

Eucalyptus Drive

A little over a month ago on February 26 a high speed police pursuit ended with the death of two youths who slammed a stolen car they were driving into a tree on Eucalyptus drive. A residential street in the Glenquarie public housing estate situated 40kms from the centre of Sydney, in the outer limits of its western suburbs. The identity and addresses of the boys were well known to the police as they had been under police electronic surveillance for several days beforehand. Despite this, and just two weeks prior another police pursuit along Eucalyptus Drive ending with a car crashing into exactly the same tree leaving its driver with severe injuries, the police pursued the boys into the narrow street at speeds approaching 140 km per hour.¹

Within hours of the crash conflict broke out between grief stricken family and friends and the police, sparking some of the worst civil unrest in recent Australian history. Over four nights 300 people violently rioted with hundreds of police as they searched for Jesse Kelly the driver of the pursued vehicle who was being hidden by members of the community. The revolt incited other outbursts of anger and rioting in St. Clair and outside the IMAX cinema in Darling Harbour where 150 youth pelted police with bottles and smashed a police car.

The NSW state government and media attempted to present these clashes as minor isolated incidents of street fighting by 'bad people'. Far from it, arrests were difficult because of support from the general Glenquarie community who joined the fighting and also provided refuge to youth. Furthermore, these riots represented a sharp hardening of police stance in the area and a new paramilitary style approach to policing. Riot squads sealed off a section of the car park in the Glenquarie town centre as a command post, road blocks were established at key intersections, baton charges and police dogs were let loose on teenagers and armed raids were conducted throughout the area in houses harboring suspects.

"There are no excuses for this behaviour and I am not going to have it said that this behaviour is caused by the social disadvantaged... There's only one blame here and that is the people who went out and threw bricks and caused riots. There's only one thing to say to them: the police will get them, because they are engaged in illegal behaviour." (NSW state leader, Bob Carr, February 28 2005)

Carr's position sums up the entire political, business and media establishment which repudiated that social conditions cause problems of crime. In an interview with Peter Perkins, grandfather of Jesse Kelly and resident of Macquarie Fields for 20 years, he outlines a rather more sinister picture of



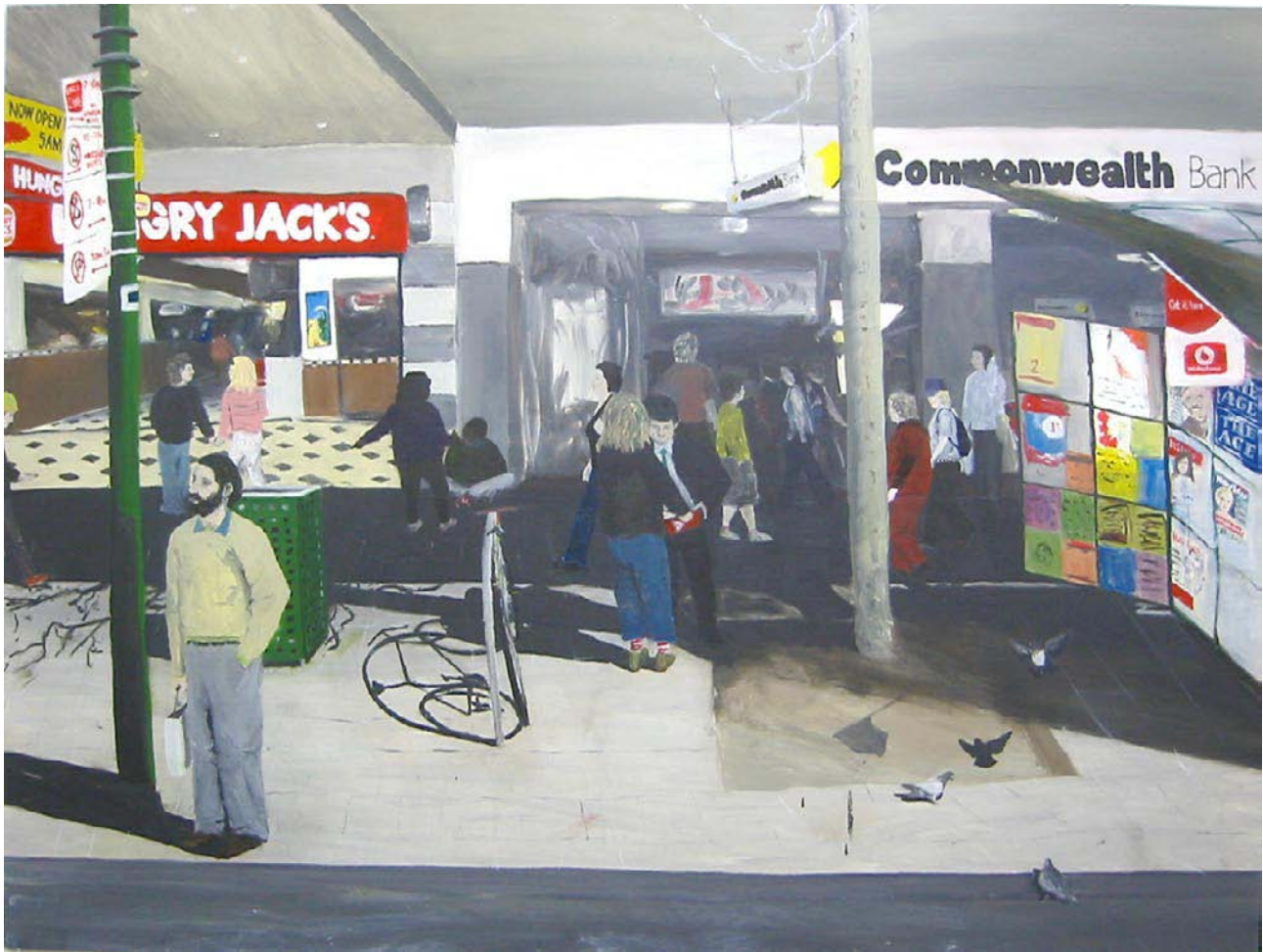
Fergus Binns, *St. Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne*, 2005, oil on board, 91.5 x 122cm

the attitude of the NSW State government. "Public housing is run down and there is a \$650 million dollar backlog on repairs and maintenance for public housing, according to the papers today. The Carr government is running it down as an excuse to bulldoze more public housing and sell the land to private developers. It is the same as in Redfern."²

The official response to social deprivation is a stepping up of police controls. (NSW has now one of the highest incarceration rates in the developed world, a 50 per cent increase in a decade.) In addition to the recent abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the pending changes to industrial relations law and the introduction of voluntary student unionism, the traditional platforms for political participation in Australia will be reduced much further. It is this climate of violent ideology by the political establishment directed towards alienating and repressing youth and the disadvantaged that heightened my appreciation of the recent work by Fergus Binns, a 25-year old emerging artist recently based in Melbourne but originally from Lismore, a rural town in New South Wales. Fergus Binns explores this shameful underbelly of the Australian cultural landscape that we all know too well, a hardened frontier of entrenched poverty, unemployment, privatisation, failed public policy, begging, consumption, abuse and telemarketing centres.

"'Son, stay away from that crap – when you stir a stink, all you get is a bigger stink,' said the old GP to the aspiring psychoanalyst."³

A recognisable array of tourist nic-nacs, iconic figures and



Fergus Binns, *Opposite St. Paul's Cathedral*, 2004, oil on board, 91.5 x 122cm

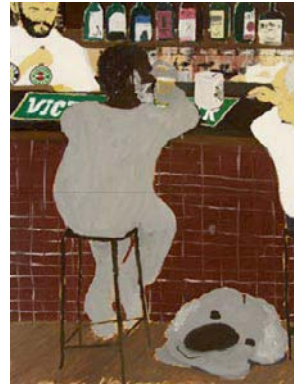
consumables such as beer, Akubra hats, Aussie flags, Uluru, dingoes, boomerangs, dot painting, koalas as well as a collection of clumsily rendered figurative paintings on bits of masonite and found cloth are the ingredients this artist mixes to create his very own undeniable stench. Vegemite helps as well, large lumps of the stuff. In his first exhibition at TCB *Galerie Vege* (2003) Fergus invited friends to contribute their homage to the shitty sticky brown substance. A salon of objects (brown monochromes, tea towels and home made ashtrays) was presented on walls smeared with the icky muck and the audience were served it on toast as well. Vegemite, once a sovereign symbol made from the surplus of beer production, is now owned by the transnational Corporation Kraft Foods. (Yet trading in the old myth is a collaboration continued by consumers and Kraft alike.) *Galerie Vege* insinuated adolescent jokes about faeces and scat parties. Some say, too, violence is a lot like Vegemite, an acquired taste and something hidden away in every family cupboard. *Galerie Vege* abounded in obscenities resulting in an embarrassing air of something gone terribly wrong.

The faulty, filthy and visceral associations reappeared in his current exhibition at Uplands. The boxing kangaroo greeted audiences ready to beat up a version of the Aboriginal flag over a messy BBQ apron. Later, audiences would discover

a bottle of methylated spirits smeared with paint and cut out pictures of tall ships stuck on it like flies on blotting paper, a deflated plastic kangaroo hung upside down from a shelf like a skin or trophy and a collection of paintings depicted various subjects, such as animal handler Steve Irwin holding a rainbow serpent and covered with paint and dirt, two hands prising open a dingo's mouth, a bunch of young people at a tourist look-out and the Australian coat of arms covered by small black handprints. Another painted panel depicted a dull stretch of a city street: a footpath; some phone booths and some public seating along Swanston street. In an accompanying panel, a family peers out the window of a passing tram at the same spot. Fairly ugly and unremarkable as pictures go, both *St. Pauls Cathedral Melbourne* and *Describing Sights (Tram, Melbourne)* portray a public stand-off that continues to occur today. The site is a tourist attraction and a meeting place for homeless and Koori groups. Like other examples of watering holes on shopping strips in Smith Street Fitzroy and Acland Street St. Kilda, they have been used in this purpose for several decades and are some of the only highly public and visible spaces left for these groups to occupy. It has been reported that public

nuisance and drinking problems have caused disruptions to businesses such as McDonalds, Hungry Jacks and KFC and to the taxi companies who use the space as a rank at night. Other complaints have supposedly come from commuters and tourists whom wish to avoid being hassled for money and have a 'clean and safe' journey home to the suburbs and from local police whose tolerance and authority is continually tested. These pictures depict an ongoing site of conflict and its observation by others. An embarrassing blot on the corporate landscape of Melbourne, that no doubt the major 'stakeholders': the town planners, developers, franchises and shopkeepers wish would just go away. In their clumsy acrid rendering these two paintings capture an immense shame, the daily reminder of our failures: the monstrous treatment we have accorded the different ones in our midst.

At art school, Fergus 'hit his straps' as they say, with a series of naively drawn and unfinished paintings depicting childhood monsters and meetings between whites, loggers and native folk. I also remember Qantas airplanes lost at sea and a group of stragglers quietly observing aboriginal figures around a campfire, which come to think of it was more like a big bon-fire, out of control. They were deliberately hung as though they were about to fall off the wall. The work was immediately appealing for its child like directness, humour and wit, a painting style that was equal parts nostalgic and brutish parody. Fergus chose to continue a rich and long tradition of Australian vernacular, a canon well versed in previous decades by Melbourne artist and musician Jon Campbell as well as the enigmatic Linda Marrinon. I can also recall other recent examples of Australiana and nationhood such as Jarred Kennedy's (Fergus's peer) video spoofs of Alvin Purple and the Australian Crawl; Raafat Ishak's complicated drawings of suburbia and abstract shapes – one particularly memorable outline of the emu from the Australian coat of arms fucking the kangaroo doggy style; Tony Schwenson's fat, white, straight, bald, guy; and A Constructed Worlds flag burning, there is much resistance to an Australian public life in purposeful denial about everything. What's different and risky about Fergus Binns' work is that he re-stages the mythical conflicts of contemporary Australian society observed very much from his own lived experience. The complicated social issues of indigenous rights, race, the environment and poverty have remained permanently frozen in stasis or have significantly regressed by the political agenda of the last 15 years. Fergus often presents a different and more confusing perspective to these stagnated disputes. In one picture for example, a white logger protects a tree from an aboriginal figure wielding an axe. His use of the Wilderness Society Koala is another example of conflict staged between social issues and experience. One of the crappier jobs recently available for the unemployed and art students alike, was fundraising for this environmental organisation. Workers would have to wear these big koala fake fur costumes and walk the pavement shaking the bucket for any loose change. A very admirable cause indeed, but the reality is an extremely tough and difficult job (especially on hot summer days) of long shifts for the minimum award and a small commission. In Fergus' paintings we can observe the



Left: Fergus Binns, *Koala (Does not drink)*, 2001, oil on board, 120 x 90cm. **Right:** Fergus Binns, *The fancy dress party*, 2001, oil on board, 120 x 90cm

Wilderness Society Koala having a well-earned beer at the pub with some old drunks and in a group portrait staring blankly with an aboriginal figure and Chewbacca from Star Wars. In a submission to *rubik 14* (2004) for artist pages regarding nature Fergus reprinted his official membership application form to the organisation, complimented with a funny line drawing by his girlfriend (artist Jessie Green) of himself al' naturale.

In a photocopied catalogue accompanying Fergus' exhibition at Uplands results from recent telemarketing research identifies qualities that are un-Australian. Defining in reverse, the absurdity and stupidity of what now quantifies as national characteristics. Fergus Binns' art describes an Australian public life brimming with injuries, repressed guilt and failed communication. He returns to familiar conflicts, so that the meaning and source of pain can be comprehended and the conventional and nontraditional social roles can be acted out.

James Lynch is a browncoat who enjoys cooking one pot wonders.

Notes

1. James Cogan, "Australia: Sydney suburb remains tense following four days of conflict", *World Socialist Website*, March 3 2005, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/mar2005/sydn-m03.shtml>.
2. Peter Boyle from an interview with Peter Perkins, "Youth riots in Sydney: the real story", *Green Left Weekly*, March 9 2005.
3. Harvey Greenberg, *The movies on your mind*, Saturday Review Press, New York, p198.