

## My New Neighbour

I live in this 1970s apartment complex in a quite sought after suburb in a small capital city in Australia. It has a bunch of buildings, each with either four or six apartments. There are lots of trees around and stuff. It's really nice in an old school way. And I'm lucky because the rent is really reasonable. The apartment is entirely comfortable – and none of that floating floor stainless steel kitchen lifestyle shit that would add \$80 to the weekly rent.

Anyhow, I'm 32, and I had just been back from a weekend away, and since it has been the summer holidays, I haven't been doing much housecleaning or whatever. Plus, the weather has been really weird, kind of overcast and drizzling rain. But it will get hot into February, bush fire weather and all.

I work at a university so I can kind of make my own time, plus school doesn't really start for another week or so. Last Tuesday I went into the office for a bit to check my mail and do a bit of work on my thesis. Then went home by the supermarket and the local gay video store and rented a DVD.

Anyhow, I was planning to postpone watching it because I had to get my house in order. I stripped the bed of my sweaty summer sheets and loaded them in the communal laundry.

As it happens, my kitchen window overlooks the washing area (my living room windows overlook a nice tree-lined street). There are five or so clothes-drying hoists, and an adjacent laundry with washers and dryers for use by the apartment residents. So, when I'm doing the washing up or whatever I occasionally get a look at some of the army boys who live in the other apartments (there is a major defence academy nearby).

Anyhow, I put a load of bed linen in one of the washing machines, and kept an eye on my watch (the washing takes 25 minutes) while I put shit away and vacuumed the floor and stuff. When my watch hit 3.30 I went downstairs to get out the washing and there was this guy, I reckon about 22, hanging out his washing. I walked past him and into the laundry but my load wasn't quite done yet. Well, I'll go back upstairs and grab the stack of newspapers I've read over the last few days and take them to the recycling bins.

As I was walking back past the clotheslines, the guy says:

"Is it safe to hang clothes here?" (He was worried if someone would steal clothes from the line).

I said "Yeah, it's cool." And then, "You just moved in?"

He goes, "Yeah, I'm Dan", and I go, "Hey, I'm Dan. Mad huh?"

I tell him that I've been living here six months or so, blah blah blah. Anyhow, he said that his girlfriend was worried about it (the clothesline safety issue).

Later, I noticed that there was some skimpy girl underwear



Internet image. Photographer and subject unknown.

but that wasn't what I was interested in. This boy wore nice shorty undies. You know the sort, not fucking skater sagger shorts, and not CK boring briefs, but nice cotton brief shorts. I could see when he was reaching up to peg his and girlfriend's clothes that he was wearing some light blue ones.

So, I pegged up my washing (get this, white sheets and pillow cases, god knows what he thought), and I go, "Good to meet you man, see you 'round." He goes "Yeah, seeya mate."

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This is the start of a story I was writing for an online porn story website. They've already accepted one of my stories. In this one I've lied about my name (I say it's Dan Ellis) and my age (I'm really 38), but the rest is true. The idea was to amp it up slowly. Running into the guy at the local shops, describing what he was wearing, describing his particular sexy aspects in more detail each time. I'm not sure what



the climactic denouement will be if I get around to finishing the story. It doesn't matter really. I was writing it for my own entertainment. Something to do instead of watching television.

Likewise, there's this picture post board that I subscribe to where people post non-sexual images of hot guys in their teens and twenties. Some images are actually photographed by subscribers at beaches and stuff, and these photographers have their own very specific styles. They're entirely artistic, not exploitative I don't think. I'm not being a dick when I say that they celebrate the beauty of the male form. That sounds like a half-assed defense of Robert Mapplethorpe's photos or something, but I don't mean it that way. The photos would make an excellent coffee table book that would rival the professional gay photography that you see in magazines like 'Blue' and those books put out by gay porn companies of impossibly perfect Eastern European boys dressed up as cowboys. Mostly though, the images that subscribers post are sourced from innumerable websites of photos compiled by private persons, photos that circulate and spawn copies of themselves and keep popping up on other websites. The interesting thing is that none of these images are 'owned' in the traditional sense. A rule of the posting board is that images cannot be copyrighted (and other similar boards have been closed down for copyright infringement). Usually, images of 'hot dudes' from commercial sites are marked with logos and digital watermarks, but there are plenty that aren't.

Internet image. Photographer and subject unknown.

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To me, the 'amateur' pictures are the most appealing anyhow. They're 'real' in some hard to define sense. These are pictures of guys posing and flexing their muscles in the backyard, or hanging with their mates, all with their arms around each other, smiling stupidly. They're not 'arty' or over-determined which gives them a certain kind of impact (American artist Tim Gardner draws upon a similar sort of ambiguity in his watercolour and pastel versions of his brother's snapshots of college 'dudes'). My favourite amateur net pics, though, are photos that guys have taken of themselves in a mirror – holding their IXUS or digicam at shoulder height, and flexing their belly muscles. They're cute and they know it, and it's simple to upload the images to god knows where and then it filters down and outwards and turns up everywhere.

Not to get all Barthesian, but what really gets me are the telltale signs that these images give away for free: the stack of cds tells me what music the guy likes, the posters on his bedroom wall tell me if he is into reggae music or if he is into soccer. One set of images I encountered recently of a mid-teen Israeli boy look like he's taking his own photo in an upper-class Californian suburb, but the details around him give his location away (a vinyl record hung on the wall in his room has Hebrew text on the label). And a great image I didn't archive included these beautiful pencil drawings pinned to the wall that the guy had obviously made himself,

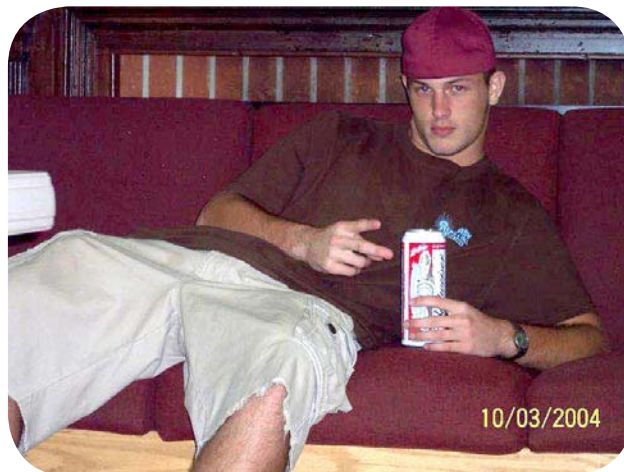


sort of in the style of the German and Israeli-born artist team Mutean/Rosenblum. It was such a sweet giveaway that this guy was an actual person, with talent and sensitivity.

There's something compelling about contemporary male identity going on here. It's about narcissism and technology but it's not 'gay'. In Canberra over summer we have a hotted up car festival called Summernats, and you constantly see all these ethnic boys driving around in their immaculate street utes, the back window plastered with vinyl letters saying FOR SALE with a mobile phone number. Likewise, at the Big Day Out concerts, boys have their name and mobile number printed on their t-shirt backs. The cars aren't necessarily for sale, and the guys don't need to advertise their number to the paramedics in case they pass out drunk. This advertising is strictly for the chicks so they can call up the particular baseball-capped 'hottie' that appeals to them and their girlfriends.

It's nice that these boys think they're hot. It's healthy really. Better than them thinking otherwise. I'm not advocating some porno or fashion ideal of attractiveness, or even a staging of coolness as a basis of identity. But the confidence that these guys display is better than not being confident (I can hope, too, that it's not an over-reaction to depression). Probably some of them would be unreconstructed dumbass misogynists if put to the test, but mostly they are probably just testosterone-fuelled boys out to get laid. At least they take pride in their appearance, even if it's (secretly?) for their mates. I know this is a complex issue, and I've read enough papers from sociology journals on homosociality, hegemonic masculinity, identity prototypes, class and race to short-circuit any argument I might make here. But I'm just making an observation, really.

For instance, through observing young male skaters in urban environments I would suggest that their decision to wear baggy pants revealing the tops of the underwear is one based primarily on the imperatives of fashion, and the self-identification, through this style of dress, with their nominated subcultural group. The 'eroticisation' of this style of dressing is one that operates at a second degree. Likewise, the fashion for long board shorts (a style of swimming trunk derived from surfer style), also worn low on the hips, relates directly to the 'cool' factor of this style of clothing. At an urban public pool last summer this style of dress was the preferred option of the majority of young men present. While it could be assumed that the revealing nature of this clothing style was deployed consciously by older teenage boys and young adult men, it seemed that the fashionability of this clothing was of paramount concern. It could be that the body display inherent in the swimming pool environment, connected with the wearing of low-slung shorts, functions to enhance the boys' sense of hegemonic (that is, of predominant influence) masculinity within their own peer group. That is, the clothing emphasises the musculature of the torso, and visually elongates the body by revealing the V shape of the lower abdominal muscles. This is old news in terms of Western modes of body display (at least since the 15th century). I think that these boys don't really understand how erotically-



Internet images. Photographer and subject unknown.

charged this type of dress is, because this kind of clothing (low-slung pants) enacts a transit between clothing and nudity, as Mario Perniola eloquently explained in his essay 'Between Clothing and Nudity' reprinted in *Zone: Fragments for a History of the Human Body: Part Two* in 1989.

I was going to say that this style of dress is 'hot', but I don't want to fall into the trap of using the word as a descriptor in the way that Bruce Hainley and John Waters do in their recent book *Art - A Sex Book* (as in 'he's so hot') as one reviewer of the book pointed out (I can't find the reference, sorry). Sure, the teenage hustler in Gary Lee Boas's 1970s or early 1980s photo could be described as 'hot' in a total boy next door kind of way (the heat lies in a sexual charge camouflaged by the appearance of unworldliness, I guess). It's an extraordinary photograph, and the guy reminds me of this angel boy I used to hang out with (solid torso, broad open features, a sprinkling of body hair that he was nervous about but shouldn't have been), but you could also use the term 'hot' to describe Jeff Burton's photo taken on the set of a gay porno film of two muscle studs engaged in vigorous analingus. So, it's fairly useless.

Weirdly, in response to the major recent survey show of

Australian artist Bill Henson at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, references have been made to the work of American photographer and film-maker Larry Clark, and American artist Will McBride. Okay, on the Australian art commentary weblog, 'The Art Life', a commentator wrote recently that it was a missed opportunity that the exhibition shop for the Henson show didn't stock Larry Clark or Will McBride books. Adolescent sexuality and all. McBride likes to photograph boys at adolescence, showing the signs of puberty and so forth. There's nothing wrong with this (McBride's work) but it's not what Henson is about (his work, while it incorporates youth sexuality, is more 'about' theatricality, and that, even though I'm a fan, and he's a brilliant artist, may be a let down). If we're talking about hotness, it might be better to think of that as heat. American artist Larry Clark has always had the heat turned way up, and for him it's aligned to both a critical point in his subject matter (sex, violence, drugs) and to his style: documentary, collage, cut-ups, mixing imagery from mass culture with his own photographs, and, in his films, fast-paced montage and soundtrack (in his 2001 film *Bully*, the soundtrack is all badass rap and pounding techno).

Portland-based film-maker Gus Van Sant, on the other hand, in his 2004 film *Elephant* chooses to treat an interpretation of the Columbine High School shootings (which took place in Jefferson County, Colorado in 1999) as an elegaic rumination on peacefulness. His film uses long takes, unscripted scenes and multi-perspectival accounts of moments in the narrative. Van Sant and Clark are comparable not only for the subject matter of their work, but are worthy of exegesis because of the different ways in which they deal with it. Van Sant appears cool and slow to Clark's hot and fast, but I don't think that's the key entirely.

The adolescent male is a complex beast. Artistic representation of his persona is a complex and contested field. As it happens, my current post-graduate research is trying to nut this out to a degree. I've tracked his representation in Western culture since medieval times, and, while the popular depiction frames his world as one fuelled by 'storm and stress', there's something about a sense of transcendence that I'm grappling with. It is, I think, equal to the physiological epiphany that occurs to all of us when we are in that transitory phase from childhood to adulthood, but there's also something more, in the work of these artists, that both rides with and challenges this formula. Clark and Van Sant manage to capture the beauty of this manifestation of identity with sensitivity. And maybe that's the key that gets lost in the representation of the culture at large. The fragile nature of an identity that is becoming is enigmatic and moving. But elegy and sympathy, even so, over nostalgia and memory, still seems to leave something unanswered. The young male characters in *Bully* and *Elephant*, both aged 18 and 19 and playing characters of their own age, are allowed to cry, not really even in response to a momentous event, but as the expression of a fleeting emotion. What's at stake is less melodrama than a challenge to the entire register of hegemonic masculinity in formation. And it's one that engages ideas of sacrifice and redemption too.

In Van Sant's *Elephant*, the conventionally 'hot' high school senior Nathan Tyson whose presence frames the film wears a red hoody with a white cross and the word LIFEGUARD on the back. Nathan was a high school senior when the film was made, and continues to pursue his interests in gymnastics as a coach. At the end of the film, Nathan and his girlfriend Carrie are discovered by Alex, who is armed with a semi-automatic rifle, and proceeds to taunt them with the game of eeny meeny miny mo. We don't know if Nathan survives or not.

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A few days later at about 7pm when I was buying some cigarettes from the local shops I saw Dan in the minimart deciding what kind of milk to buy. The minimart employs cute boys and girls, and one Eurasian boy in particular always makes my day. He's so straight up: friendly, and casually stylish. What's with that surfer neck-wear thing anyhow? I know it's a talisman vibe. Anyhow, as I was leaving the shop, so was Dan.

He must have recognised me kind of suddenly because he sort does a double take and says, "Oh hey man" and flashes me this grin. I go "Hey Dan, 'sup dude?" and he goes "Oh nuthin much. My girlfriend is away for the weekend." As we're walking the short distance back to our apartments he looks up to the sky and says "Beautiful, isn't it?"

I go, "Yep, it is."

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