

ADAM BOYD

EYES IN THEIR
SHOULDERS,
MOUTHS IN THEIR
CHESTS

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“It is not the unconscious I seek in your pictures, but the conscious... your mystery is manifested outright. The picture is but a mechanism to reveal itself”

– Sigmund Freud upon meeting Salvador Dalí

In the summer of 1938, Salvador Dalí met with Sigmund Freud in London, while the latter was already terminally ill with cancer. It was an important moment for Dalí, who considered himself a faithful disciple and vanguard practitioner of Freud's ideas. The influence of Freud's psychoanalytic theory on the Surrealist movement in the early part of the last century is well known. André Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism* referenced his work explicitly, and Breton had also made a personal visit to the man both he and Dalí believed had opened the way to the world of the subconscious. By employing elements of Freudian theory such as automatic writing in their practice, the Surrealists believed they could loosen the control of conscious thought over their art. The shadowy, latent contents of the mind could, they hoped, be uncovered and explored. Freud's comment to Dalí revealed his scepticism about the Surrealist's endeavour. What looked like exercises in spontaneous creation were, to Freud's mind, unavoidably structured acts of composition.

Adam Boyd is an artist who considers the question of the structures and limits of consciousness in *Eyes In Their Shoulders, Mouths In Their Chests*. Through large scale drawings and sculptures, he examines themes of perception, memory and the creative act. His work recognises a tension inherent in our modern self-conception: a sense of ourselves as free agents who shape and are shaped by our culture and society, in contrast with an understanding that we are beings whose behaviour is fundamentally bounded by biologically determined parameters. Boyd addresses this incongruity through complex layers of images and text which reify and subvert representations of the subconscious: the masked, the malappropriated and the misremembered. The scale of the works is notable, compelling the viewer to step back to take them in in their entirety, while simultaneously luring the viewer in to consume the textural details. Jumbles of figures and faces are interwoven with word fragments, snippets from quotes and sheer nonsense. Language plays an important part in the pieces, subverting and disrupting the composition, speaking against the narrative authority of the image.

Boyd's *Good Humour* depicts a shadowed skull anamorphically rendered as an enormous mandible, orbited by four heads seemingly persecuting the central figure. They are archetypal, possibly alluding to the humoral temperaments of medieval science. The sanguine, somewhat smug face floating on the far left is composed of

books and leaves, wrapped in text. This contrasts with the melancholic visage in the centre - tongue firmly on, rather than in, his cheek. The joke is on him. We seem to be being asked the value of received wisdom. Spaces permeate the image, transgressing the boundaries of the figures depicted, reminiscent of bacterial vacuoles. They are a nourishing pause amidst the chaos. Situated within the skull, they are also suggestive of gaps in the mind, of the conceit of certainty. Boyd appears to be subtly qualifying what we mean by knowledge, rather than overturning it. The emphasis is perhaps on the nature of our understanding of the world. Is this simply an objection to claims to truth, or a knowing, winking subversion of epistemological authority?

Referencing Nikolai Gogol's story of the same name, *The Nose* considers the relationship of the imagination to creative narrative. In Gogol's tale the protagonist is shamed when he awakes and discovers that his nose is now living its own life as a civil servant with a higher rank than its original owner. Adding to the insult is the protagonist's inability to restore the wayward part to his face. After nearly a fortnight's torment, the nose reappears one morning without explanation. Gogol leaves the truth of this matter unresolved, a matter apparently concerning his characters alone. Building on this, Boyd's work maps the dissonance inherent in the creative act - that of the attempt to impose structure upon the wanderings of the imagination. *The Nose* reveals a landscape of abstract images overshadowed by an enormous nose, dominating the entities below. A jumble of freely associated body parts spill across the paper, like topographic features loosed from the bordered coherence of a chart. The nose hangs like a cloud over the disordered scene below it, an attempt to impose boundaries on the details. Like a map, the piece is populated with recognisable features, but the whole is highly abstracted. The nose, stretched and distorted across the paper, suggests a mutant biology which mirrors the twisted figures it envelopes. Any order that it might impress upon the whole appears to be largely a matter of perspective. The possibility of resolving this perpetual tension between the conscious agency of the mind and the anarchy of imagination is a matter Boyd leaves us to consider.

Milk Pail is a banner length work featuring a disembodied head atop a plate, underneath a depiction of a flat earth domed by the sky. The plattered head is paralleled by the skull above it, which is mirrored by the balls of paper it is flanked by in turn. Roughly sketched flies buzz in negative space. The unseeing eyes of the head and the empty sockets of the skull stare out at the viewer, and we can't help looking back. Beneath the platter, what appear to be pinball flippers are engaged, seemingly keeping the whole piece in play. The suggestion of motion contrasts with

the inertia of the other elements, like a joke on still life. Boyd's work again hints at the importance of agency. Pinball is a game premised on active participation. It requires the player to constantly resist the flux of the continually falling ball. Without intervention, the ball falls away and the game is lifeless. Agency is essential to give the activity meaning.

Alongside Boyd's drawings are *Silent Witnesses*, clay masklike sculptures set low to the ground that are companions to the other works. They are barely shaped, like golems, countenances almost devoid of recognisable features. As masks they are both disguises and representations. As faces they return our gaze, challenging us to give them meaning. In doing so, they make us complicit in their construction. We are trapped here. There is a determinism in play. This speaks to something undeniably innate within us, a deep structure that lies beneath the surface of culture, within our subconscious. Perhaps this is what these entities are bearing witness to, that in making meaning out of disorder we reveal something of ourselves.

Eyes In Their Shoulders, Mouths In Their Chests presents us with a perceptive and subtle enquiry into the nature and bounds of consciousness. The challenge is to interact with these works, to shift our position as viewers and consider for ourselves the questions Boyd explores.

Garth Hughes-Odgers, 2015

garthhughesodgers.com

Image credit: Adam Boyd, *Triangle of Means* 2015, pencil on paper, 105 x 70cm

STRANGE NEIGHBOUR
395 GORE ST FITZROY AUSTRALIA 3065
03 90418727
INFO@STRANGENEIGHBOUR.COM
WWW.STRANGENEIGHBOUR.COM