

NO ONE IS WATCHING YOU

RONNIE VAN HOUT

Curated by Melissa Keys

Opening remarks - Max Delany
Buxton Contemporary, Wednesday 11 July 2018

Thanks Su and Ryan.

I too, would like to acknowledge the Boonwurrung, sovereign custodians of the land upon which we meet, along with the Wurundjeri, and all Kulin nations, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging ...

It's a great pleasure and honour to participate in the opening this evening of the second exhibition at Buxton Contemporary - if somewhat of a daunting prospect given Ronnie's tendency towards the deflation of pomp and ceremony.

Like Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, *No one is watching you: Ronnie van Hout* is an exhibition that has been a long time coming - but worth the wait, and couldn't be more timely.

THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Ronnie van Hout grew up, and came of age, at the height of the Cold War. He was born in 1962 in Christchurch, New Zealand, just two years after the theatre critic Martin Esslin first articulated the idea of the Theatre of the Absurd, a genre of post-war theatre informed by existentialism and 'what happens when human existence has no meaning or purpose and communication breaks down'¹

Writing about the work of playwrights such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Jodorowky, Havel and others, Esslin defined the Theatre of the Absurd as being characterised by experimental and sometimes nonsensical works of dark comedy and vaudeville, mixed with horrific or tragicomic images; characters caught in hopeless situations, forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions; with dialogue full of clichés, wordplay and nonsense; plots that are cyclical or absurdly expansive; and works that are either a parody or outright dismissal of realism and the concept of the [so-called] 'well-made play'.² This catalogue of characteristics could be just as happily applied to Ronnie van Hout's absurdist sculptural assemblages and tableaux.

The Theatre of the Absurd was shaped by the political turmoil, scientific breakthroughs and social upheaval going on in the world in the Cold War period - but is equally relevant to our present times, to the culture of fear, otherness, spectacle and communication breakdown that is so familiar today.

SCIENCE FICTION, ALIEN INVASION AND BRIDES OF CHRIST

The anxiety of the Cold War period - the fear of nuclear holocaust and communist invasion - also gave rise to the proliferation and popularisation of science fiction in film and literature - *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *The Thing*, *The Blob*, *The Fly*, *Invaders from Mars* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* - and to fears of alien invasion, infiltration and abduction, mind control, mutants, metamorphosis, impending annihilation and the end of the Earth.

Many science-fiction films of this period were B-grade, low budget, lo-fi productions, with a visual style that resembled the semi-documentary look of crime and espionage films. Ronnie is a keen scholar of the sci-fi genre, and has recently spoken of his interest in UFOs and the popular literature and news reports of 1970s sightings, when photography was posited as truth and

1 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_the_Absurd

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_the_Absurd

evidence.³ He was somehow compelled and taken by the odd quality of these media images, and the particular genre of fake news and photographs, which again rings true in the present. And it might also be that the science-fiction films of his youth have led to his fondness for the visceral qualities of goo and slime and other miscreant materialities that reappear throughout his work.

Ronnie's mother and father, who emigrated from the Netherlands to New Zealand in the mid-1950s, had the word 'alien' stamped on their passports. So Ronnie grew up thinking of himself as the son of aliens.

Growing up in the period of spooks and surveillance, amidst a general sense of distrust and despair, gives the act of looking and being looked at extra significance and malevolence - a sense that runs through the exhibition, and has also accelerated in our current era.

Not only was Ronnie the son of aliens, but, educated in Catholicism, he was also a Bride of Christ. As a participant in Holy Communion, he was inculcated into ingesting the body of Christ, into swallowing the host, so it is perhaps not surprising that his work is fully of blurry visions, stand-ins and body doubles, and that he has an appreciation for abjection and transubstantiation, for beautiful mysteries, the unknowable and the unknown - not to mention proscribed and repressed bodily acts and functions.

And we might also remember that, attending film school in the early 1980s, and entering the art world, Ronnie inherited a rich vein which coursed through the New Zealand art scene; seen, for example, in the sceptical, threadbare, religious text and landscape paintings of Colin McCahon, full of vulnerability and doubt. At the same time, he embraced the alternative religion of rock and roll and the communal, transcendental experience of post-punk abjection.

As exhibition curator Melissa Keys writes in the catalogue, these 'Fragments and passages of 1970s and 80s science fiction, cinema, comedy, music, art, popular and celebrity culture animate van Hout's work, forming an ongoing document of everything that influences him during his formative years.'

Referring to Ronnie's body doubles, Melissa continues: 'While sharing a distinct likeness to the artist they are not portraits in any true sense, nor are they reflective of any particular individual or group. Instead, van Hout's figures seem to combine a disjunctive and troubling mix of characteristics.'

I'm sorry to mention this, and to add to this troubling mix, as I'm sure it is not intended by the artist, but there are times when Ronnie van Hout's body doubles, what Melissa refers to as 'the artist's mutant doppelgangers or miscreant self-portraits', could be mistaken for effigies of Donald Trump or Boris Johnson, or even Alan Jones, Cory Bernardi, Mark Lathan or David Leyonhjelm ... the list could go on.

As you will see when you enter the gallery, the exhibition brings together an extraordinary assembly of new and recent work, along with an expansive back catalogue, encompassing more than 70 works in total: from early embroideries of band posters and UFOs, to photographs of aliens, and the absurdist, existentialist, gravel effigies of men trapped in the bodies of bananas, sausages and poo. The mise-en-scène is equally intense and claustrophobic, with recent works such as *Couch*, *Steps* and *Medicine cabinet*, from 2016, set within a stark, clinical chamber - part bathroom, hospital, asylum - which only serves to amplify the vacuous horror of the white cube of the gallery.

In works such as *Doom and gloom* 2009, comprising a pyjama-clad pair of child-sized doppelgänger versions of the artist, we see something of the child behind the man, or the man the child would become. In this work, Ronnie draws us back through memory, bringing his personal history into the present, invoking the potentiality of childhood and the past. And yet, like much of Ronnie's work, *Doom and gloom* invokes a sense of existential dread, related to fate,

³ Ronnie van Hout, 'On UFOs and amateurism', public lecture, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 21 May 2018.

destiny and determinism, as the potential of childhood is channelled into the limitations and imperfections of the present.⁴

In the upstairs gallery is an extraordinary new body of work, the exhibition's apotheosis, called *Bad fathers*, a crescendo of shock-jock stadium rock, full of classical art historical references, to Jesus and Lazarus, Hercules and Bacchus, Narcissus, and the ascendancy of Dionysus over Apollo. Like an over-scaled nativity scene gone wrong, it strikes an anthemic chorus as a caricature of over-blown triumphalism and testament to the fallibility of toxic masculinity.

CONCLUSION - MANIFESTO

In what might stand as an early manifesto of Ronnie's philosophical outlook and artistic methodology, there is a work in the show that includes a reference from Ronnie's high school headmaster, W.E. Jefferey, dated 26 November 1979. The headmaster notes that:

Ronnie has good ability which he has chosen not to apply in any concerted and concentrated way ... He is very much an individualist and determined not to conform to normal standards of work, dress, etc. If he is motivated, however, Ronald shows originality, flair and genuine ability. He has a genuine talent in art and a considerable interest in film making. His fellows and teachers tolerate his eccentricities remarkably well, mainly perhaps because of his basic sense of humour and lack of malice.

Ronnie's investigations into the complex cultural relationships between art production and social reality are indeed charming, disarming and strikingly original. He is known as a master of slapstick existentialism, but I would also make a claim for Ronnie as a secular religious artist of the highest order.

For whilst, 'The Theatre of the Absurd sought to attack the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy' - to return for a moment to Martin Esslin and his 1965 book *Absurd Drama*:

It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation ... But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence ... The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.⁵

And upon that note, I would like to congratulate Ronnie, Melissa, Ryan and all involved, and to rejoice in Ronnie's liberating sense of laughter in the face of despair.

It gives me great pleasure to declare the exhibition open.

Max Delany Artistic Director & CEO
ACCA | Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

⁴ This outline is drawn from the acquisition proposal of *Doom and Gloom* 2009 for the Monash University Collection, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2009.

⁵ Martin Esslin, 'Introduction', *Absurd Drama*, 1965, cited at https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Martin_Esslin