

Beauty, Vanity and Narcissism

Three Aboriginal Male Artist-Photographers:

Adam Hill, Gary Lee, Christian Thompson.

By Djon Mundine OAM

The Cross Art Projects, Sydney

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*“... I am an Indigenous actor/ performer/ artist
I am an indigenous person who is an actor/ performer/ artist ...”*

Bjorn Stewart, Aboriginal Actor, 2010. (See footnote)

In Arnhem Land when beings, creatures, and people exhibit a type of internal radiated ‘beauty’ at certain times, they are said to be ‘fat’ or ‘full of *djukurr*’. It is a period of strongly evident health and vitality.

Beauty is exhibited by those attributes deemed culturally as pleasing or impressive or just a socially defined personal appearance. Beauty could be seen to personify a truth and innocence (if not a little naivety). This varies considerably from society to society, culture to culture and time to time.

“I’m a good-looking man”

D. S., a Maturing Aboriginal Actor, 2010.

Mutton dressed as lamb—unfortunately ‘age does weary them’. A ‘private random’ survey of Sydney Aboriginal society, for better or worse, has named these three men as probably the most vain in Aboriginal art. Vanity isn’t necessarily a bad personal trait as pride in one’s achievements and knowing your worth is usually good. These three have much to be vain about: they are good looking, stylish, intelligent, prescient and confident enough to wear my jibes. They have accomplished artistic careers by any measurement. But when vanity does appear as excessive pride or conceit, it is painful to watch and endure.

“Grace—consider beauty and look for it both in yourself and in others. Even though beauty is simply an ornament, its contemplation can bring joy, albeit ephemeral. Highlight your own beauty and admire that of others.”

Your I Ching – I Ching Oracle.com, 20 May 2011.

A recent study by American psychologist Prof Jean Twenge warned that today’s under 18 generation were three times more narcissistic than previous generations. (Kate Hagan, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 2011.) Narcissus as narcissosis is not news. Several decades ago, Marshall McLuhan suggested all expressive technologies; photography, painting, and even writing, as extensions of our forms, allow us to gaze into the mirror at ourselves. (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Chapter 4, ‘The Extensions of Man’. The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis, p41.) And no more than our present age of mass over-saturation of endless, eventually numbing, images. Narcissism is about self-absorption, egotism and self-admiration. It can be a quick slide from here into selfishness, conceit, and a

mentally disturbed idea of self-importance—narcosis, and possible death. The word narcosis from Greek mythology (narcotic) talks of numbness, numbness to real concerns and issues, both individually personal and community societal. It is to engage only with the reflection, the non-real extension of self to the exclusion of all others. In the story Narcissus is led to a pool by Nemesis and shown his beautiful reflection which beguiles him to death by starvation.

They know not what they do? Although the Sydney suburb's name—Manly—originates from a compliment to the Aboriginal men living there, the colonialist view of Aboriginal males is one of disgust, disdain, avoidance and revulsion. So to see an Aboriginal male displaying their 'deadliness' is a sight to behold. As Honeycutt in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000) says: 'N#ggas is a beautiful thang'!

On a chance trip to Melbourne that led to selection of Christian Thompson's work, as we passed Sydney Road in Brunswick, a shocking pink floral cotton dress in a shop front window display caught my eye—'Fight Boring' a large caption demanded!

Christian Thompson's brazen display is possibly more than a conceited flaunt. In former times and revelatory occasions Aboriginal adult males covered their naked bodies with various painted and adorned spaces and designs. These were in essence a vision of how your soul, your very personal spiritual essence, in all its power and beauty exists all the time, despite the changing form of your outer shell. Is the outer layering and discarding performance, a reference to this practice and belief?



Christian Thompson: *International Look*, 2005; *King Billy*, 2011. C-type photographs

Along this path of thought, in *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde, the central character is perverted into a focus on the 'aesthetic'; the surface level of beauty and indulgence, both physical, and moral. Through a kind of Faustian pact, his portrait painting comes to embody the increasingly contaminated stained image of his soul.

To be an intellectual in Australia is a terrible vanity to suffer. Freudians may say that everything is sexual but there is identification with and a joy of meeting the young. Youth is a beautiful thing. This joy of freshness and renewal is Gary Lee's obsession, search and expression.



Gary Lee: from *Bulli Boys* series 2009, *Daniel, 17, II*; *Declan, 17, II*; *Michael, 17*. Digital prints

Adam Hill projects his vanity, possibly unconsciously, revealing a 1950s ‘Chesty Bond’ Australian male, a kind of striving sincerity, and yet these photographs are a genial send-up of himself and the idea of the ‘male’. The self-examination, self-absorption, preening and narcissism can be one reaction to oppression and demonization and trauma, the trauma forced on Aboriginal males through a brutal colonisation process.



Adam Hill: *Big Head*, 2011; *Illuminated Pussy*, 2011. Black and white photos, series of 20.

“I hear words like ‘beauty’ and ‘handsomeness’ and ‘incredibly chiseled features’ and for me that’s like a vanity of self-absorption that I try to steer clear of.”

Hansel, in the film *Zoolander*, 2001.

Djon Mundine OAM, 2011

Thanks: to Bjorn Stewart for the opening performance and the artists.

Footnote/Spotlight

Bjorn Stewart

INDIGENOUS ACTOR/PERFORMER/ARTIST, 2010

I am an actor

I am a performer

I am an artist

I am Indigenous

I am an Indigenous actor/ performer/ artist

I am an indigenous person who is an actor/ performer/ artist

I am lucky

I am lucky to be an Indigenous person

I am lucky to be an Indigenous person who is an actor/ performer/ artist

I am loved

I am loved as an Indigenous actor/ performer/ artist

I have so many opportunities

So many opportunities being an indigenous actor/ performer/ artist

Will I have the same opportunities if I am an actor/ performer/ artist?

BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS IT!

BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU!

I am lucky

I have black skin and black blood

I have Koori skin Murri blood

I have skin and blood

I have more than skin and blood

There is more than my skin and my blood

PUTS ITS HAND OUT!

PUT YOUR HAND OUT!

I don't want to

I don't want to use it

I don't want to use my card

I don't want to play the racial card

SORRY!

I SAID I'M SORRY!

Sorry that I am a lucky indigenous actor/ performer/ artist with countless opportunities and puts out his hand ... but you would too.