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Ian A. McLean
University of Wollongong, imclean@uow.edu.au

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Who is John Citizen?

by Ian McLean, 2006

'It's all me. Nothing is me.' (Philip Roth 1)

Like the Jewish-American author Philip Roth, Gordon Bennett's art is at once intensely autobiographical and self-effacing. Each plays with the rhetoric of identity precisely to deny the identity game any oxygen or legitimacy as if nothing is more boring (or dangerous) than its heavy-handed politics. Roth denies he is a Jewish writer: Bennett denies he is an Aboriginal artist: for both their art is a means to escape the reductive logic of identity politics by showing its essentialisms to be discursive fictions or, as Bennett once said, a 'hall of mirrors'.

In line with this strategy Bennett has continuously shifted his style, not only to avoid being typecast (though as all successful mid-career artists know this is impossible) but also to make the point that he is, before anything else, an artist, a performer. We don't confuse an actor with the role he plays, so too we should not confuse the artist with the persona projected in his art. In short, art is a type of disguise, mask or mirror rather than a window onto the soul, but a disguise by which the artist can be something more than himself, and a mirror that reflects back to the audience their own selves and the world they live in. 'Gordon Bennett' did this masterfully, but the danger of too good a performance is that it is mistaken for reality itself. As if to drive this point home, Bennett has invented a new artistic persona, John Citizen.

John Citizen is not an identity (his anonymity is particularly ego-less), nor even an alter ego with all its psychological connotations, but transparently a type of disguise. Perhaps the main point of John Citizen is that in recognising his disguise, we must also accept that 'Gordon Bennett' is one too. But John Citizen also has his own play to stage.

John Citizen's first work, 'Skin Deep', mimicked Gordon Bennett's art. Made in September 1995, it appropriated the welt paintings – amongst the most violent works Gordon Bennett made. But as with all good mimicry John Citizen's was notably different. Instead of raw red whip marks on a black skin of Pollock-like lesions, John Citizen used a smoothly applied 'skin tone' (i.e. pink) producing a more luxurious and even seductive effect. They are distinctly postmodern rather than postcolonial.

Bennett staged 'Gordon Bennett' as a postcolonial artist, but John Citizen is an artist for our times: he reflects back to us citizens the white Australia of the post-Keating era. If Gordon Bennett is a history painter, John Citizen paints science fiction, which is a subset of the utopia genre. Utopias are generally thinly disguised critiques of contemporary society. However John Citizen, an altogether more relaxed persona than Gordon Bennett, keeps his cards quite hidden. Without Gordon Bennett's biting satire, John Citizen's sardonic humour might easily be missed.

In the recent Interiors series (shown in this exhibition) John Citizen has become his own artist as if he no longer needs the inspiration of Gordon Bennett. Gordon Bennett has made paintings of the Interior but their deconstructions of the myths of Australia's colonial history were altogether different. The interior, a metaphor for both John Citizen and Gordon Bennett of Plato's cave and other myths of the psyche, is the proverbial stage of identity. However John Citizen's contemporary Interiors with monochrome paintings have completely foreclosed on Gordon Bennett's maps of contested colonial identities. Made in the image of modernist utopias – postmodern versions of Corbusier and Bauhaus - they are the Ikeas of the mind in which humans have seemingly evolved to some higher post-historical plane and where the beautiful is a smart mathematical ratio rather than in nature and the sublime emotions of human passions. So too the monochrome paintings, like the modern furniture and slick tones of these placeless rooms they decorate, have lost the mystical aura modernist artists and theorists once invested in them. It is as if the theoretical progenitor of the monochrome, Clement Greenberg, stands naked, his turmoils and commitments left behind leaving only the flatlands of postmodern desire.

These halls of mirrors reflect nothing but their own timeless glassy surface. Futures without history, they have nothing to apologise for. John Citizen might picture the poverty of the future we are making for ourselves, but he also reminds us that this Dreaming is only a hall of mirrors.

NOTE: the title is taken from a quote by Philip Roth (Weekend Australian, 11-12.02.06, R4)

1 From a quote by Philip Roth (Weekend Australian, 11-12.02.06, R4)