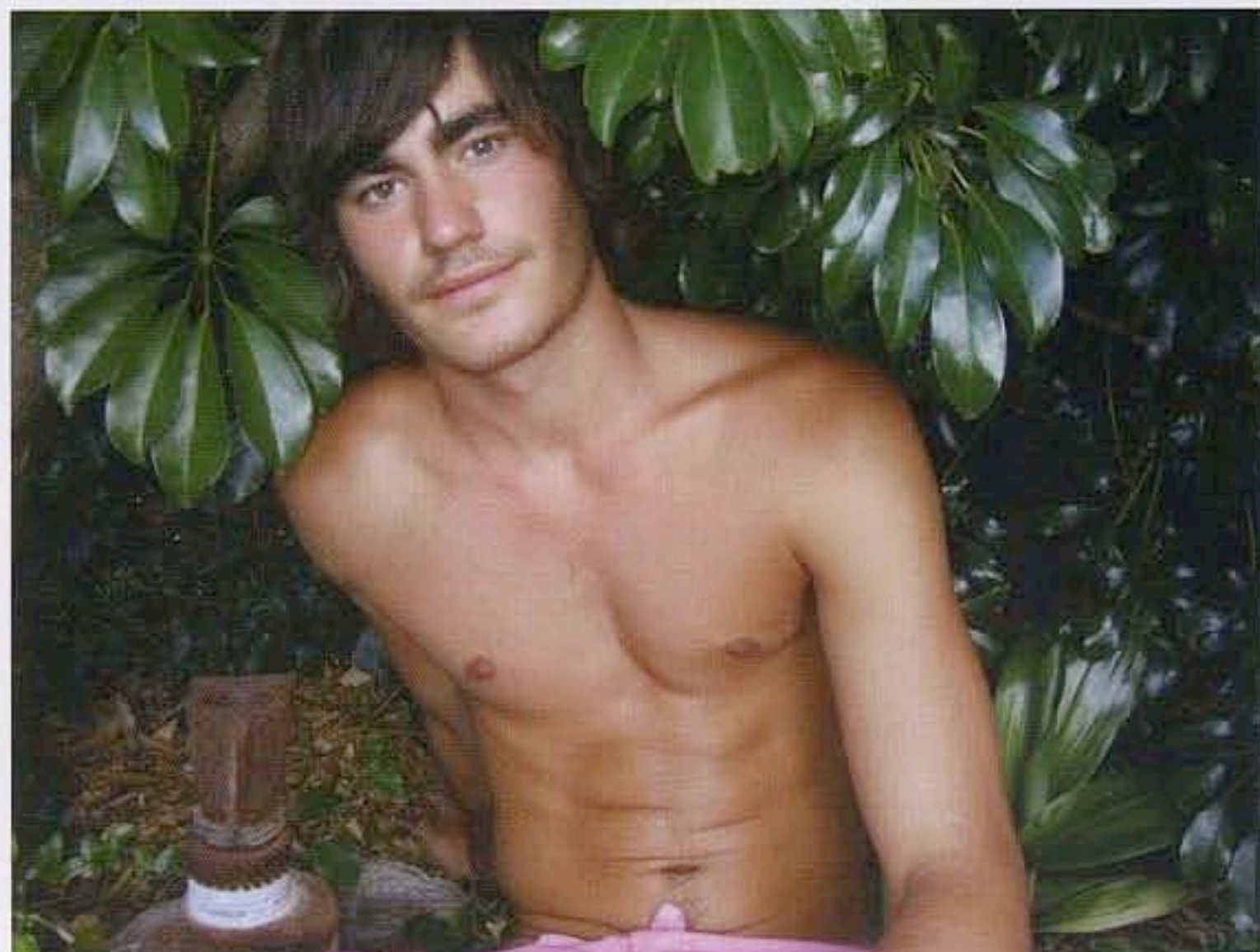
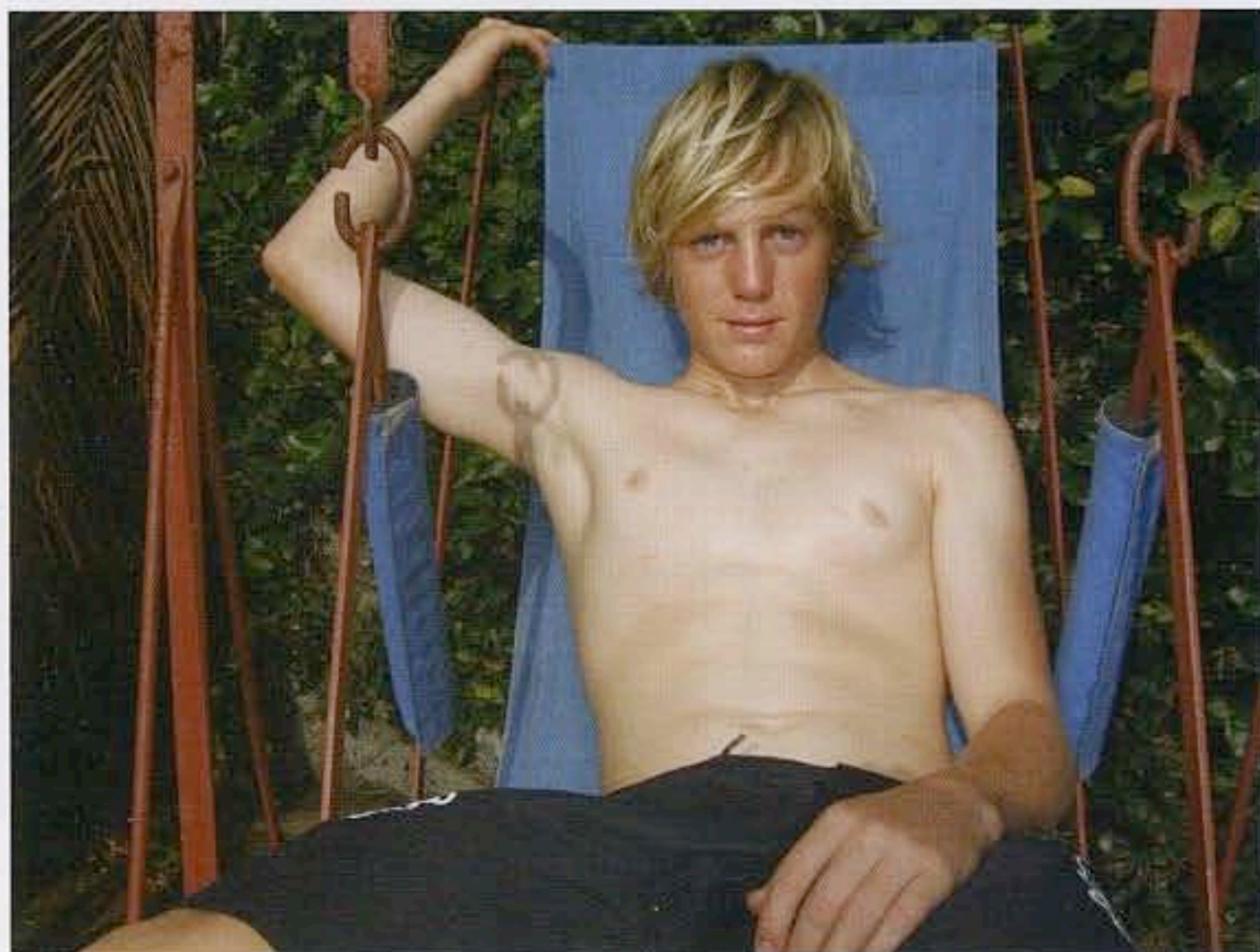


Gary Lee: Bulli boys

Djon Mundine



I'm pretty sure there's a lot more to life than being really, really, ridiculously good looking. And I plan on finding out what that is.

Derek Zoolander, *Zoolander* (2001)

IN BEN STILLER'S 2001 FILM, the much-photographed title character, male supermodel Derek Zoolander, employs a number of dramatic looks: 'Blue Steel', 'Ferrari', 'Le Tigre' and, lastly, the ironically named 'Magnum'. Generally used to describe a major artistic or literary work, 'magnum' is also the word for a lethal weapon.

In his unfinished novella, Herman Melville created the character of the young Billy Budd as an unformed, illiterate man and as a foil of innocence and goodness against the evil of men.¹ The sailor's surname is a trope, suggesting unopened new flowers, the fresh buds of youth. The original Aboriginal name for the Bulli area south of Sydney was *Bulla* or Bulla Bulla, which carries a phallogocentric meaning of 'two mountains' (in this case Mount Kembla and Mount Keira). Other meanings given have been 'white grubs' and 'place where the Christmas bush grows'. As a friend commented to me, the unformed bodies of the teenage boys photographed in Gary Lee's 2009 series 'On the Verge' are like white pupae or grubs yet to undertake metamorphosis.²

For many years Bulli was the name used for all the country north of Wollongong to the town of Coalcliff. It's where the mountains run along the coast and the edge is a steep drop to the Tasman Sea. It's on this edge that a group of young men, on strike from the nearby colliery, built the Clifton School of Arts for the local community in 1910. Appropriately, 'On the Verge' was hung in the 'Doug Luck Room', named after a young private killed in action during the Second World War. A local miner and art student, Doug Luck was not much older than the young men in Lee's photographs.

Lee's mission, found within his practice, is the widening of the

opposite, from top

Paddy, 17, 2009

Digital print on Hahnemuhle paper, 42.2 x 56.27 cm

Courtesy the artist and Sheahan Galleries, Thirroul

Stefan, 17, 2009

Digital print on Hahnemuhle paper, 42.2 x 56.27 cm

Courtesy the artist and Sheahan Galleries, Thirroul

idea of male beauty. As the artist explains:

*My photography is a way to record the beauty of ordinary men. This beauty is not just a matter of youth or maturity. It's partly about an attitude, a look. The men might exude innocence as much as sexuality. Often it's a kind of beauty that they aren't even aware of – and that attracts me.*³

Lee's pathway to Bulli and this project was incidental. Although a Larrakia man from Darwin, a world far away to the north, Lee's nephew, Callan, lives locally. As does Callan's gang: Daniel, Declan, Luke, Michael, Paddy, Stefan and Tomas – most of whom were still at high school when Lee shot them over the course of a summer's day. Teenage boys are naive, thoughtful and sensitive, and Lee placed them each as Adam, among lush garden foliage as the original innocent man.

Teenage boys can also be vain, stupid and incredibly self-centred. (Remember *South Park* boys are teenage boys.) For various unkind reasons, they are often seen as troublesome, irritating and downright lazy. However, one must also remember that teenage boys are among the greatest number of victims of social violence. Historically they have been used by society as 'cannon fodder' – pressed into action for various endeavours, wars and crusades in a generic testing of their manhood and mortality. Inside each youth lurks a potential struggle between good and evil, and long teenage silences often belie deep thought.

There is the cynical saying that 'youth is lost on the young', and some disgruntled older people have trouble with all this youthful energy and beauty; indeed that these youngsters are actually liked. During colonial times missionaries of all denominations and ideologies preferred to convert and work with young girls rather than teenage boys. But Herman Melville thought differently. He saw Billy Budd's unformed nature as full of potential and 'character'. More than a century later, Lee's admiration for the

beauty and youth of teenage boys is similarly untainted. His subjects don't need to be sexualised or homoerotic. Instead, for uncynical older viewers there can be a recognition, an identifying with the young. By investing emotionally, these viewers can see themselves in these young men, reliving their lives through their images. Such impulses can be generally good for the individual and constructive for society as a whole.

In Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), Mowgli is a 'boy cub' who grows up with a pack of wolves and only interacts with other humans when he reaches puberty and has to rationalise where his life will turn. For any male as he moves from childhood to manhood, he comes to interact with the wider adult world of humans. For many teenagers, a new relationship has to be developed with parents – an absent father, perhaps, or a mother determined to keep her children from unwanted welfare officials. In a small-town setting, they might be exploring issues to do with stereotyping, identity and race relations, and asking: Is there more to life?

Like many people, I look for small imperfections and flaws indicative of character. Billy Budd had a speech impediment which rendered him literally without voice. All young men feel a type of metaphorical speech impediment through their lack of confidence and vocabulary. They are at a threshold into another consciousness. They often feel they can't wait, and waste periods of time in conversations with the dead. It's a struggle to face the taunts and temptations, and to remain true to their culture and themselves. **A**

- 1 Begun around 1886, *Billy Budd* was eventually published in 1924, thirty-three years after the author's death.
- 2 The series was first exhibited by Sheahan Galleries at the Clifton School of Arts, 20 February – 7 March 2010, before being included in subsequent shows at Woolloongabba Art Gallery, Brisbane, and Randell Lane Fine Art, Perth. Some images will be included in the group show 'Gorgeousness' at Fresh Gallery Otara, Auckland, 13 May – 25 June 2011.
- 3 In conversation with the artist, March 2010.

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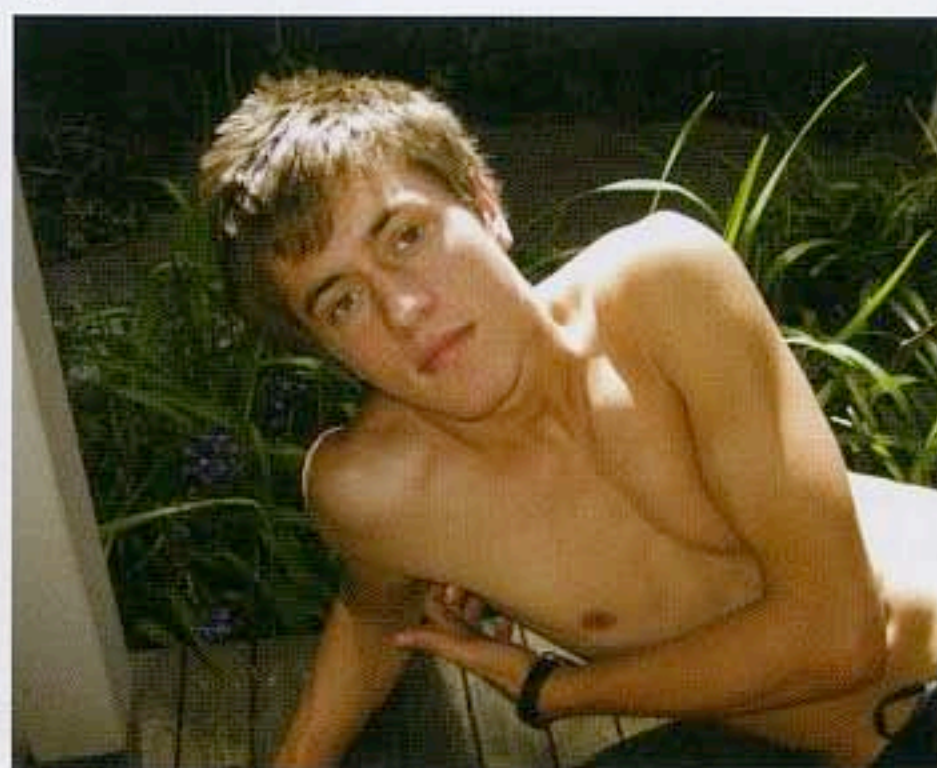
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