

**Merde on the Dancefloor**  
**MIR11, Melbourne, 11.2.05-25.2.05**

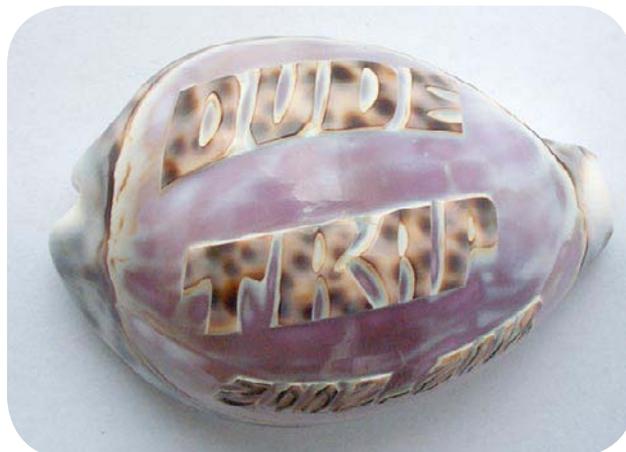
'Merde on the Dancefloor' recalls Sophie Ellis Bextor's catchy pop hit 'Murder on the Dancefloor', yet its component parts suggest a more subversive dimension. Like pop music, contemporary art often takes on the language of the everyday – the cliché, the trite remark, the commonplace – and stages them in a different way.<sup>1</sup> Here the language of music is invoked as a kind of visual shorthand by the participating artists.

The title of the show arose from text messages sent between the curator Matthew Griffin and his friend, who regularly try to outdo each other with plays on words. This text joke is redeployed as a comment about the conservatism of art institutions in Melbourne. In the mini-catalogue, Griffin uses the metaphor of shit on the dancefloor to describe the corruption of the local art scene. These artists are dancing around the shit in front of them, trying to ignore it and do their own thing.

While being a space of confrontation and creativity, the dancefloor is also a space of transformation, where dancers can experiment with identity, becoming 'other' in the process. Masks feature frequently throughout this show since most of the figurative works feature disguise of one sort or another. Originally conceived as a show about text and its manifestations in daily life, 'Merde on the Dancefloor' evolved into a more music-orientated exhibition, with an emphasis on subcultural phenomena. There is a definite anti-establishment, punk rock ethos discernible in many pieces, especially Griffin's ink drawings which have a vigorously abrasive quality.

Griffin's works reveal a recurrent obsession with the abject. His drawings often feature bodily excretions and disfiguration of various sorts. He likes to disrupt the aesthetically pleasing elements of his work with the inclusion of crass details, like vomit, eyeballs popping out or grossly distorted limbs. In these drawings, words are spewed out of patchy, peeling faces, declaring 'Things Fall Apart', 'Satan' and 'Decomposition Awaits', suggesting imminent decay. Versions of the artist's own face are held up as masks and torn away, suggesting the provisional nature of identity. 'Shaking Hands' shows a woman's head impaled on a middle fingertip, disembodied and smiling.

In Tony Garifalakis' 'metal theory' gouache paintings, youthful faces are made up as clowns with trickles of blood dripping out of noses and mouths. Apart from these painted markings, the faces look too well groomed and 'normal' underneath the makeup, lending a certain uneasiness to the compositions. Their direct gaze is confronting in its blankness; they stare outward with deadpan expressions, challenging the viewer to respond. Garifalakis' '13', a quirky photograph of a found piece of china also has an element of theatre. The face looking out of the studded frame is oddly distorted, like the grizzled mask of a



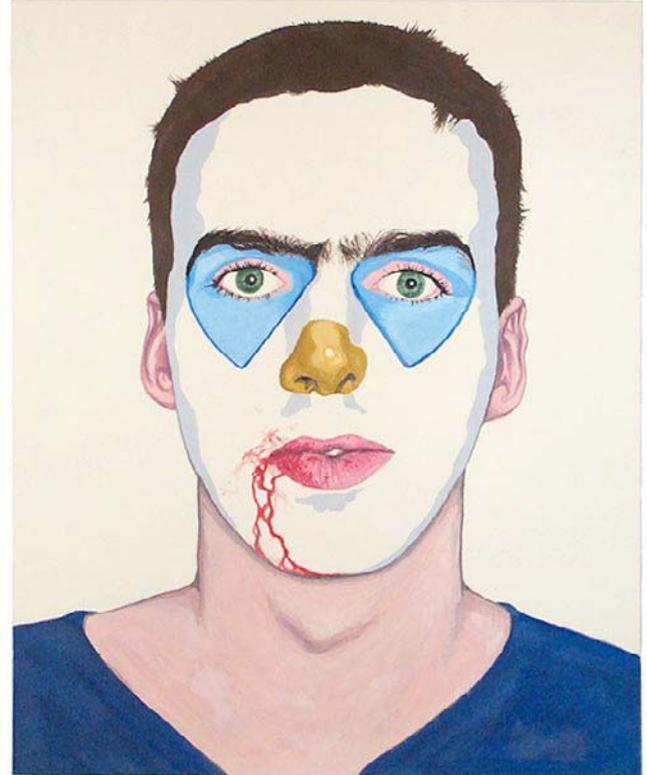
Blair Thethowan, *Dude trap*, gift for 50-something birthday, etched shell, made in Bali, 2004.

rock n' roll casualty. Topped by a feathery headdress, the figure is hopelessly out of place in its kitschness.

New York artist Rachel Howe's work humorously invokes traditions of cover art and band photography. Sewn on white A4 paper with black thread, Howe's works feature Death Metal musicians, standing around pondering their doom. Her previous drawings have featured suicidal youths wearing studded belts and committing acts of self-harm. Since her contributions had to be mailed to Australia, Howe is working in a smaller format than usual, to good effect. The economy of line makes these cotton sketches striking in their simplicity. In 'Message 2' a band member is head to head with Casper the friendly ghost joined by the caption 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' simultaneously referencing the Joy Division classic and sending up the studied gloominess of the rockstar.

Geoff Newton's 'don't go to skool' features a bunch of 'alternative' CD titles, part of an imaginary music collection. Seminal titles are referenced, indicating the considerable musical capital of the collector. This work is paired with a painting of female torso from the rear tattooed with the names of familiar Melbourne art spaces. Art institutions become mere decoration on a naked body – marks of experience the wearer must bear. Like notches on a belt, these tattoos might be read as trophies of artworld conquests or commercial branding taken to extremes.

Blair Trethowan's quirky piece 'Dude Trap' is a Balinese shell with text engraved on it. Originally gifted to an Italian-based friend as a 50th birthday present, 'Dude Trap' was flown back to Melbourne especially for the show. 'Dude Trap' is primarily ornamental but the engraved name is very suggestive, conjuring up its potential uses. Although its not musical in quite the same way as most of the other works, the shell can mimic the sound of the sea if held to the ear.



An odd collection of disparate parts linked by a tenuous theme, 'Merde on the Dancefloor' is suited to the transitory space of MIR11. Given that MIR11 feels more like a foyer zone between offices than a gallery, its not over-determined as an art venue. It allows room for marginal artists to experiment in a non-commercial environment. Due to the fact that its participants are all friends, the show gives the impression of a closed circuit at times. Griffin's 'pantonygarifalakis', a brown pantone sheet lying against the wall with a veiny eyeball poking through a hole, indicates the high level of intertextuality and mutual citation between the artists. Viewing the show is like eavesdropping on a raucous conversation full of funny quips and knowing references to pop culture.

**Left:** Rachel Howe, *Message 3*, black thread on paper, 2005. **Right:** Tony Garifalakis, *Metal theory*, gouache on card, 2000.

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#### Notes

1. John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Music*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2003: 126.