

YANNICK BLATTNER
CONTRIVED
CIRCUMSTANCES



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Painting Cricket

Written by Llewellyn Millhouse

As a teenage boy in the early 00's I recall art being popularly understood in opposition to sport. Particularly for young men, a coherent public identity corresponded to an inclination towards either sport or art. Attached to the idea of the sporting male were more stereotypically Australian ways of being a man; defensive heteronormativity, working-class practical skills, physical self-confidence and the solidarity of peer male bonding. To identify with art meant to see oneself outside of these categories of masculine value, to position oneself as a more progressive, sophisticated or alternative individual. Despite failing to perform as an archetypal Australian bloke, the arts-oriented male attempted to salvage some social power through cultural criticism of the dominant masculinity associated with sport.

To a certain extent this dichotomy still exists in the public imagination. But recent trends in Australian male youth culture have significantly undermined the polarities associated with this distinction between sport and art. Appropriating the most palpable historical signifiers of Australian masculinity (sporting fanaticism, mullet haircuts, Aussie rock, Stubbies shorts, XXXX or VB tinnies), many arts-educated young men over the past five years have distinguished themselves from the ubiquity of a gentrified hipster aesthetic by identifying with working-class Australia. While it was difficult to confuse these original appropriative gestures with the appearance of middle-aged men from the 80s and 90s, the ironic distance between these cultures has now evaporated. Re-aestheticisation of late 20th Century Australian working-class masculinity has attracted a broad spectrum of male demographics, so that a culturally sophisticated self-parody has emerged at the centre of contemporary masculinity. The widespread popularity of recycling and fetishising passé Australian masculine signifiers owes a great deal to parodic celebrations of 'bogan-ness' arising out of internet culture. The blog and instagram account *browncardigan* or the Facebook meme groups *Authoritative Australian Memes*, *420 Speed Dealer Supremacists* or *Euphoric Queenslander Memes* typify the humour and appeal of re-aestheticising cliché masculinity through artistic appropriation. Whereas in the past these parodic texts could be read as counter-cultural critiques of masculine posturing, they appear in the contemporary as ironic celebrations, a self-reflexive absorption of criticism by hegemonic culture.

If we were to identify late 20th Century Australian masculinity as characterised by a split between investment in either sport or the arts, the move to collapse this dichotomy in the 21st Century stems from a need for Australian masculinity to redefine itself. The dichotomous identities of the sporting bloke and the cultured intellectual now seem embarrassingly archaic, classist and self-indulgent. Redefining masculinity as a convergence of these two polarities helps to relieve this identity crisis. While masculinity in the arts has been associated with snobbery, physical ineptitude, illusions of subversiveness and alterity, art's re-aestheticisation of sport goes a long way in negating these insecurities. By the same token, sporting masculinity's association with patriarchy, conservatism and boorish vulgarity is significantly undermined by the cultural sophistication and



Image: *Fighting Lethargy I*, 2016



progressiveness of self-reflexive parody. In the terms of the popular meme format regarding masculine value, contemporary masculinity requires us to 'get you a man who can do both'¹.

This contextual background to the state of contemporary Australian masculinity provides a useful entry point to Yannick Blattner's practice. In *Contrived Circumstances*, Blattner's aesthetic exploration of the cricket field and its performative behaviours function to reveal a continuity between the game of test cricket and the game of contemporary painting. To Blattner, both cricket and painting are monotonous spectacles of precision, structure and self-control, sporadically interrupted with the drama of small victories and failures. Viewed at the distance of the grandstand or through the televisual lens, the cricket field itself appears as a perpetual overlay of performative line drawings across geometric planes. Frozen in time and rendered in greyscale, Blattner's anachronistic cricketing scenarios become absurd and otherworldly, injecting public displays of sporting masculinity with vulnerability, precariousness and uncertainty.

Central to Blattner's interest in cricket are the procedures of spectatorship that permeate the game and its consumption. Due to the consistency and predictability of the average bowling event in test cricket, the players, umpire and audience must all participate in a process of inert spectatorship as they wait patiently for a meaningful aberration in the delivery process. The pleasure of the cricket spectator is grounded in these apparently sudden and sporadic deviations, often corresponding to minute failures of judgement or attention by any one of the competitors. It is the result of these failures, the moments in between deliveries and the spontaneous interruption of the lethargic consumptive process that interest Blattner. Viewed as a whole, the structure, symmetry and routine of test match cricket appears too similar to the mundane habituation of contemporary life to act as entertainment. However, in these moments of minute failure the cricket match becomes filled with irrationality and excess, inciting eruptions of absurd excitement, frustration and despondency. Blattner's careful documentation of these dramatic moments prove how contrived our rituals of excess really are, accentuating their emptiness to the point of futility.

Blattner's work has shown a consistent interest in exploring Australian masculinity and the aesthetics of summertime leisure over a number of years. In *Contrived Circumstances* Blattner talks to his experience as a contemporary painter through the frame of cricket, bringing these two 'leisure' activities together. In popular culture, the convergence of the folly of sport with the folly of artistic appropriation and self-parody helps to maintain hegemonic masculinity. The meme that ironically appropriates sporting fanaticism reflects a functionally palatable social identity, a coherent and appealing form of maleness for contemporary Australia. Blattner's paintings reveal cracks in this dynamic, bringing cricket and painting together to demonstrate how sport and art might be equally pointless, excessive and devalued in the face of a society that demands instrumental meaning, rationality and efficiency.

1 Twitter Account @MikeShotya_, posted 14th of February 2016, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/michaelhannahjr/status/698914118108102656>



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Thursday - Friday: 11 am - 5pm
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Image front: *Sleeping dogs have right of way*, 2016