seductive qualities of artworks that are humorous, banal or ugly. The critical and creative possibilities of this seduction lies in its ambivalence that creates space for turning relations between contemporary art, humour and masculinity on their head. Playing off categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, humour and societal realms and roles, their artworks engage the viewer with a humour that elicits a response, despite, or perhaps because of, our lofty intentions and expectations of art. Here we see art as a constellation of signs misrepresenting concepts that seem apparent though less than concrete, throwing up contradictions and spitting out slippages of words, materials and situations.

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