

EDUCATION COLLECTION NOTES

INVESTIGATING KEY ARTWORKS IN THE GALLERY
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ART
GALLERY
NSW

ADAM CULLEN LET'S GET LOST ANYTHING I SAY OR DO AUSTRALIAN SAINTS





ADAM CULLEN Australia b1965

LETS GET LOST 1999
 synthetic polymer paint, ink and enamel on board
 120 x 242.2 cm
 Contemporary Collection Benefactors' 1999
 © Adam Cullen



ADAM CULLEN Australia b1965

ANYTHING I SAY OR DO 2001
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
153 x 214 cm
Contemporary Collection Benefactors' 2003
© Adam Cullen



ADAM CULLEN Australia b1965

AUSTRALIAN SAINTS 1999
synthetic polymer paint, ink and enamel on board
107.8 x 208 cm
Contemporary Collection Benefactors' 1999
© Adam Cullen

ADAM CULLEN

AUSTRALIA b1965

I was in Spain with my parents, in the Prado, when I was nine and a half, and apparently I was in awe of this image. It was called *Saturn devouring his children*. It was a small work by Goya, and he was there chewing on this infant's head. I was overtaken with as much emotion as a nine and a half year old person can endure and/or fathom. I was there for almost an hour staring at this thing, and it's stuck with me until now ... It's incredible how uplifting and inspiring artworks can be, even if they're repulsive, or demonic or black – they still inspire you.

Adam Cullen 2006¹

Cullen presents the un-palatable 'other' to middle Australia, an other of aggression, impotence, racism, missing resolve and bad decisions. While it may seem extreme, it is also a place in which, amongst both hard realities and gross distortions, unflinching honesty and empathy can be found.

curator Wayne Tunncliffe 2008²

Adam Cullen won Sydney's prestigious Archibald Prize in the year 2000. It was a portrait of red-bearded actor David Wenham. The choice of subject was astute. Heartthrob in the TV series *Seachange* as Diver Dan, but also as the ex-con in the dark and disturbing film *The boys* (directed by Rowan Woods 1998) who, when released from prison, joins up with his violent brothers to commit a senseless crime. It was Wenham in this latter role that drew Cullen to him as a subject, and perhaps the wit was in sandwiching the two images – nice and nasty – together. Why did he do this and what does it mean?

Rather than go for photorealism, Cullen brought to the portrait a slapdash expressive style, that expressive reticence which so defines masculinity in Australia. The cartoonish contours in Cullen's pictures seem to generate no formal tension with the framing edge. No material is too dumb (marker pens, biro, aerosol cans), no image too mean (a tree stump, a pair of underpants with aialis), and no notion too 'sick' (a decapitated angel praying to a large-breasted female corpse) to be beyond further debasement.

Portrait of David Wenham puzzled your average punter at the Archibald. Why didn't one of the other artists get the prize? They seemed to have worked so much harder to get their representations down; their scale of ambition, in terms of effort, was so much more. With Cullen's work the finessed brushstroke has been replaced by a violent crossing out, an acrylic dribble and aerosol smudge.

Cullen's pictures are more than just about aesthetic decorum; they are about aesthetic emergency. Who cares about table manners during an air-raid? Decorum is the way in which art genres like landscape and portrait, as can be seen in the Archibald and Sulman prizes, give you an acknowledged set of procedures. With a genre, or subject painting, we take pleasure in the way the artist can take a long-held convention while ordering and re-ordering the motifs, acknowledging the same in the different; making new pictures while playing with the same set of rules.

Cullen, on the other hand, does not automatically pre-processed the meanings in the portrait genre according to the protocols of representation. In other words, his portraits are not mere illustrations of the external features of the sitter. Rather than allowing the pleasure of playing 'Snap' with the subject and the painted portrait, Cullen's pictures release abject feelings. But at least they are feelings, and that's something Cullen wants to do: get a reaction. Given time you will see how it becomes possible to surrender to the fierce reality of the image. A bit like looking intently at the food at the tip of your fork before eating it. (What part of the cow are you eating?)

So where does this sense of emergency come from? Do we need to ask in the brave new 21st century? Watching the nightly news, if you were to take it seriously, is to view a slaughterhouse carnival. So there's a rawness in Cullen's body of work that seems to go beyond *art brut* primitivism, and it certainly has none of the charm of kitsch that we see in other contemporary art. Is the work punk? Is it part of that the fashion tag 'grunge'? Or is it more than that?

Before his success, Adam Cullen made a small reputation with flailing and jagged style at the edges of the artworld, those places that are a bit like radio stations you can't quite pick up. And his snarling pictures conjure places and things that don't get much airplay in the mainstream artworld: motor lodges, grease-cafs, people in worthless jobs taking bad drugs, losers and boozers, shrill tabloid bylines. The style comes across as the visual equivalent of those middle-finger-for-all electric guitar riffs in Heavy Metal music. The opposite of Easy Listening (or Easy Viewing).

For most people this brutal assault on the senses looks like a joke in the worst possible taste. There's a creepy comic violence that seems very 'black'. What is black humour? It's the humour of someone who is trying to stay sane in a crazy world: 'Mummy I don't like little brother.' 'Shut up and eat what you're given.' Did you laugh? See we are all sick.

Might it be part of a deeper philosophical attitude that has haunted art practice like a ghost in the machine. The bottomless scepticism of the dadaists and Alfred Jarry, or of madman Antonin Artaud, or the German *enfant terrible* Martin Kippenberger, who produced a sculpture of a frog that was crucified and bought a Gerhard Richter painting and used it as a coffee table. Yet Cullen's work also recalls other more mainstream continuities for he shares something of the

unremitting drive to tell the truth that we admire in Goya, or in the nauseous vulnerable bodies of Francis Bacon and the improvised bluntness of Philip Guston's later work.

Adam Cullen was born in 1965 in the northern suburbs of Sydney. He came from a family supportive of the arts, but anyone who knows the doleful, nondescript suburbs in the 1970s will recognise how a combination of wild energy, total futility and excruciating boredom contributes to a strangely trashy inner life. This is not helped by an overbearing daytime TV culture and 'the indefinite elsewhere' of the shopping malls. Anybody who has been bed-ridden with the 'flu, and watches *The Ricki Lake show* knows the weirdness of everyday life I'm referring to here. Cullen managed to find a route through the confusion and the numbness.

But here's one significant and awful anecdote from his past: Cullen recalls visiting his cousins that lived on a property in the bush. He remembers them lassoing a kangaroo with the help of some kelpie dogs, and while they held the animal down, the cousins cut off the kangaroo's tail with a chain-saw while it was still alive. The roo hobbles horribly, trying to balance without a tail. This happened after Cullen saw the Goya *Disaster* series in the Prado with his parents.

Like many other artists today, Adam Cullen is finding ways of exploring our secret, subterranean history, what American novelist Don DeLillo has called our latent history: 'those events that almost took place and events that definitely took place but remain invisible or unremarked upon'.³ Cullen's deliberately ugly style is a blowtorch applied to the corporate gloss presented by Sydney publicists and those art directors looking for *Mission impossible II* backdrops. Beneath the sparkling facades of bank lobbies and vamped-up heritage sites, Cullen brings up an infernal jigsaw puzzle of corporate and sexual follies mixed with themes that include real-estate swindles, off-shore funny money, class war, race hate, labour violence, immigrant hordes, drug-crazed cops, plus the whole toxic pornography of mass-mediated desires.

The surfaces of Cullen's pictures look ragged because he's forever chewing, like those junkfood ibises outside the Art Gallery of NSW in the Domain; chewing through the gaudy packaging of display culture, the surface TV chatter, the jingles for air-fresheners, slice-of-life commercials about Rice Krispies, the business suits in the commodity pits, the blokey territory around sports memorabilia and forex dealers, and the nicer, quieter kind of art elsewhere in the Gallery.

What's impressive is the continued stream of second-attention awareness that Cullen maintains: where every street mark becomes a festering portent; where his pictures show up the pathetic road kill left by the flow of money, power and stupid ideas.

Sado-erotic hallucination? Nightmare satire? Angry circus?
A tortured means to a fuller existence? Adam Cullen materialises

all of the above, as well as a way of acting out your madness to arrive at a point on the other side of the horrible experience, rather than being shocked and drugged back to where it began.

George Alexander
Coordinator of Contemporary Art Programs

NOTES

1. 'Adam Cullen talks: interview with curator Anne Loxley' in *Between the lines: works on paper 1995–2005*, Penrith Regional Gallery, Penrith 2006, np
2. Wayne Tunnicliffe (ed), *Let's get lost* (exhibition catalogue), Art Gallery of NSW Sydney 2008, p 9
3. Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1973

SOURCES, FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

Books

Perez, Ingrid. *Adam Cullen: scars last longer*, Craftsman House, Fishermans Bend Vic 2004
Tunnicliffe, Wayne (ed). *Let's get lost*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney 2008

Journal articles

Tunnicliffe, Wayne. 'Adam Cullen: inspired by the Australia he is standing in', *Look* magazine, Art Gallery Society of NSW, April 2008, pp 33–35
Radok, S. 'Drugs'n'art', *Artlink*, vol 17, no 2, 1997, pp 44–46
Gibson, J. 'Avant-grunge', *Art+Text* 45, May 1993, pp 23–25

Collection connections: Adam Cullen's artists of interest

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection
Francis Bacon (Ireland/England 1909–92)
Otto Dix (Germany 1891–1969)
Albrecht Dürer (Germany 1471–1528)
Francisco Goya Y Lucientes (Spain 1746–1828)
Philip Guston (USA 1913–80)
Sidney Nolan (Australia/UK 1917–92)
Mike Parr (Australia b1945)

For further resources, information and programs related to Adam Cullen and his work see also:

Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au
to search the collection and for information on exhibitions and education programs

Kaliman Gallery, Sydney
www.kalimangallery.com

Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne
www.tolarnogalleries.com

Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide
www.greenaway.com.au

- Adam Cullen paints types, stereotypes and genres that have been identified as 'Australian'. Survey Cullen's work and develop an inventory of the subjects that would prompt this categorisation. Discuss stereotypes and define what they are. Identify and outline as many Australian stereotypes as you can. Do they have relevance and meaning to you as an Australian? Investigate how these stereotypes may contribute positively and negatively to a national identity. Debate whether Cullen is critically assessing Australian stereotypes or further contributing to their perpetuation.

- What qualities in Cullen's work evoke a sense of living in suburban Australia? Consider the application of paint, selection of colours, use of text and subject matter. Do you recognise any of the characters? Have you experienced any of the events or seen and heard any of the words presented in the work? View his body of work and describe a day in the life of Adam Cullen's Australia. Consider whether Cullen is telling it like it is, like he sees it, or like he wants it to be seen.

- The phrase 'anything I say or do will be used against you', is a recognisable misquote of the Miranda Rights that US police officers are required by law to recite to suspects in police custody before they are questioned. Research the Miranda Rights and investigate their origins. Propose what Cullen may be implying about his art practice and Australian culture through the fracturing and appropriation of this quote.

- Research other examples of text used in Cullen's body of work. Examine how they are integrated as both subject matter and composition. Do they sound familiar? Are they song lyrics, titles, written or verbal statements? Attempt to pinpoint their source. Investigate whether their effectiveness is hindered or helped by knowing the reference. Consider whether Cullen is playing the same game with his selection of discombobulated images. Draw parallels with the relentless stream of media images and texts in our culture. Are they sources of information or disinformation? How do we know what to trust and when? Is Cullen reflecting media culture, commenting on it or participating within it? Debate his motivations and whether they are apparent in his work.

- Discuss the construction and composition of Cullen's paintings. Is each artwork comprised of one image, multiple images or perhaps both? Select one artwork and record the way Cullen deliberately arranges the visual elements within it. What is the effect? Does the arrangement bind disparate and seemingly disorganised texts and images or not? Does his arrangement bring balance and stability? Does this neutralise the immediacy, urgency and potency of Cullen's subject matter? Discuss.

- Investigate how Cullen's style and technique contribute to the visual impact of his paintings. Select key words you would use to describe them. Is this an appropriate and deliberate approach for the subject matter he pursues? Cullen paints his work quickly, in a loose and expressive way, giving the impression of little thought or effort. Consider whether this is the case? Is Cullen lazy, not very skilled or having a joke at the viewer's expense? Discuss

if the effort and time he expends creating an artwork is always evident to the viewer in the work itself? Research the relationship between Cullen's signature aesthetic, his working methods and the subject matter he investigates. Debate whether there is more to Cullen's artmaking process than meets the eye.

- Cullen's work has been described as 'revolting and yet compelling', in much the same way as a car accident, a fight in a pub or the endless TV replays of an injury on the sporting field. Is this 'need to shock' a strategy particular to contemporary art or is it something that artists have always used to engage their audiences? Research artists in the Gallery's collection who have inspired Cullen, such as Otto Dix, Albrecht Dürer, Francisco Goya, Philip Guston, Sidney Nolan and Mike Parr. Outline comparisons that can be drawn between their work and Cullen's. Are there any recurring motifs, subjects or themes common to all? Investigate why some artists feel the need to present an uglier, darker side of life rather than an idealised, beautiful version that offers audiences an escape from the reality of their lives.

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