

The Suburban Sweet: Simon Mee

Queensland artist Simon Mee's distinctive use of children's playthings, in particular dolls, strikes an uncomfortable chord with the average viewer. His figures are innately known to us and in turn have their own *raisonne d'être*, but Mee imbues his cast of characters with an insidiousness that confronts the viewer's inbuilt response to the toys. Some are pristine while others carry the signs of heavy use—their various states metaphorically illuminate the daily life of humanity. Mee exploits the familiar as a conduit to some of the darker sides of life. Even the play on the word 'suite' in the series title alludes to the innocence of childhood while suggesting that any saccharin overtones are sickly or even perverse.

Mee refers to the coalescence of his conceptual framework and his subjects as 'Gordian Knots',¹ or difficult to reconcile dilemmas. The term has its origins in Greek mythology in which Alexander the Great attempted to untie an intricate knot. When he could not untie it Alexander took his sword to the rope and sliced it apart. Is the solution to Mee's dilemmas a 'slash and burn' approach? Hopefully not. After all, he maintains a prettiness in his imagery. The backyards, the local streets and the everyday objects carry a beauty that is most highly appreciated by the very individuals who inhabit such spaces. These are our neighbourhoods, our houses.

This is a crucial element of Mee's work. We know such locations and are familiar with them. The streets of Carina on Brisbane's southside have been Mee's stomping ground and the most influential locale for the work in this exhibition. He celebrates the suburban streets of our fair city. This is not to say that Mee only looks to his immediate surroundings for inspiration. He cites various artists as informing his work, ranging from Baroque painters through to contemporary artists.² We can see the influence of the ornately posed infants of Rococo artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806), in all their overly exaggerated grandeur, and the classical lines of Baroque artist Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665).

The highly praised Spaniard Francisco Goya (1746–1828) gave us dark, allegorical images of the shortcomings of humanity. His touch is certainly evident in Mee's oeuvre. Goya's images of horror, deformity and socio-moralist judgment are far more confrontational than those created by Mee. It is a subtler path that Mee directs, one that prods at our subconscious rather than pouncing on it. Similarly, New York-based John Currin (born 1962) has produced paintings that entice while simultaneously confronting the viewer. One reviewer of a Currin exhibition pondered the less attractive aspects of the artist's work. The last line of the critique reads, 'You hate the people



The vertical expression of a horizontal impulse (Keep your eye on the ball) 2004

he depicts, but you just can't help but love the way they're depicted.'³ Mee's paintings don't quite instigate such strong feelings but there is a certain resonance in the emotions. His paintings are luscious in nature but before the viewer can be seduced by Mee's works of art, they jolt one's sensibilities. As Frank McBride wrote on Mee's drawings from the late 1990s:

They create a series of malevolent *tableau vivant*, in which picturesque and dramatic scenes are created, where the viewer is left to instill the complete meaning. It is a world of menacing threat and impending evil, where the blandly impish smirks of the genitally bereft, androgynous toytown assassins, brings a smile to the lips and a shiver to the spine.⁴

This is not to say that Mee's paintings are dark, gloomy doomsday images. They are usually bright and airy, with sky-blue a dominant colour on his palette. *The vertical expression of a horizontal impulse (Keep your eye on the ball)*, for instance, clearly relates to Australian Rules football. The title alludes to Martin Pike, who retired from the Brisbane Lions in 2005. While a very strong and popular player, Pike was not particularly known for his high leaps into the air when vying for marks. The centrepiece doll takes the place of Pike and even has a vague resemblance to the footballer,

particularly the shaved head. It also follows Mee's earlier painting *Bacchanal* in its use of a circular composition of figures, a formal structural device in paintings that has been utilised throughout art history by a diversity of artists including Poussin and Henri Matisse (1869–1954).

The Maids of Damocles, by comparison, refers once again to Greek mythology. King Dionysius overheard Damocles' envy of his wealth and power. Dionysius offered his lifestyle for a day to the young courtier. While enjoying the excesses of the life of a privileged few, Damocles realised there is a sword dangling by a single hair above his head. When he asked Dionysius, Damocles was told that it was an everyday danger for the King. A 'Sword of Damocles' refers to an ever-present threat⁵—Mee strings up fair women in lieu of a blade... The doll in the foreground deliberately has an 'All-American' feel to her,⁶ while the three dangling figures take on entirely different overtones as compared to the parables' sword. The work is a comment on the recent events in Iraq.

The parable of the blind (1658) by Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c1525–69) informs *Not a conga line*. Bruegel and fellow countryman Heironymus Bosch (c1450–1516) both painted works on the theme of 'the blind leading the blind'. *The parable of the blind* is also the source painting for *Blinded by the light* (1991) by Japanese photographic artist Yasumasa Morimura (born 1951), which was included in the 1996 Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary



Bacchanal 2000

Art at the Queensland Art Gallery. Mee's painting is another comment on Iraq, the politics of violence and the futility of war. The front doll's 'peg-leg' is derived from the walking sticks that Bruegel's blind men grasp as they guide each other during their fruitless procession.

As the title suggests, *The attack of the 60ft Vermeer inspired woman and the despondent chicken* find resonance with the work of Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer (1632–75). Vermeer's incredibly intricate works are considered pinnacles in the history of art. Mee's figures are clad in garments inspired by the period clothing of Vermeer's subjects. In particular the bonnet and apron recall the style of seventeenth century Holland, conveying an opulence that is dislocated in Brisbane's streets. In opposition to the painting's title the oversized doll, instantly recalling old B-grade movies, doesn't terrorise. In fact she doesn't even draw any attention from those around her. She gazes off into the distance unaware, or perhaps even uncaring.

Mee endeavours to engage with his audience so as to underline the foibles of life but also to highlight the nuances of living. Regardless of one's initial reaction to the work, Mee's art leaves an indelible mark on the viewer.

Simon makes us think as he entertains us.

Gordon Craig
Curator (Collections and Exhibitions)
QUT Art Museum

Simon Mee was born in Launceston in 1970. He is an alumnus of QUT, having completed a Bachelor of Arts in 1993 and a Master of Fine Arts in 1999. In 2004 Mee was awarded an Arts Queensland Creative Fellowship.

- 1 Mee, S. (2005) Unpublished correspondence with QUT Art Museum.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 'Rowan' (2003), Editor, *BBC Collective* [online] available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A1164971> accessed 8 May 2006.
- 4 McBride, F. and Mee, S. (1999) *A Pilgrim's Regress*, Published by Simon Mee, Brisbane, p.3.
- 5 (2006) *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th edition, Columbia University Press, New York [online] available: <http://www.bartleby.com/65/da/Damocles.html> accessed 10 May 2006.
- 6 Conversation with the artist, 11 May 2006.



The attack of the 60ft Vermeer inspired woman and despondent chicken 2005



In the box 2002



The Maids of Damocles 2004

List of Works

Dimensions are listed in centimetres, height x width x depth. All works are in private collections unless noted otherwise.

The duel 1999
Pencil on paper
56 x 58cm

Bacchanal 2000
Oil on canvas
140 x 175cm
Rockhampton Art Gallery Collection

It's a small world (Red hat green hat) 2000
Coloured pastels on paper
54 x 54cm
Courtesy of the artist and Schubert Contemporary

In the box 2002
Oil on canvas
122 x 76 cm

The collaborators 2002
Oil on canvas
123 x 137cm

There was an old woman 2002
Pencil on paper
67 x 33cm
Courtesy of the artist and Schubert Contemporary

Not a conga line 2003
Oil on canvas
110 x 140cm

The Maids of Damocles 2004
Oil on canvas
120 x 160cm

The vertical expression of a horizontal impulse (Keep your eye on the ball) 2004
Oil on canvas
150 x 240cm

Another Freudian swing 2005
Oil on canvas
150 x 140cm

The attack of the 60 ft Vermeer inspired woman and despondent chicken 2005
Oil on linen
180 x 140 cm

The Last Judgment of the shopping mall (The ultimate makeover) 2006
Oil on linen
265 x 190 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Schubert Contemporary

Mobile 2006
Produced in collaboration with Elizabeth Shaw
Pewter and aluminium
40 x 40 x 50cm
Courtesy of the artists



The collaborators 2002

QUT Art Museum

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Front image:
Simon Mee, born 1970.
Not a conga line, 2003.
Oil on canvas.
Courtesy of the artist and Schubert Contemporary.

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8 June to 13 August 2006