

NO ONE IS WATCHING YOU

This ironically titled exhibition shines a spotlight on Ronnie van Hout, a Melbourne-based New Zealand-born artist best known for his distinctive brand of existential absurdism. Bringing together works that span more than thirty years of practice, *No one is watching you: Ronnie van Hout* encompasses sculpture, video, photography, embroidery and text, and features major new installations.

Van Hout's tragicomic oeuvre references a wide range of sources from science fiction, cults and cinema to art history and popular and celebrity culture. He frequently draws upon childhood experiences and recollections to create wryly amusing yet heart-rending micro fictions. Casting fragile, lonely figures in the midst of perplexing scenarios, van Hout masterfully evokes familiar and yet strange interior worlds. His unsettling tableaux unleash deep social anxieties and feelings of self-consciousness, triggering the impulse to simultaneously laugh and cry.

The multitude of protagonists populating van Hout's work include figures from pop culture, peculiar everymen and wicked self-portraits. The latter appear to theatrically seize the artistic limelight while at the same time attempting to elude its searching glare. Van Hout's practice deliberately blurs the boundaries between self and other, artist and audience, tragedy and farce, at once humorously and poignantly exploring powerful sensations of the contemporary human condition.

CURATOR: MELISSA KEYS

RONNIE VAN HOUT

Ronnie van Hout

Conversations in Black and White 1993
cotton embroidery on cotton duck

Collection of Rae-ann Sinclair and Nigel Williams, Melbourne

Untitled 1994
cotton embroidery on canvas

Collection of Suzie Melhop & Darren Knight, Sydney

Untitled 1994
cotton embroidery on cotton duck

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Drawings of UFO 1995–96

cotton embroidery on cotton duck

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

I've Abandoned Me (chimp and boulder excerpt)

2003–18

painted fibreglass, acrylic, synthetic fur, clothing,
monitor, DVD

installation dimensions variable

duration 00:21:53

Long Term Loan Collection, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, New Zealand

Four Days and Nights, After McMahon 1994

digital print

Collection of Rae-ann Sinclair and Nigel Williams, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

Untitled Embroidery 1993–2000 2000
cotton embroidery on cotton duck

Untitled Embroidery 1993–2000 2000
cotton embroidery on cotton duck

Untitled Embroidery 1993–2000 (DEVOX) 2000
cotton embroidery on cotton duck

These canvases reference handmade band advertisements from the mid-1990s that were often found in music stores and other hangouts and that sought prospective musicians for aspiring bands. In contrast to the apparent yet often carefully considered casualness of the posters that inspired them, these works are meticulously reproduced in embroidered form.

Disarmingly humorous and poignant feelings of incompleteness, deficiency and failure can be traced throughout van Hout's practice. These band-member-wanted ads can be read as expressing aspiration and the desire to perform. The posters also suggest absence and the search for completeness. The cover band ad may wryly reference van Hout's approach to artmaking via processes of re-making, re-presenting and referencing experiences and memories found in TV, cinema, music and art.

Ronnie van Hout

Ersatz 2003

plastic, painted polyurethane and fibreglass,
glazed clay, string, aluminium

Collection of Andrew Grigg, Auckland, New Zealand

Ronnie van Hout

D.E.A.D. Pronounced Dead 2004
painted resin

Collection of Simon Hayman, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

The Way Home 2014

cotton embroidery on cotton duck

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

The End 2010

single-channel digital video, colour, sound

duration 00:08:44

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Bananaman (fallen) 2010

painted fibreglass and plastic, plywood

I am Hammer 2 2010

painted fibreglass and plastic, plywood

Michael Buxton Collection, Melbourne

Sausageman 2010

painted fibreglass and plastic, plywood

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Sausages and bananas are regular cast members in van Hout's artworks. Sometimes endowing them with human limbs and other figurative references, the artist finds these forms endlessly amusing. For example, he sees sausages as simple shapes that remind him of human waste. Van Hout appreciates the symmetry of the idea that when sausages are made they are connected together in a string and that once they pass through the body they re-emerge in approximately the same shape that they went in. It's a grotesque circulation of form – an abject reference to movement of matter from one orifice to another.

Ronnie van Hout

YOU! 2016

painted polyurethane, urethane coated CNC polystyrene,
clothing, wig, MDF, lighting

Ronnie van Hout's sculptural characters possess an indeterminate relationship to the viewer and to the artist himself. While his figures often share a distinct likeness to the artist they are not portraits in the true sense, nor are they reflective of any particular individual or group. Instead, his characters seem to combine a disjunctive and troubling mix of different physical and cultural characteristics.

Caught between childhood and adulthood, this self-assured character points aggressively towards the viewer. The accompanying sign reads 'YOU!' Van Hout's hybridised, man-child mini-me's might initially be mistaken as the artist's mutant doppelgangers or miscreant self-portraits. However, as this installation attests, it's not just about him it's also about *YOU!*

Ronnie van Hout

Steps (Shit, Fuck, Piss) 2016

glue and urethane on polystyrene, T5 slimline florescent

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne

Sitting Figure II 2016

painting polyurethane on polystyrene, clothing, wig,
cast epoxy resin fiberglass, stainless steel plinth

Raft Studio, Melbourne

Medicine Cabinet (Ha Ha) 2016

glue and urethane on polystyrene, T5 slimline florescent

Couch (Standup Sit) 2016

glue and urethane on polystyrene, T5 slimline florescent

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne

In this humorous suite of works referencing clinical medicine, domestic life and bodily functions, van Hout creates visual wordplays or bad puns associated with healing. There is a medicine cabinet that laughs (*ha ha*), a psychotherapist's couch (*standup sit*) and steps to make a full recovery (*shit, fuck, piss*).

Sitting figure II, consisting of a pyjama-clad, cross-legged figure seated on a lavatory, is a theatrically pensive and uncertain character. In one hand he holds a microphone and in the other a cigarette. Perhaps humorously referencing French-American artist Marcel Duchamp who infamously presented a urinal as a work of art in 1917, and also made his artistic persona the subject of his artwork, van Hout's figure itself can be viewed as a stand-in equivalent for a contemporary readymade presented in a most functional everyday form.

Ronnie van Hout

I Can Change 2013

Painted polyurethane and fibreglass, graphite

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

No Exit 2002

audio file

duration 00:02:51

ATM 2013

audio file

duration 00:05.51

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Bad Traveller 2010
painted cast resin

Slipping on a banana peel is a staple of physical comedy, the legacy of ‘Sliding’ Billy Watson, who became famous in the vaudeville halls of the late 19th century for his slapstick banana-related routines. Similar comedic sequences appear in the film work of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd.

For van Hout, the banana has an enduring appeal as the funniest of fruits, associated as it is with falling over, stupidity and chimpanzees; and it is often used by the artist as a substitute or stand-in for a penis.

This work is filled with comic pathos and, somehow, the artist nudges us to feel for – or even identify with – the absurd hard luck of this gigantic Ronnie banana. Avoiding the *schadenfreude* of early slapstick humour that often reinforced class, gender and ethnic stereotypes, *Bad traveller* elicits sympathy, triggering humour but also arousing a latent shared sense of existential dread.

Ronnie van Hout

Banana Man 2010

painted cast resin, plastic, plywood

I am Hammer 2 2010

painted cast resin, plastic, plywood

Michael Buxton Collection, Melbourne

Sausageman 2010

painted cast resin, plastic, plywood

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Sausages and bananas are regular cast members in van Hout's artworks. Sometimes endowing them with human limbs and other figurative references, the artist finds these forms endlessly amusing. For example, he sees sausages as simple shapes that remind him of human waste. Van Hout appreciates the symmetry of the idea that when sausages are made they are connected together in a string and that once they pass through the body they re-emerge in approximately the same shape that they went in. It's a grotesque circulation of form – an abject reference to movement of matter from one orifice to another.

Ronnie van Hout

Painting again 1998
single-channel video
duration 00:14:19

Monkey Madness 1998
single-channel video
duration 00:14:23

Drinking again 2001
single-channel video
duration 00:08:09

House of the Rising Sun 2002
single-channel video
duration 00:09:48

Ronnie van Hout

Untitled 1994

cotton embroidery on cotton duck

Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Uhhuhhhhhhhhh 1996

cotton embroidery on cotton duck

Collection of Rae-ann Sinclair and Nigel Williams, Melbourne

Dad Drawing 1995–96

cotton embroidery on polycotton

Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Life sucks 2018

painted polyurethane and fibreglass

Zombie apple 2018

painted polyurethane and fibreglass

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

I didn't see it coming 2012

painted polyurethane and fibreglass

I can't give up 2012

painted polyurethane and fibreglass

I should've done that ages ago 2012

painted polyurethane and fibreglass

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Being seen 2011

painted fibreglass, plastic and cast polyurethane

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne

A distant friend 2012

painted polyurethane and fibreglass

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Now I'll never know 2012

painted polyurethane and fibreglass

Collection of Rae-ann Sinclair and Nigel Williams, Melbourne

Grouped together under the shared title of *The leavings*, this array of individual works is presented on an odd assortment of wonky white plinths, variously echoing stumps, posts or markers. Each with its own suggestive title, these peculiar totems or memorials reflect the residue of materials, objects, memories and emotions that is left behind when we move on.

The banal and kooky objects and their titles are absurd gags – wicked one-liners and visual jokes that playfully test the combined comedic potential of language and form.

Ronnie van Hout

Fly Concorde 1989
silver gelatin print

Collection of Rae-ann Sinclair and Nigel Williams, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

Backdoorman I 1996

single-channel digital video, colour, sound
duration 00:03:00

Backdoorman II 2003

single-channel digital video, colour, sound
duration 00:02:57

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Planet B 2004

inkjet print

edition 1/15

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Fly Concorde 1989
silver gelatin print

Collection of Rae-ann Sinclair and Nigel Williams, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

Timing that Flawed 2009
painted resin

Bosci Collection, Melbourne

Cold Shoulder to Cry On 2010
spray enamel on cast polyester resin fibreglass

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

These two model-scale sculptures recall van Hout's late father's own backyard shed. Throughout his boyhood, the artist wasn't permitted inside and, as a result, the shed was transformed into a mythical place of imagination and longing.

Cartoonish, stilt-like legs with tiny sneakers protrude from each of these structures, as if the human and the object worlds have seamlessly combined. The title *Timing that flawed* is a lyric from the 1980s English band Joy Division's influential song, *Love will tear us apart*.

Ronnie van Hout

Hybrid 1999, exhibition print 2018
inkjet print

Monster 1999, exhibition print 2018
inkjet print

Abduct 1999, exhibition print 2018
inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

Ersatz (Alien) 2003

resin-coated styrene, clothing, synthetic polymer paint
on composition board, string

Private collection, Christchurch

Ersatz (no one is watching you) 2003

synthetic polymer paint on composition board

Collection of Andrew Grigg, Auckland, New Zealand

Ersatz is a German word that means substitute, or stand-in for something else; it suggests something that might be false or artificial.

Van Hout is fascinated with our need to create and accept irrational narratives as truths. These works explore the psychological imperative to believe in super beings, phenomena and forces beyond our control. While the artist doesn't necessarily believe that aliens are watching and studying us, he is interested in the absurd and often disturbing nature of abduction narratives – encounters that sometimes entail bizarrely erotic, physically or psychologically invasive experiences. Van Hout is curious about the social phenomena of abduction narratives and what these stories might suggest about humanity and our relationship with the unknown.

Ronnie van Hout

Paul 2014

polyurethane, fibreglass, acrylic, fabric, glass,
plastic, wood

Museum of Old and New Art (MoNA), Hobart

Ronnie van Hout

Sick Child 2016

Painted resin, wig, clothing, plaster

Collection of The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū
Purchased from 'Recovered Memory', the fourth Goodman-Suter
Contemporary Art Project and funded by the Goodman endowment
and Burton Bequest in 2006

Ronnie van Hout

Dave 2014

cast polyurethane, fibreglass, acrylic, clothing, wig,
glass eyes, wooden chairs

Zipped up in his sleepwear onesie and white socks, van Hout's protagonist *Dave* floats in suspension, his body impossibly supported between two chairs. This character's name and the suggestion of zero gravity allude to the astronaut in Stanley Kubrick's seminal 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Often appearing in pyjamas, van Hout's hybrid figures feature casts of the artist's face and hands, mismatched with child-sized bodies. With their crudely painted faces, they remain at once recognisable likenesses of van Hout and yet unsettlingly unfamiliar. The peculiar, even grotesque qualities they possess manage to solicit equal levels of empathy. *Dave* is at once eerily adorable and repulsive, and like many of van Hout's figures this character appears to be in a strangely detached state lacking autonomy and agency.

Ronnie van Hout

Painting From the Future (Titanium) 1993

Titanium and acrylic on concrete, marker additions by
Vito van Hout 2011

Collection of the artist

Painting From the Future (Sulphur) 1993

Sulphur and acrylic on concrete with graphite

Collection of the artist

Ronnie van Hout

All said, all done 2012

polyurethane, fibreglass, clothing, wig,
synthetic polymer paint, basketball, shoes,
plywood, wire, laser prints, high-definition television,
colour high-definition video, sound
duration 00:07:15

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased with funds donated by Michael and Janet Buxton, 2014

Endgame 2012

paint on digital print on canvas

1pm 2012

cast polyurethane, fiberglass and acrylic

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne

The bold geometric grid repeated throughout this work references a critical moment in the artist's life, when he designed the cover of his high school magazine in 1978.

The installation takes the form of a low stage or platform, which is populated by an ambiguous ensemble of figures and forms. The artist recites a series of adolescent musings drawn from the same high school magazine, variously expressing fears about the atom bomb, the baffling incomprehensibility of mathematics, the guilt of youth and the pointlessness of measuring emotion. The theatrical scene is unsettlingly anxious, amusing and confused; odd misshapen characters and assemblages of forms appear both big and small, including a diminutive figure resembling van Hout who appears to be about to disappear down a hole. No one seems to quite belong in this absurdist tableau where tumult and insecurity take centre stage.

Ronnie van Hout

Failed Robot 2007

synthetic polymer paint on fibreglass over polyurethane

Collection of Peter Bate and Wendy Foard, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

Failed Robot 2007

synthetic polymer paint on fibreglass over polyurethane

Private collection, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

BED/SIT 2008

pigment, fibreglass resin over polyurethane,
single-channel digital video

Ronnie van Hout's *BED/SIT* replicates and doubles each of the elements that constitute American sculptor and conceptual artist Robert Morris's seminal work *Hearing* from 1972. Morris's installation consists of an approximation of an interrogation room, including a heated copper chair, a bed made of lead and galvanised aluminium table components.

For his installation, van Hout creates a mirror image of this work, situating two look-alike miniature mannequins opposite one another, each with the artist's face but with their hair arranged to possibly suggest Morris's own distinct appearance. Morris's *Hearing* also features an audio component that runs for over three and a half hours and fictitiously suggests some sort of investigative procedure. The content of this sound element consists of a series of quotes and paraphrased textual excerpts by leading philosophers, writers and artists.

In contrast, van Hout's audio comprises a recording of the monotonous hum of an electrical substation, thus substituting the literal ambient frequencies of power being transformed and distributed in the public grid for the transmission of ideas and philosophy. The mysterious electrostatic hum signals an unsettling absence, in contrast to the steady presence of a narrative voice and words of intellectual authority. Further adding to the sense of isolation, van Hout's installation refers to a bedsit, which conjures up a sense of domestic solitude and loneliness counter to Morris's institutional setting.

Ronnie van Hout

Hold That Thought, Salazopyrin 2008

Salazopyrin and acrylic on MDF

This monochrome panel was produced as part of a broader project that explored historical ideas about the humanist, therapeutic and curative potential of art. Referencing the aspirations of modernism, with its focus on purity and materiality, van Hout created this work by crushing his arthritis medication Salazopyrin into a fine powder to make a pigment he then used to coat the work's surface. 'I thought if looking at art could make you better, then looking at medicine as art would be even better.'

Ronnie van Hout

Punk on a Bed 2015

painted MDF, painted polyurethane and fibreglass
on polystyrene, wig, clothing

In this amusing scene, the anarchic excess of the punk collides with the measured minimalist dispassion of the bed on which he stands. When discussing the work, the artist has remarked that 'there is no big meaning, I just liked the idea of a punk on a bed as a barrier to comfort'.

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Brett and Michelle 2014

digital video, sound

track *Home (Parts I & II)* 1998 by Chris Smith from his album *Cabin Fever*; dialogue from *The Boys*, 1998, director: Rowan Woods, screenplay: Stephen Sewell
duration 00:04:37

In *Brett and Michelle*, van Hout performs the dialogue of two roles from multiple scenes throughout the menacing 1998 cinematic thriller *The Boys* that are edited into one continuous exchange. Just out of prison and on parole, Brett, a violent psychopath, reconnects with his girlfriend, Michelle, shortly after his release.

Deeply unsettling, this video continues van Hout's interest in the psychopathology that simmers beneath the surface of daily life. Presented in dynamic split screen and claustrophobically shifting between close-ups (with suggestions of domestic spaces in the background, one notably including a poster of an alien), the characters engage in an intense and ricocheting dialogue that constantly threatens to erupt into violence.

Existing away from the ever-watchful gaze of society, the home is presented here as an ungoverned and threatening space. Van Hout's performance as both aggressor (Brett) and the subject of aggression and oppression (Michelle) disrupts the normative order, complicating notions of gender and violence within the cinematic imagination.

Ronnie van Hout

Learnt Happiness 2008
painted resin

Collection of Simon Hayman, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

Nice and stupid 1995

Head: insulation foam, CD player with lead and three point plug, speakers, plastic eyes, plywood, customwood Swastika; silicone and fibreglass

Head: 395 × 330mm (h × d)

Swastika: 326 × 426 × 34mm (h × w × d)

503098 1999-0021-3

A lumpy, globular mass of silicone with eyes crudely set into it is paired with a white panel inscribed with a swastika. The two elements can be seen to represent different forms of ugliness and horror; van Hout comments that 'no one wants to look at either of these things'. Histories are littered with the co-option of aesthetics for evil, corrupt or bankrupt ends. Among other concerns, van Hout's practice explores stigmatised symbols that cannot be rehabilitated and repulsive things we reflexively look away from, or do not wish to see.

Ronnie van Hout

Standup 2016

single-channel digital video, colour, sound

duration 00:10:49

‘A joke isn’t a joke until someone laughs at it.’ Ronnie van Hout

In *Standup*, van Hout re-performs and imitates comedy routines and performance styles personified by four distinctive and legendary comedians from the 1980s and '90s: Woody Allen, Ellen DeGeneres, Richard Pryor and Andy Kaufman. Each performer embodies complex and sometimes critical moments in history, popular culture, identity and politics.

The various monologues are all simultaneously presented, with van Hout’s re-creations of each of the performers’ characteristic use of voice, body language, narrative, rhythm and timing combined into a single cacophony.

Ronnie van Hout

King Vader 2018

single-channel digital video, colour, sound

duration 00:20:21

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Bad Fathers 2018

Painted MDF, painted polyurethane and fibreglass
on polystyrene, wigs, glass eyes, plastic

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Manson Son 1996

collage of newsprint and plastic bag, school report

Histories, fragments of culture and personal memories are reconfigured throughout van Hout's practice to suggest the ever-shifting ways we construct new life narratives and are shaped by historic moments and social and cultural dynamics. In particular, van Hout is interested in our 'desire to stitch our personal narrative together with a broader historical moment'.

Here, the artist incongruously combines his high school leaving report with a series of newspaper clippings about the infamous court trials of 1960s Californian cult leader and killer, Charles Manson. A youthful van Hout collected these media clippings around the same time he received his school report and kept the materials together in a tiny sealed plastic bag until this work was realised in 1996.

Ronnie van Hout

News, Thursday February 22 1962–1972 2006

inkjet print

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

The Way Home 2014

cotton embroidery on cotton duck

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

I Can Change 2013

Painted polyurethane and fibreglass, graphite

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Learnt Happiness 2008
painted resin

Collection of Simon Hayman, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

Hand holding a rock 2018
painted resin, ply and aluminium

Collection of the artist

Learnt Happiness 2008
painted resin

Collection of Simon Hayman, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

Gang of Hands 2018

3D printed resin, paint, steel

Michael Buxton Collection, Melbourne

Ronnie van Hout

Crawling Figure 2016

Painted urethane on polystyrene, clothing, wig,
cast epoxy resin fibreglass, stainless steel plinth

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne

Empty Doorways 2016

Painted urethane on polystyrene, clothing, wig,
resin coated

Courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

End Doll 2007

fabric, cast resin, synthetic polymer paint, plastic,
synthetic hair
artist proof

Collection of the artist

Ronnie van Hout

Handwalk 2015

single-channel digital video, colour, sound
dimensions 00:06:28

Courtesy of STATION, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Ronnie van Hout

Bad Ronald 2013–18

mdf, cast resin, soundtrack of *Bad Ronald*, 1974,

director: Buzz Kulik

duration 00:74:00

This installation comprises a false wall with a cast of the artist's eye peeping out through a hole, combined with the soundtrack of *Bad Ronald*, a strange made-for-TV thriller from 1974 that fascinated van Hout as a young boy.

Prone to fantasy, artistically inclined and socially inept, the adolescent protagonist, Ronald Wilby, becomes a source of ridicule after asking a classmate out on a date. Rejected and teased by his peers, he accidentally knocks over Carol, the younger sister of his love interest, and she dies as a result of her fall. In panic Ronald buries her and confesses to his mother, who hides him from the authorities by entombing him within the walls of the family home. Mrs Wilby then dies unexpectedly, leaving Ronald, disturbed and alone, to watch, through a series of peepholes in the wall, the new family that moves into the house.

In his reimagining of this cinematic encounter from his youth, van Hout takes the place of the ever-watchful protagonist, peering out through the wall – seeing all but remaining unseen. He has become the ultimate invisible outsider, repressed and sealed away from the world by 'Mother'.

Ronnie van Hout

Doom and Gloom 2009

painted fibreglass on polystyrene, painted plastic,
clothing, modelling clay, wig

Monash University Collection

Purchased 2009

Courtesy of Monash University Museum of Art | MUMA, Melbourne