



## Australian Art

by Joyce M. Youmans

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Historically, Australia has produced some important gay and lesbian artists and is currently home to many others. These artists work with a wide variety of materials and explore a broad range of topics. Their art encompasses portraits, figure studies, jewelry, paintings, interactive videos, and other genres, while embracing styles as distinct as surrealism, camp, and the abject.

### Earlier Artists

Although she lived most of her life in Paris and London, Agnes Noyes Goodsir (1864-1939) was born in Victoria, Australia. She became part of the legendary lesbian scene in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, and is best known for her portraits of sophisticated women.

Another prominent portrait painter is Sir William Dobell (1899-1970), who is regarded by many as one of Australia's greatest painters. Although his paintings are often homoerotic, particularly his idealized and sexualized portraits of construction workers, he spent much of his life hiding his homosexuality from a conservative Sydney society.

Far more open was Donald Friend (1915-1989), who specialized in nude male figure studies. Although he spent much of his life abroad (including many years in Bali), he returned to Australia near the end of his life. Friend's richly illustrated book *Bumbootziana* (1979) shocked a prudish Australian public with its eroticism and satire.

Another Australian expatriate artist was Leigh Bowery (1961-1994). He was born in the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine, but earned fame in London as a fashion model and performance artist. The centerpiece of his art was his transformed (and often disfigured) body.

### Contemporary Artists

Contemporary gay and lesbian artists find Australia more hospitable than earlier artists did. Hence Australia is now home to a vital gay and lesbian artistic community. Some of the most interesting of the contemporary artists are discussed below, but the listing is necessarily highly selective.

### Deborah Kelly and Tina Fiveash

The Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival in Sydney provides an annual forum for Australian artists to showcase their work. For the 2001 festival, writer/artist Deborah Kelly and photographer Tina Fiveash (b. 1970) collaborated to produce a series of six photographs entitled "Hey, hetero!" Beginning in February 2001, these photos appeared on illuminated public advertising spaces, billboards, magazine pages, street posters, and postcards.

The "Hey, hetero!" series forces viewers to consider the hidden advantages of being straight. "Hey, hetero!"

proclaims one photograph with a nuclear family picnicking in a park, "When they say family, they mean you!" Another, which features an infant lying on its back on a rug, is emblazoned with the statement: "Hey, hetero! Have a baby: no national debate." A third work encourages heterosexuals to get married "because you can!"

Produced to look like slick, sophisticated advertisements, the "Hey, hetero!" photographs are unsettling, and even alarming. The viewer might become unbearably uncomfortable if not for the element of camp and humor incorporated into the works; the people in the photographs often display artificial poses and goofy grins that suggest that the works are spoofs, but the message is ultimately too serious to ignore.

Since heterosexuality generally is understood as the "norm," it is never deconstructed, questioned, or challenged. By pointing it out, even advertising it, Kelly and Fiveash reveal that heterosexuality, like homosexuality, is socially constructed; it is its own culture, and its members share common beliefs, privileges, and fashion sensibilities.

### **Timothy Horn**

In contrast to Kelly and Fiveash, who emphasize the constructedness of heterosexual society, Timothy Horn (b. 1964) sculpts magnificent objects that belong in a make-believe world. One of his most recent series includes works inspired by the Cinderella story (1999-2001). Crowns, brooches, a slipper, and other items are made from relatively common, inexpensive materials such as nickel-plated bronze, cast crystal, and Easter egg foil.

Lavish and beautiful, Horn's creations are also over the top and tacky. The artist accentuates the latter two qualities by giving his works trashy, lewd titles such as *Pink Bits*, *Love Muscle*, *Bearded Clam*, *I Want Candy*, and *Boy Pussy*. His name for the sumptuous, downscaled carriage central to the Cinderella story is *Bump n' Grind*. This title emphasizes the crude, sexual aspect inherent in any romantic fantasy.

Horn's works insult good taste. The artist deems his celebration of the fake and the ornamental a queer sensibility, and he calls his reinterpretation of the Cinderella myth a queer rewriting. Indeed, the flashy, glitzy, ridiculously feminine *Glass Slipper (Ugly Blister)* could be part of a costume from an upscale drag show.

While Horn's fashion accessories are for the brash, the shameless, and the proud, they are also for the outcast and the different. For example, a brooch titled *Big Girl* incorporates the word "butch" above three teardrop pearls. The work could be a medal for a tormented outcast and/or a badge of honor for someone who is different.

*Big Girl* also raises issues related to gender construction. The word "butch" brings masculine associations to mind; yet jewelry is quintessentially feminine. The combination of these two elements reminds the viewer that identity is complex and unstable. Since the person who wears *Big Girl* does not fit into accepted gender roles, the accuracy of these roles is called into question.

### **Vanessa Buemi and Karen Coull**

Works by artists Vanessa Buemi and Karen Coull address these same issues, with a feminist spin. Both artists use handcrafted objects to explore stereotypes of femininity. Buemi's *Femme with Butch Tendencies*, for example, consists of an exquisite length of crocheted pink yarn, to which steel crampons are attached.

Similarly, a thorn-encrusted pillow by Karen Coull is designed to unsettle. A commonly held belief is that females are supposed to be soft, yielding, and manageable like a pillow; they are not supposed to harm others, or to be capable of violence and rage.

## Linda Dement

Linda Dement (b.1959) uses her artwork to break the stereotype of the passive, yielding female. In her electronic videos, she positions female subjects in a culture of pain, abuse, and abandonment as a means to give them both salvation and ammunition.

For the interactive CD-ROM *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* (1995), about 30 women scanned parts of their bodies and digitally recorded a sentence or another sound, such as a dog barking. Dement then animated conglomerate bodies culled from this information and created interactive monsters. When the viewer/participant clicks on one of the monsters, words may be heard or seen, sounds may be heard, another monster may appear, or a digital video may play.

*Cyberflesh Girlmonster* reveals the various attributes of a male-dominated society, such as rape, that spawn monstrous responses in women. The work treats women as powerful individuals who have revenge fantasies that they act out. For example, in one part of the work, text that reads "If only a woman could kill just one of the men who has raped her" is followed with several video clips that demonstrate bloody scenarios by which a woman might physically act out revenge.

## James Gleeson

James Gleeson (b. 1915) is perhaps the most famous Australian artist who addresses homosexual themes in his work. He began painting in the surrealist style in the 1930s. Since that time, he has created a multitude of works that explore the subconscious. Psychoanalytic theory informs his paintings, which are as elusive to the mind as they are seductive to the eye; their meanings seem just beyond conscious understanding.

Some of Gleeson's paintings have homoerotic undertones. In these works, nude men populate strange, colorful landscapes that may suggest the artist's mind. Perhaps these works illustrate the unconscious as it entices the conscious mind to take pleasure in male flesh. If so, these works may represent the universal struggle of the liberation of the individual will from one stronger than its own, such as that of society.

## Conclusion

Australian artists play an important role in the gay/lesbian/transgender community. Their bold, innovative works increase awareness and understanding about alternate genders and lifestyles.

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