

Self Portrait

“...me / maybe I should have stayed in commercial art? / I am not a very strong character...sometimes / I feel I am a lion (without a red eye) ripping off...”

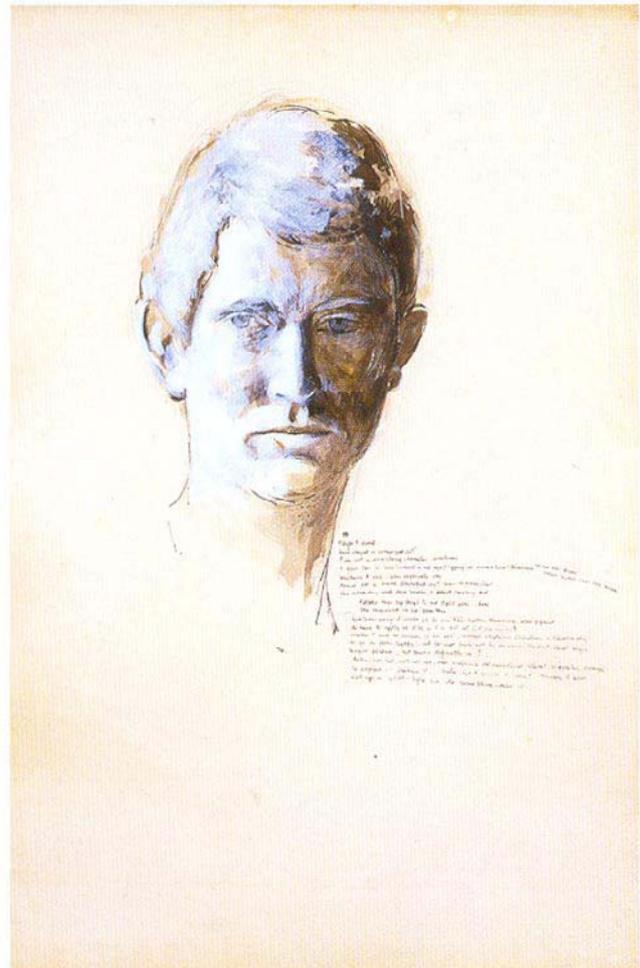
That’s Brett Whiteley in a written text on a self portrait drawing from the ‘60s that turned up at a Christies Australia auction recently. It should really have been purchased by the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra as it seems to me to be a telling admission. Not just about Whiteley but about a lot of Australian art. Maybe all Australian art: all Western art full stop.

I’m wanting to write a sort of ‘daydream’ piece about what I would curate if I could be Director of the Sydney Biennale. I didn’t see the 2004 Biennale because, yes, I live in Brisbane and I was busy. But really it was because everyone said it was poor. In fact they often said far worse than that but I’m not repeating that. For a measured and invaluable rundown of the Biennale see Michael Desmond’s review in *Art Monthly Australia* August 2004.

Of course MY Sydney Biennale would be pop culture extravaganza. Once and for all pitting the Mass Media against its High Art cousin and seeing if there really was any difference. Imagine rooms where episodes of *Big Brother* or *Australian Idol* face off against Bruce Nauman or Gillian Wearing. Eminem vs Wolfgang Tillmans (well actually already done by Pet Shop Boys). Quicksilver vs Jorge Pardo. Benetton vs Haacke, Abba vs Culture Club, Pearl Jam vs Nirvana, Hirst vs... well Hirst. You get the picture. And it has partially been done before in various shows over the years: “Art meets Ads”, the book from *Avantgarde & Kampagne* at the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf 1992; Peter Greenaway’s 1991 *The Physical Self* show; exhibitions on art and shopping; *Let’s Entertain: Life’s Guilty Pleasures* at the Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis and touring; on and on. There was *Virtual Reality* curated by Mary Eagle and Chris Chapman at the NGA. But it hasn’t been done in Australia on any large-scale declarative manner of a ‘big themed’ *Perspecta* for example.

Call me old fashioned but I think the Sydney Biennale should be built around themes that are pertinent to Australian culture. Not some well-meaning concept that could produce an art show done by anyone, for anyone, anywhere, any time. An exhibition consisting of X group of artists when Y or Z group of artists would just as easily fit: a recipe for a polite nothingness. A way of art presentation that all too often fills our public spaces.

Which brings me back to Brett Whiteley. I’ve always been nagged by a doubt about White Australian Art generally. Why were our impressionists really so illustrative? Why was abstraction never really ever accepted here? Why are the Angry Penguins seen now as precursors to Pop Art? (I mean Sidney Nolan’s *Ned Kelly* paintings are really cartoons.) Why were so



Description from the auction catalogue: “Brett Whiteley (1939-1992), *Self Portrait*, inscribed ‘me/maybe I should/have stayed in commercial art?/I am not a very strong character... sometimes/ I feel I am a lion (without a red eye) ripping off...’ (lower centre), ink and gouache, 55.3 x 37 cm, Provenance: Gift from the artist to Mr. Prizcak, Bequeathed by the above to the present owner in 1970. \$10,000 - 15,000”

many incredibly successful Australian artists once gainfully employed in advertising, Charles Blackman for example? (And if not Robert Dickson then he should have been.) Why were many of the painters in the canonical *The Field* exhibition 1968 actually really graphic artists? (Not that there’s anything wrong with that as the *Seinfeld* episode goes.) Why were so many Australian artists at their best when war artists ‘reporting’. And are still so. I only like George Gittoes’ and Rick Amor’s war artist work. Why was post-modernism (theory illustrated) so endemic here? And then there’s Paul Taylor and *Popism*.

I’m not against advertising and the graphic arts. Far from it. But looked at from the beginning of a new century, with the collapse of the high/low divide,

Aussie art looks like a precursor here. Not a follower. But they said that also of Australia's embrace of post-modernism. Just as I often think that reality TV looks like '70s video art. Maybe the Australian public always knew what was right. I just wish someone in the Fine Art establishment would have the manners to acknowledge the state of play. I personally think the general public would be delighted.

But no. Yet again we will deal with really exceptional mass culture as rarefied artefacts 'cleansed' clean of their real origins and 'elevated' to high art land. In the way that exceptional black athletes are 'cleansed' for white mainstream consumption. More same old same old.

Turn all the art galleries into convention centres and motels for the rich and put the galleries in Westfield shopping centres. Be actually avante garde! Move the Sydney Biennale to Surfers Paradise and the Billabong headquarters to Sydney.

And if I sound like an Italian Futurist I don't care.

I keep running these pieces by an art historian friend just to annoy him. I keep thinking I will get some glimmer of a new approach to all this from him: some old school rebuttal that will strip away at my arguments, my populist ravings. Bring me back to my senses. But I'm afraid each time I engage him on this I receive almost exactly the same email (maybe he just re-sends with some faint adjustments).

I suppose that is art history to most art historians: the same email on re-send. The Futurists already did it Scott.

Scott Redford is an artist, curator and sometime writer.