



# MEMORIES IN MOTION

ADAM CUSACK



CONTEMPORARY

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## ADAM CUSACK

Adam Cusack is an artist whose practice explores ideas of authenticity and identity in popular culture. Using a process of conceptual development, photography then drawing or painting to realize the artwork, Adam is interested in showing real things in provocative ways; assembling unrelated objects together to bring about relationships that challenge the perception of the original items. His creative approach honours the traditional picture plane utilising simple methods, applying charcoal or pigment on the prepared surface.

'The act of making something to 'look real' is not what's necessarily important to the work. However, I have found that spending time on rendering the subject gives value to the idea, which in turn allows the audience to consider it's 'unrealism' and engage with my practice'

## The Flight Collective

The Flight Collective, current works from Melbourne-based artist, Adam Cusack, is a series of meticulously rendered charcoal drawings of varying scale. Both figurative works and object studies feature in this evolving series, which reveals a sense of Cusack's personal symbolism and investigates themes of identity, transformation and popular consumer culture.

Surrealist influences are evident in Cusack's dream-like imagery, melding object and human form. The main subject, recurring within the series, is a male figure with a cage-like structure in place of a head. This juxtaposition of the human form with a ribbed bird cage appears at first glance, almost comical but upon closer examination, a more serious reading emerges.

Adam Cusack's life-long passion for graphic novels, animation and film simmers below the surface of the works. Each drawing, as it emerges in sequence, appears as though upon a storyboard in some timeless narrative. In stark monochrome, The Flight Collective references Cusack's penchant for black and white photography and film.

Posing and photographing the subject is a formative element of the artist's process, allowing for the arranging and blending of incongruous items within each composition. With a growing interest in digital media across the arts, Cusack engages with these technologies but it's the simple materiality of traditional charcoal, which he adopts for the final production of his work.

Cusack's finely resolved drawings belie the painful process of rendering for endless hours; the artist's incredibly labour-intensive process becoming embedded within the creative memory of the work. Across these drawings, the male body becomes fragmented; the central focus shifts from legs to torso to the back of the departing figure. In works such as *Running from shadows*, the subject is seldom presented as a whole, rather viewed as though in a film close-up. Located against a stark backdrop of white, the gestures of the caged man extend beyond the picture plane, reminiscent of the action scenes of Cusack's animated heroes.

References to urban life appear in these works as the central figure dons the familiar garb of the urbane city-dweller, with denim jeans and Chuck Taylor's a nod to the homogenous imagery of the fashion world. Well-worn jeans and sophisticated suiting adorn Cusack's muse; these fashion accoutrements of popular culture are a repetitive motif.

The glossy fashion plates of the commercial world are mirrored in the taut renderings and carefully defined and arranged compositions of The Flight Collective. Smaller investigative works such as *Divided* (study) could have been lifted from the pages of a skate magazine. The lower limbs of a jean-clad youth straddling an innocuous crack in the pavement are presented in fine detail. In homage to the banal, wrinkled denim and Converse shoes are selected for reverential treatment.

The subject matter may be understated but Cusack's approach to drawing is measured; each element carefully considered. The development of this series, extending from an early exploratory work in 2008, has seen continual refinement of the imagery presented. The initial work, *Inception*, is a much looser brush and ink composition, adopting Cusack's trademark narrative approach. As the series has progressed, the intensity of detail and composition has become more complex and finely honed, resulting in the latest work, presented by Cusack as the central work in the series, *Tell me what you know about freedom*.

The works can be viewed as a narrative sequence with Mr Featherwood, the central 'character', both self-portrait and muse. The strong stance and posturing of this figure resonates with a constrained sense of masculinity; this faceless subject, somehow caught up in the machinations of contemporary society. As the subject's name would suggest, the artist links this figure conceptually with his interest in birds and reflections of an avian nature. Animal symbolism in art has appeared throughout the ages. From early Egyptian art and mythology to significant references in biblical works, birds have been a potent symbol for artists, typically embodying spiritual concerns. And yet, for Cusack the imagery lends itself a more personal interpretation.

Linked with the central male figure, a crow frequently appears within Cusack's drawings. According to the artist's own statement, these drawings are revealing self-portraits reflecting upon innate human potential and the freedom to create. For Cusack, the crow becomes the physical manifestation of these ideals.

*No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings.<sup>1</sup>*

Flickers of memory; family history and personal symbolism underpin this series. The artist's father and grandfather before him invested a life-time of interest in flight; aviation engineers with a fascination with what is possible and the technical know-how to achieve this feat. From childhood, Cusack watched on and the potentiality of flight continues to hold a personal resonance, which is revealed within his current practice.

Cusack's bird is never caged and yet there are hints at past confinement. In *'Tell me what you know about freedom'*, the crow stares steadfastly at his viewer, challenging us boldly with his defiant gaze. Beyond the shackles of the cage, the bird/artist is free to explore a sense of self and the potential to pursue some uncharted path of his own determination. And yet, ironically, the man himself is both cage and bird; both his own tormentor and his relief.

*It is a tease; the temptation to pursue the unachievable. Ultimately, flight makes the impossible possible.<sup>2</sup>*

In Cusack's smaller object studies, the form of the bird is investigated more closely. The anatomy of skull and wing are selected for detailed examination. Like his paternal predecessors, his interest lies in the intricate structure and physical potential of the form.

The recent rise in realism and hyperrealism in the contemporary art world is reflected in these works from Cusack with their velvet blacks and intricate detail. His ability to convey lush textural variety adds substantial depth to the work and yet what we see is not entirely real; the human figure is transformed. Mr Featherwood is part man, part mannequin. At times, a hollow torso is revealed and yet, the lavish folds of clothing hint at something decidedly more life-like.

The works of Patricia Piccinini come to mind when reflecting upon the complex relationship between what is real and what is constructed within the realms of contemporary culture. Her works challenge our perception of the artificial versus the natural. Drawing upon the shiny appeal of consumer products for inspiration, her work, *The Lovers* (2011) fuses the seductive imagery of the automobile industry with animalistic qualities. This sculpture

takes the form of an intertwined coupling of enamoured motor scooters, adopting the sensual and almost visceral qualities of animal forms. Piccinini frequently attributes mechanical ensembles with a sense of the living.

Conversely, Cusack's Mr Featherwood is very much a man and yet with his caged cranium devoid of brain, mouth and sense organs, he becomes less life-like and more automated, blurring the delineation between man and machine. While Piccinini breathes life into her tactile creations, Cusack challenges us to accept the fantastical and to see beyond what is real. Contemporary practice has seen a renewed interest in hand-crafted or produced work. In spite of the rise of digital technologies and global access to photography, realism in art maintains its appeal. The hand of the artist re-emerges in works which embrace technical virtuosity. Aligned with works from other contemporary Australian artists exploring figurative realism, Adam Cusack's The Flight Collective shares its approach with artists such as Michael Zavros and Kim Buck; Natasha Bieniek also, albeit on an infinitely smaller scale.

Cusack shares with Zavros, his interest in the appropriation of imagery from popular culture and a sense of performance, where compositions are staged as though on a film set. Fellow realist, Kim Buck's 2013 series, Lithology, engages her dynamic use of the human figure as a metaphor for the ever-changing landscape, embracing the power and fluidity of movement. Like Buck, Cusack's figures remain posed and ready for action, even levitating from the ground. They are dynamic but caught in a frozen moment like an action still from an animation sequence. While Buck's figures are entirely human, Cusack's 'mannequin man' appears to be flesh but remains a shell.

Adam Cusack disrupts the human form, playing upon shifting imagery but it is his underlying interest in the freedom of flight which resonates most strongly throughout these works. The notion of flight has both wondrous and yet devastating connotations. It is a tease; the temptation to pursue the unachievable. Ultimately, flight makes the impossible possible. As with Icarus and his misadventures with the Sun, if we venture too close, we may be burnt. And yet the sweet desire to soar free is always there, just as the artist savours the freedom of personal creativity.

Louisa Ennis-Thomas  
Curator / Co-founder  
Knock Knock Contemporary Artists' Initiative

<sup>1</sup> William Blake *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790-93

<sup>2</sup> Louisa Ennis-Thomas (2015)



*The Flight Collective*  
Graphite on paper  
710 x 920mm framed





*Flight (study)*  
Graphite on paper  
520 x 520mm framed





*Divided (study)*  
Graphite on paper  
690 x 640mm framed







*Mr Featherwood and The Flight Collective*  
Charcoal on paper  
860 x 1080mm framed





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*Raven Bone Feather (study)*  
Graphite on paper  
520 x 520mm framed



## ADAM CUSACK

### EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 The flight collective The Stockroom Gallery -Kyenton, Victoria
- 2013 Diamonds in a Paintbox -Group Show, The Art Cabriolet Charity (Fund Raiser) Luminare, Victoria
- 2013 Studio 9 and The Art Cabriolet (with Godfrey Street Community House) Kingston Art Gallery, Victoria
- 2013 Sub 150, Knock Knock Contemporary -Group Show Cairns. (FNQ) Qld
- 2013 'Robots vs Art' A play by Travis Cotton -Group Show on set La Mama Theatre, Victoria
- 2009 Melbourne Affordable Art Show -Solo Exhibition Melbourne Exhibition Buildings, Victoria
- 2007 Melbourne Affordable Art Show - Group Show Represented by Lethbridge Gallery Melbourne Exhibition Buildings, Victoria
- 2006 Thought Paroxysms -Solo Exhibition Catanach's Gallery 5th May -High St Malven, Victoria
- 2005 Thought Paroxysms -Solo Exhibition Cobalt Gallery Toorak Rd Toorak, Victoria
- 2004 Cobalt Gallery Opening -Group Show Cobalt Gallery Toorak Rd Toorak, Victoria
- 2004 Melbourne Affordable Art Show - Group Show Represented by Lethbridge Gallery - Melbourne Exhibition Buildings, Victoria
- 2004 Abused Child Trust Art Exhibition Group Exhibition Waterfront Place Brisbane, Qld
- 2004 Thought Paroxysms - Solo Exhibition Doggett Street Studios, Brisbane, Qld
- 1992 Works on paper - Solo Exhibition Hilton International - Cairns, Qld
- 1991 Queensland College of Art Graduating Exhibition -Group Show Griffith University - Brisbane, Qld
- 1989 Thought Paroxysms - Group Exhibition Shonelle Gallery - Brisbane, Qld
- 1988 C.A.D. Graduating Exhibition - Group Show Cairns, Qld
- 1987 C.A.D. Works on paper - Group Show Cairns, Qld



.M Contemporary is a gallery space that aims to create a cross cultural conversation through showing and supporting emerging and established artists from around the world. We aim to foster a strong appreciation in Australian audiences for a new generation of foreign and domestic artists and to expose both novice and established collectors to these works.

By curating interactive exhibitions .M Contemporary aims to serve as a platform that introduces all mediums of art ranging from traditional to digital video art, interactive and immersive installations, showcasing the skill, creativity and concepts of artists within these mediums from around the world. .M Contemporary has a strong focus on supporting these artists ongoing presence through regular exhibitions, complemented by industry expert panel discussions, artist talks, social events and more.

Recognising the need for broader participation and exposure to art, .M Contemporary is also opening up itself to schools, universities and other parties as a platform for education where an appreciation for global and local contemporary art is inspired and nourished.