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Shadow reflections: Gordon Bennett

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GORDON BENNETT SHADOW REFLECTIONS

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[VIEW WORKS](#) [ESSAY](#) [ARTIST PAGE](#) [PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS](#)**Face to face: Gordon Bennett's Shadow reflections**

2008 is a milestone for Gordon Bennett. 20 years ago he was finishing his graduating year at art school, and now a large survey exhibition of work from these two decades is touring the State art galleries. Also this year Gordon Bennett is showing a new body of his abstract paintings in Adelaide, and in Sydney there is an exhibition of the very different looking interiors by his alter ego, John Citizen. Also in Sydney, Bennett will be exhibiting in the Biennale, which brings us to the suite of paintings, Shadow reflections—15 double portraits made 15 years ago.

On being invited to make a submission to the Biennale, Bennett thought that Shadow reflections, which had never been exhibited before, would fit in well with the Biennale's theme, 'Revolutions: Forms that turn'. Each work in the suite depicts a settler type, painted upright and in full light, with an accompanying shadowy portrait of a tribal Aborigine—a different one for each painting. The Aborigine's dark-skinned face is doubly darkened by shadow and turned upside down underneath the settler: face facing face. It is an unsettling juxtaposition, as if on looking at his or her reflection in a muddy pool, the settler sees the uncanny reflection of an Aborigine looking back.

On another level, the double portraits are an allegory of the British Empire and its new antipodean colony upside down on the other side of the world. Like the ancient Greek idea of the Antipodes, which can be traced as far back as Pythagoras (and surely further), the doubles oppose each other as in a mirror yet together comprise a balanced whole, a gestalt. This is exactly how Bennett depicts each pair. Joined at the chest, they are like Siamese twins who share the same body, the same genes. Even if each face reflects the other negatively, both are peas in a pod, the composites of the new Australian identity and harbingers of a global culture. What might at first seem a relationship of otherness is, from another perspective, one of co-dependency: an embattled discourse of binary opposites shifts into a hybrid text.

Bennett's early work showed a deep interest in such ancient mythological schemes of mirror images and reflections, which are also the basis of the earliest conceptions of the nature of art and, in more recent times, psychoanalytical schemas of identity. What most fascinated Bennett about the mirror was its metaphoric association with language, in which the coding mechanism of language is the silvery edge or tain of a thin clear membrane that simultaneously separates and mediates the discursive arrangements of knowledge (i.e. texts, images etc.) and the world of things. Language as a clear mirror or window onto the world is the key trope of classical (i.e. Enlightenment) epistemology. In its invisibility the mirror confirms the order of classical reason, or in this case the order and dress of Englishness. However, seen in another light, the baroque distortions of the mirror's reflective surface reflect back a lurid satire, as in those vanitas paintings in which a beautiful woman preens herself in a mirror but we, the spectator, see not her beautiful features but the skeletal and haggish shadow of death. The Shadow reflections are also vanitas paintings, in which the Aboriginal portraits play the role of death, a reminder of the limits and contradictions of settler pride.

If this history of the mirror as a metaphor for language and vanity resonates in the name Shadow reflections, most at stake in these particular paintings is the question of identity: not who but how am I: what makes us think we are this and not that. Thus Bennett's avowed interest in the tropes of psychoanalysis. He is not interested in Freud's model of the subject—its neurotic individualism, sexuality and paternal or phallic identification. Rather, as is clearly evident in these works, he draws on more socially orientated theories of identity, such as Jung's notion of a collective unconscious and Lacan's theory of the mirror-image and split self. The most obvious point of these 15 different settler types is that they share a similar shadow reflection, as if there is a symbolic common ground or stratum of settler Australian identity. Like both Jung and Lacan—in their very different ways—Bennett's notion of identity or self is also of a split or multiple entity that, despite the powerful illusion of a whole, consists of opposed forces. As with Lacan's theory of camouflage and mirror-image identity, each face, no matter how mask like, wears its identity like an emperor without clothes: what appears a mask cannot be removed, it does not hide or cover a naked truthful body. The disguise is all there is, and it is fully revealing. We must look at the dynamics of the shadow reflection rather than search for some inner essential meaning; and this dynamic reveals the psyche in all its troubled delusions. And like Jung's scheme, each mask insinuates its opposite, indeed is beholden to its opposite: European settler as white Aborigine.

The suite is thus a classical example of Bennett's early postcolonial deconstructions of pervasive colonial representations that shaped the modern Australian imagination. The images appear generic and familiar because they are based on widely disseminated media and textbook representations. Bennett's main concern, as always, is not so much the apparent subject matter of the source image, but its pictorial language or structure. His deconstruction proceeds in a typical Derridean manner by exposing the binary formations of this underlying structure—in other words, he puts into play the baroque distortions of the mirror surface.

In this suite, the pictorial language structure Bennett focuses his attention on is one used in the landscape paintings of Australia's best-known colonial painter, John Glover. Glover's Tasmanian landscape paintings divide into two types, what one art historian called Aboriginal and pastoral Arcadias. The pastoral Arcadias, well-known depictions of Glover's and other settler properties recently cleared of Aborigines, are sunlit and bright, while the Aboriginal Arcadias are invariably cast in the darker shadows of twilight or even night. Usually these two landscape types are kept quite separate, as if they represent two different times and histories. However in one painting, Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point (c. 1834), Glover actually anticipates Bennett's composition. The top half of the painting depicts the ordered colonial settlement of Hobart town in full sunlight, and the bottom half its wilder darker shadow reflection: Tasmanian Aborigines engaging in traditional activities of dancing hunting and swimming.¹ Glover's intention, besides contrasting the light or enlightenment of English civilisation with the darkness of savagery, is to paint an allegory of what has been called the Course of Empire. The shadowy baroque foreground at the bottom of the painting is a metaphor of the past and what is passing, while the upper part of the painting bathed in the new morning light is the future, with Mt Wellington crowning the landscape like a beneficent Old Testament God.

One important difference between Glover's painting and Bennett's suite, besides their genre and the 160 years that separates them, is that Glover's image is not easily turned upside down, where as Bennett's image invites the viewer to do just this, either literally—the frames are wired so they can be easily reversed—or imaginatively. Without wanting to over-simplify Glover's painting, we could say that it depicts the irreversibility of time and history, whereas Bennett's suite suggests the reversibility of time, the circularity of history and thus the possibility of revolution. And this is what Bennett sought to specifically address in the Biennale. His idea was to install Shadow reflections upside down in the colonial wing of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, alongside colonial portraits similarly upturned. Upturned, Bennett's shadow reflections usurp the former hierarchy, as the slave overthrows the master in Hegel's dialectic. Of course, unlike Glover's painting, colonial portraits invariably keep their shadow reflections hidden, unarticulated, as if they depict only half the story. However, when hung in the colonial gallery, the Shadow reflections suite invites the viewer to complete the tale, to see the invisible shadow reflections of the colonial portraits and the revolution this would imply.

The Shadow reflection series was made 15 years ago, near the beginning of Bennett's career. If this seems an odd contribution to a contemporary Biennale, it is also in keeping with the theme of revolution. To revolve is to return to the beginning, and revolutions usually are a starting again. Bennett is not simply appropriating former examples of his art—something he has often done in the past. In bringing out these paintings after 15 years, and reconstituting them for the 2008 Biennale and thus for a contemporary context, Bennett is also returning to his beginnings, engaging in his own private revolution. Perhaps the current survey exhibition of his art has caused the artist to reconsider the trajectory of his career, and to think again about his early work.

In 1993, when this suite of paintings was made, Bennett had been out of art school for just four years, but four momentous years. His very early student paintings (of 1987–1988)

appeared from nowhere, like bush fires torching the Australian psyche. Expressionist and direct, their rage against racism was nevertheless very clearly considered: he was a serial arsonist with a plan. During the next few years his anger became more cerebral, a controlled slow burn, though the heat was just as intense. The expressionism was jettisoned and Bennett developed a certain purity and clarity in this thinking, as if we could read in the art the movements of the artist's mind. This is particularly the case with this suite of paintings. However, somewhat unusual for this time, Bennett has painted them freehand from his memory of similar representations, rather than worked directly from projections of specific images. Hence they retain something of the direct expressionist style of his student work.

By 1993 Bennett's art had begun to consolidate into a style that would carry him through the next decade—though one that became noticeably more baroque and complex in its composition. Thus, in returning to this suite in 2008, Bennett turns his own practice upside down; a sort of spring-cleaning, a revolution, a return to the origins of his practice, and also, it should be said, to the origins of the current phase of contemporary art practice in general. Western art of the last four decades of the 20th century is notoriously theatrical: hence it has been characterised as 'a Baroque age, meaning that rules of taste are impossible to enforce and forms have gone haywire in the various arts—but from lack of conviction than revolutionary enthusiasm.'² Bennett is one of many artists who, from about 1990, injected conviction and revolutionary enthusiasm back into art, instigating the most recent cultural realignment of contemporary times. Usually seen as beginning in 1989 this period marks the definitive end of modernism and the emergence of the globalised and postcolonial world we now live in. Perhaps Bennett sees the Biennale as an opportunity to re-engage with this revolutionary moment.

A lot has happened since the early 1990s, both in the wider political landscape and the artworld, as well as Bennett's art. Today *Shadow reflections* does not have the revolutionary frisson it initially had. History wars aside, it illustrates what has since become an accepted truism of contemporary Australian sentiment: when Europeans arrived from the other side of the globe and stepped on these shores, they immediately made the Aborigine their primitive other, the shadowy reflection of the white narcissistic ego, the victim of European arrogance and power. However, the format of these portraits—that they can be revolved—at the same time deconstructs this platitude, upsets and unsettles the simplistic binary hierarchy that the images at first appear to create—a hierarchy echoed in the title of each painting: *Settler and shadow reflection*, *Anthropologist and shadow reflection* etc.. In revolving or reversing the hierarchy, we are reminded that this act of European colonialism also simultaneously made the European the other of the indigenous worldview. The future of each was entwined in the other even though they shared no common history except in the primeval origins of the species itself. In a sense, the modernity of colonialism is not the coming of European arrogance to these far off shores, but the co-joining of these two alterities into the one body, the one future—which surely is the lesson, the starting point, of contemporary globalism: we are all in it together. Even the background of the paintings alludes to this hybrid fate: the dotting is sufficiently indeterminate to simultaneously echo modernist mark making, the benday dots favoured by postmodernists, and Aboriginal art. In the end, the binary relations Bennett plays with create not an unchanging and simplistically divided world but, like the mirror reflection itself, an ambivalent inter-related space that must be continually negotiated.

The recontextualising of this suite of paintings today, particularly in the context of the upcoming Biennale and its theme of revolution, emphasises this second deconstructive movement: that the structure can be revolved, not to simply institute another hierarchy but to focus on the time and space of revolution itself: this baroque heterotopia when things are upturned and up for grabs. As recent political events attest, something was begun in the early 1990s that remains unfinished, open to the future.

Ian McLean

1. see David Hansen's excellent discussion of the painting: David Hansen, *John Glover and the 4 Colonial picturesque*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 2003, pp. 210-213.

2. Robert Harbison, *Reflections on Baroque*, Reaktion Books, London, 2000, p. 221.