



regarding the moving images of *vernon ah kee*

MARGARET FARMER

*everyday i achieve something because i was born in this skin
everyday i concede something because i was born in this skin*
Vernon Ah Kee¹

MOVING IMAGES

Vernon Ah Kee is a maker of moving images. He makes moving-image works, telling in their pith and challenge, or beauty, horror and humour. He draws portraits that move those that see them, because they are vessels of love, of beings struggling for life. He creates text works that operate through the shifting of the viewers' perspective, their puzzling forms moving them to anger or sorrow.

IRONY AND ICONOGRAPHY

*why didn't the racist cross the road?
because he didn't want to see the other side*
Vernon Ah Kee²

Ah Kee's surfing movie *Cantchant (Wegrewhere)* (2007), adds irony and politics to the laconic icons of Australian summer—the beach, the surfboard, the relaxed comfort of sunnies, boardies, thongs and t-shirts. The all-Aboriginal cast includes a champion surfer; the boards are decorated with rainforest shield designs on one side and portraits on the other, and the driving soundtrack is by an Aboriginal rock band. Conceived nearly a decade ago, the work was completed in the wake of the Cronulla and Palm Island Riots (2005), depicting the beach, often thought of in Australia as 'the great leveller', as a racially contested space.

Cantchant starts with the sound of the surf, the lap and gurgle of water, as three channels are filled with the colour and movement of a translucent green ocean flecked white with rolling surf and spume, the sunny sky blue above. Piercing the waves with fluid grace is a young man surfing, an Aboriginal man, and we catch glimpses of his vibrant board, decorated in burnt orange, yellow and black. There are patterns in the seams between the three screens, like a segment of a kaleidoscope. The sequence is idyllic; as it turns out, an idyllic precursor. This sequence is replaced by an odd landscape—the cleared pastoral landscape of the Queensland hinterland with unfamiliar trees and suspended trapeziums of foliage, the progeny of the kaleidoscopic screen seams. This landscape bears strange fruit—surfboards wound with barbed wire and suspended from a tree. Gunshots shatter the flesh of the boards; in the silence flies pester the gashes as the boards spin limply. This is a history lesson, ending with a board lying in stagnant algae-smear water, the dead of a despoiled land.

A new sequence shows a posse, resplendent in boldly coloured surf-gear and flash sunnies, carrying their boards from the boardwalk to the dunes and the beach to the pumping beat of the Warumpi Band's 'Stomping Ground'. The sequence ends with the group standing as if posed for a photo, holding their boards fins to sand, point to sky, to display their dramatic rainforest shield designs. It is an image that brings to mind Tracey Moffatt's 1985 photographic work, *The Movie Star: David Gulpilil on Bondi Beach*, in which Gulpilil also proudly takes his aboriginality to the beach; his pose is relaxed; he reclines comfortably alongside his boom box, smiling broadly, as coloured dots of sunscreen bridge his nose. In contrast, our modern Puma- and Billabong-clad warriors are parvenus; they have all the gear but are made conspicuous by it. Standing on the beach, they don't venture to the water. This is the contingent urban present.

The fourth sequence intermingles these three tropes—the surfboard warriors, the surfboard carcass with its crown of barbs, and the first surfer, who industriously waxes his board before again taking the waves—contrasting 'the natural', 'the urban' and 'the persecuted'; the surfer embodying "the resilience of Aboriginal sovereignty, disrupting the iconography of the beach that represents all that is Australian within white popular culture".³ And the work ends with images viewing the lone surfer from underwater, as he straddles his board, the reverse of which sports the left side of Ah Kee's portrait of George Sibley; so the viewer is left with the formidable gaze of Ah Kee's great-grandfather.

VISAGE AND VISCERA

we grew here
Vernon Ah Kee⁴

Installed to hang in free space between walls bearing his text works,⁵ Ah Kee's rainforest-shield and portrait-bearing surfboards resonate with a different significance than that of the less densely decorated boards shot in *Cantchant*. At Artspace, Sydney in 2008, the boards were hung so that they all faced the same way, that is, a defiance of shields from one direction; a pride of portraits from the reverse. In one place, two boards almost form a face from the halved portraits, through which could be read the words "we grew here". This is an unexpected phrase, especially given Ah Kee's other works *Not an Animal or a Plant* (2006) and *Strange Fruit* (2006). The phrase is used to challenge the Anglo-Australian culture that saw fit to chant: "We grew here, you flew here" to Australians of Middle Eastern ethnicity during the Cronulla Riots.

Away from the beach the black fins of the boards, accentuated by the surrounding black text, seem to signify otherness. The fins project, from the chin, the lip and corner of George Sibley's mouth, like piercings. The effect is tribal. On Edward Ah Kee (Vernon's son), they protrude from chin and neck—horns, Frankenstein-like bolts, gang-like markers, the features of an alien species; yet the flesh of the cheeks, the calm set of the face, the coolness of the regard, these are all human, and more than that, they are wise. Sentient otherworldly beings, floating as they do, disembodied, in space.

SKIN AND KIN

*if i am extremist
it is because my people live in extreme conditions*
Vernon Ah Kee⁶

The portraits on the reverse of the surfboards are part of an ongoing portraiture project. Ah Kee found a number of photographs of his family in the archive of anthropologist Norman Tindale. These images, taken face and side-on with identifying markers, as mug shots, form the basis of Ah Kee's portraits, in which Ah Kee re-inscribes the subject's humanity. Often large-scale,⁷ the ultimate impression arising from the portraits' virtuosity, humanity, reality and unavoidable gaze is their individual and collective presence.

Ah Kee's mark-making varies with his subject. At times, such as the charcoal on paper portrait of *George Draham* (2004), it is so gentle that the would be yield of the cheek, the press of the lips in a kiss of greeting is palpable; in others, such as *Mick Miller (Pop)*, (2004), the line is crossed, hatched, harsh, scratching. Across the series *Fantasies of the Good*, these variations of line, the various sets of mouth, squares and slopes of shoulders, raise questions as to whether life treated one less harshly than the other, or did temperament lead him to respond to life more gently, to roll with the punches. In each case, the form and line is imbued with love by the hand of the artist; the observant gaze is there to be met.

Ah Kee is not the first indigenous artist to turn to the photographic record for source material, or the first internationally. Such material has been used by artists Leah King-Smith, and more recently by Julie Dowling and Brooke Andrew. Amongst Julie Dowling's broad portraiture project are portraits based on found photographs of strangers and her own family's photos and memories. Dowling and Ah Kee share a strategy here, the rehabilitation of the neglected and the falsely observed, the falsely recorded, by presenting their subjects in such a way that the presence of their humanity is inescapable and undeniable. Dowling and Ah Kee also share a political agenda, one that Dowling describes as "decolonisation", but in Ah Kee is a less theoretically, though not less articulately stated demand for human rights. However, whereas Dowling's style is evocative, rococo and bling, her portraits decorated with glitter, beaded paint, and Aboriginal and Catholic iconography, Ah Kee takes pride in elegant economy. Brooke Andrew, in contrast to both, soups up his photography, making it advertising glossy; first in *Sexy and Dangerous* (1996), in which a young warrior is rebranded for international consumption with Chinese text. And rather than reinvesting the photographic record with humanity, he emphasises the attractiveness of the people

and communities recorded. In silver-washed portraits and large-scale, colour-washed prints of images of Aboriginal camps and burial mounds, he gives lie to notions of lack of settlement, presenting instead a canon of images of an Aboriginal past, almost to the point of idealised nostalgia that some descendants of the settlers might invest in colonial images, amongst others exposing the brutal vision and acts of the newcomers. And in the 2003-04 series *Kalar Middy*, Andrew generates new images that sexualise the Aboriginal subject.

All three artists use text. Dowling often paints words that represent key aspects of the story behind her painting. These words may be English or in the indigenous language of her subject. Ah Kee creates elegantly designed statements in English that—like “your duty is to accept me my duty is to tolerate you” from *Tolerance* (2004)—confront the reader with the racism present in Australia. Occasionally, because of the way that Ah Kee sets the type, these can present what appears to be a foreign language word—“wegrewhere”, for example. More usually, it is clear from the outset that the text is in English, albeit requiring the viewer’s time to discern the individual words and overall meaning. Andrew’s text is intra- and international. Primarily using the Wiradjuri language when in Australia, Andrew often embraces the local tongue when working overseas. “You’ve always wanted to be black (white friend)”, he asserts in Wiradjuri, a statement he has presented in neon Chinese characters in China and in Lithuanian in Lithuania. Where Ah Kee’s text and politics relate to home, Andrew’s is “both local and cosmopolitan”.⁸ Moreover, there is a very different notion of either a black man or woman in the two artists’ work. In Andrew’s work, black is beautiful, black is sexy, black is what you know you want to be. In Ah Kee’s work, for the most part, to be black is to be marginalised, to be looked down upon; always it is to be human, strong, undefeated. At times it is to be clever and defiant. Notably however, and increasingly frequently, it is not to be ‘normal’ in the sense that he describes the moving image work *whitefellanormal* (2004), in which normal is equated with black, mediocre and disenfranchised. Increasingly Ah Kee’s works present a conspicuous Aboriginal excellence, comprising elegance and mastery, of design and drawing and as in *Cantchant (Wegrewhere)*, the mastery of the surfer.

Yet for all the aboriginal presence in Ah Kee’s work, there is too a sense that the restored aboriginal identity is yet to be born—a sense that arises from the *Unwritten* series (2008), in which the hollows of eyes and the crowns of skulls are apparent in threading lines. Are these lines membrane or aura? Do the visages press against a permanent shroud-like constraint, or are they rendered visible by fine and infinite connections, or perhaps veiled by fine and infinite cultural filaments? Formally, these works are the inverse of many of Ah Kee’s portraits, in which the detail of the central face, the ears and crown and above the jawline, emerges from the blank surround.

UNDER THE SKIN

*my duty is to persecute error
your duty is to accept the truth*
Vernon Ah Kee⁹

Ah Kee’s politics get ‘under the skin’ of Australian culture; that is, they “annoy, irk, nettle, bark, flay, graze, peel and scrape” at Australia’s social casing.¹⁰ Equally as blunt in the force of their meaning, but lacking in intelligence or elegance of expression are the crude and racist toilet graffiti of former workers on Sydney’s Cockatoo Island. Finding the bundled stacks of toilet doors, when looking at the site prior to participating in the 2008 *Biennale of Sydney*, Ah Kee put his name to the area, making it his work *Born in This Skin* (2008), providing irrefutable proof of the racism his work disrupts. At times, the political strength of Ah Kee’s slogans calls into question how they might navigate the test for sorting politics from art, expressed by Biennale of Sydney curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev—“does it tell you what to think, or does it ask you to think?”¹¹ The graffiti in this work is a reminder of the political and textual lineage of Ah Kee’s texts and their other possible uses—bumper stickers, banner heads, protestor-borne signs, consciousness-raising.

AN OTHER THING¹²

*in the desert I saw a creature naked bestial who squatting upon the ground
held his heart in his hands and ate of it I said is it good friend it is bitter bitter
he answered but I like it because it is bitter and because it is my heart¹³*

No matter how baldly Ah Kee states the facts, there is a two-mindedness in his work. It is the existence of the better way that is the implicit contrast to the racist past or present Ah Kee exposes. It is interesting that in *Born in This Skin* (2008), which documents racist statements such as “blacks will clean our toilets”, Ah Kee also chooses to present the fact that written on the topmost of a stack toilet doors, under the words “Lazy [sic] fat smelly wog No trade No brain Be a PoD with other dumb [obscured] shit w[obscured]”, are the words: “It’s no wonder this company treats the workers here like children it’s no wonder because they know how ignorant we are! All they have to do is read some of the racist bullshit here to see that we are more interested in fighting each other than the boss. Do something about it.”¹⁴ Ah Kee is concerned to identify and disrupt racism, to present the reality of indigenous Australia. It seems he is interested too in seeing instances of racism’s absence.

Rex Butler, describing the work *Who Let the Dogs Out* (2008), in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* (Queensland Art Gallery, 2008), said that: “It is not optimism in this work, not quite.”¹⁵ To me, the quality that Butler is talking about is the admittance of possibility, the quality of perceiving complexity. *Who Let the Dogs Out* features the repeated anagrammatic text “hatred redhat”, presented in Ah Kee’s signature run-on, kern-adjusted, lowercase arial font and a little red-hatted figure immediately resonant of Sydney Nolan’s depiction of Ned Kelly—the quintessential Australian outlaw figure, emblematic of the cause of the hated minority of the time, the Irish Catholics—effectively evoking national hero and national art hero in one. Nolan’s Ned Kelly struck out into new ground—he set out into ‘clear’ land to an unknown horizon, before his eventual dramatic downfall. Ah Kee’s Kelly-figure is puckish, delighting in causing trouble and mayhem. Nimble and quick, he will escape. Red Hat is a survivor.

Bruce McLean has described Red Hat’s resemblance to the “mostly benevolent but mischievous *Tamara Quinkan* spirit figures that dominate north Queensland Aboriginal rock art, and which emerge from cracks in cave walls to frighten people or ‘keep them in line’”, and quotes Ah Kee as saying that Red Hat “is an urban aboriginal legend. Not an ‘urban legend’. He hangs out at newsstands and is informed of news and politics. He speaks in slogans and inserts himself into dialogue”, before describing Red Hat as being “representative of all Aboriginal people who challenge the status quo; he is Aboriginal everyman”.¹⁶ McLean describes this figure as “an artistic alter ego... a fictional, ambiguous third party, who the artist uses to expose layers of meaning through dialogue”.¹⁷

This dialogue can yet be affective, in the pleasure of the puzzle, the frisson of confrontation, even the shame of truth. It is interesting to speculate on what Ah Kee is seeking to achieve by obliging viewers to slow their reading of his meaning, challenging them to insert spaces, to insert punctuation, to insert ‘proper distance’ between the words—that is, the ‘proper relations’ between the letters, in order for them to convey their meaning. Works such as *becauseitisbitter* (2009) require the viewer to take part in a mental exercise of re-ordering, re-adjusting, of re-relating, and to sustain these proper relations, even as the words themselves embody resistance to this, as the words snap back to their current relationship. So that it is in the very act of deciphering Ah Kee’s statement that the viewer/reader has to enact a change from the current manifestation of the text to one that is imagined. The viewer/reader has to probe and try out possibilities, to discern and interpret, and this is a metaphor for social change. Or so I’d like to think.

Notes

¹ *Born in This Skin*, 2008

² *theotherside*, 2003

³ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ‘Cantchant’, *Vernon Ah Kee: Cantchant*, Brisbane: Institute Modern Art, 2007, <http://www.ima.org.au/pages/exhibits/cantchant88.php>, accessed 6 May 2009

⁴ *wegrewhere*, 2009

⁵ They are similarly installed at the 2009 *Venice Biennale*, where they are part of *Once Removed* (2009) and previously at Brisbane’s Institute of Modern Art in 2007-08 and Artspace, Sydney, 2008

⁶ *ifiam*, 2002

⁷ The portraits in the 2008 *Biennale of Sydney* series, *What is an Aborigine?* and the *Fantasies of the Good* series, 2004

⁸ Nikos Papastergiadis, ‘Crossed Territories: Indigenous Cosmopolitan’, *Brook Andrew: Eye to Eye* (catalogue), Melbourne: Monash University Museum of Art, 2007: 14-29

⁹ *acceptance*, 2004

¹⁰ According to the *Collins Gem Thesaurus*

¹¹ As remembered by Nick Waterlow from conversations with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and the author, from public presentations by Christov-Bakargiev in 2006

¹² heimatkunst.com: 5 White Cubes, Forum Kunst Art Residency, Rottweil, Germany

¹³ *becauseitisbitter*, 2009

¹⁴ Two of the series of six show this text: *Born in This Skin #4* and *Born in This Skin #5*, both 2008

¹⁵ At the symposium ‘Art and Appropriation Post The Apology’, UNSW College of Fine Arts, Sydney, 1-2 May 2009

¹⁶ Bruce McLean, ‘Vernon Ah Kee: Keeping Them In Line’, *Contemporary Australia: Optimism*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2008: 39

¹⁷ *ibid.*

