

BLOKES

Billy Bain







Blokes presents us with an alchemy – of whiteness, of masculinity, of autonomy and of identity – within the context of an Australian urban consciousness riddled with subjugation and fear.

Nipper

2019

Terracotta with
underglaze and glaze.



Australian Ugliness

Rose of Sharon Leake

Billy Bain's examination of the racial relations at play within Australian culture is playful and tenaciously direct. With equal parts humour and disquiet, his ceramic figures call into question our culture's deeply rooted insecurities and falsehoods by interrogating and subverting perceived norms of male identity. *Blokes*, Bains first solo show, presents us with an alchemy – of Whiteness, of masculinity, of autonomy and of identity – within the context of an Australian urban consciousness riddled with subjugation and fear.

Bain presents *Blokes* as a continuation of his critique of toxic behaviours within Australian culture, particularly within beach, pub and sporting contexts. His work asks us: within these sites, how has the Australian male body performed its own identity and claimed authority over the space it occupies? Moreover, how has the body of the non-Indigenous male denied legitimisation of its Indigenous counterpart in that same space?

The beach space in particular is a volatile site of performativity where the heteronormative white male parades his sexuality, wealth, voyeurism and proprietorship.¹ For Bain, the beach is a signifier of urbanity and a space his own body has occupied yet never fully gained control of. His works, largely autobiographical, are the beginnings of him reclaiming that control. "I explore the conflicting duality between my Indigenous heritage and that of the Euro-centric culture I was raised within," says Bain. "My own disconnect with my traditional Indigenous culture and Country is a source of motivation for research that informs my work and helps construct my own identity as a suburban Indigenous man."

From material and scale to subject matter, every aspect of Bains work has its purpose and adds specific social and cultural histories to the narrative he seeks to write. The malleability and transformative nature of clay allows him to hypothesise and construct a reality where visual symbols – clothing, skin and eye colour, jewellery – can be reformed to demarcate an alternate social narrative. The stature of his subjects – their small size, angry disposition, unruly bodily hair – does not monumentalise them as if cast in bronze atop a column, rather they are on a human level, approachable and relatable. His paintings and etchings have a similarly conscious complexity. In *Welcome* we are presented with an arrangement reminiscent of the heroism often portrayed in neoclassical compositions, yet as our eye scans the scene we become increasingly attune to its satirical intent.

1 - Moreton-Robinson, A. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p37.

Bain's choice to centre his work around the human figure is not an unconscious one. Throughout history, the human body has been a site of conflict. It has been fetishized, defined and constructed through the lens on the non-Indigenous gaze. With raw self-referentiality and humour, Bain inserts a new lens, playfully deconstructing traditional and popular perceptions of the Aussie male as he perceives him. Beachgoers in Welcome celebrate Australia Day by drinking beer bongs and vomiting; dark-skinned Crocodile Dundee, Croc, and Dame Edna Everage, Drag, assume new, seemingly comical, identities while the Balinese Tourist retains his; the non-Indigenous Local seems to be the only character asserting any power amidst the group – arms outstretched, abs tense, face sour.

These bodies, constructed through stereotyped imagery, are the levelling reinterpretations of a young man probing his way through the muddied waters of contemporary Australian culture, ethnicity and gender. Yet the narrative Bain presents us with is not a reflection of his personal judgements, rather it is driven by our own affinity with popular culture. Performances of racial identity in mainstream culture, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, have reproduced the idea that these stylistic constructions should be read as an authentic representation of reality².

As Robin Boyd sought to highlight the ugliness of Australian architecture, Bain's work is its own condemnation of a social culture laden with racial Featurism.³ The politics of representation which govern Bain's work and make it seemingly un-PC, are the same politics which enable its success. Bain gives legitimisation and identity to the urban Indigenous male by deconstructing and mocking the white heteronormative norms which have systematically and repeatedly rejected him. In a time when Whiteness is the default of our culture, Bain seeks to redefine our Australian sense of identity through a unique sculptural language. As a result, the seasoned mateship between blokes begins to unravel. While we may find humour in the blatant mockery of Bain's visual colloquialism, his blokes' disoriented and tokenistic identities are left as a reminder of the disquiet we must bear in the ongoing resolve of racial tension.

Rose of Sharon Leake

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2 - Giardina, Michael D. Stylish Hybridity, Performativity, and the Politics of Representation. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, Vol 27, No. 1, February 2003, pp. 65-82.

3 - Boyd, R. *The Australian Ugliness*. The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, 1960.



Local
2020
Earthenware
with underglaze
and glaze.

Drag

2020

Terracotta with
underglaze, glaze,
mother of pearl and
silver lusters.



Croc

2020

Terracotta with
underglaze, glaze,
and silver lusters.





Seapunk

2019

Terracotta with
underglaze, glaze
and silver lusters.

Sidelined

2020

Terracotta with underglaze,
glaze & knitted woolen beanie.





The Anzac
(Leslie John Jack Locke)
2020
Earthenware with
terracotta slip, underglaze,
glaze & gold luster.



Bali Tourist
2020
Earthenware with
underglaze, glaze,
& gold luster.





The Bowlers
2020
Oil paint on canvas.



Smoko
2020
Oil paint on canvas.

Shiner

2020

Earthenware with
terracotta slip,
underglaze & glaze.



Bushranger

2020

Earthenware with
underglaze & glaze.



My Team
2019
Oil paint on canvas.



Father & Son
2020
Oil paint on canvas.



Lawn Bowler #2
2019
Terracotta with,
underglaze & glaze.



Lawn Bowler #1
2019
Terracotta with,
underglaze & glaze.

Hotshot
2019
Terracotta with,
underglaze & glaze.



Welcome

2019

Oil paint on canvas.





Fighters

2019

Terracotta with,
underglaze & glaze.





Blokes

Billy Bain

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.M Contemporary, Shop 8, 15-19 Boundary Street, Darlinghurst.

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Cover artworks

Ice Cream

2020

terracotta with,
underglaze & glaze



Retiree Puppy

2019

Terracotta with,
underglaze & glaze.



