

Gordon Bennett

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Introduction

Gordon Bennett was born in Monto, Queensland in 1955. After working in various trades in his early life, Bennett enrolled as a mature-age student at Queensland College of Art in 1986 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Fine Arts) degree in 1988. Since his first major solo exhibition in 1989 his work has been at the forefront of contemporary Australian art and has been recognised internationally for its innovative and critical engagement with ideas and issues of ongoing relevance to contemporary culture.

While Bennett's art is grounded in his personal struggle for identity as an Australian of Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic descent, it presents and examines a broad range of philosophical questions related to the construction of identity, perception and knowledge. This includes a focus on the role and power of language, including visual representations, in shaping identity, culture and history.

Much of Bennett's work has been concerned with an interrogation of Australia's colonial past and postcolonial present, including issues associated with the dominant role that white, western culture has played in constructing the social and cultural landscape of the nation. However, Bennett's ongoing investigation into questions of identity, perception and knowledge, has involved a range of subjects drawn from both history and contemporary culture, and both national and international contexts. The *Notes to Basquiat: 911* series and the *Camouflage* series, which reflect on the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the war in Iraq respectively, highlight Bennett's global perspective.

Bennett's art practice is interdisciplinary and encompasses painting, photography, printmaking, video, performance and installation. The critical and aesthetic strategies of postmodernism have had significant impact on the development of his art practice. His work is layered and complex and often incorporates images, styles or references drawn from sources such as social history text books, western art history and Indigenous art. Well-known Australian and international artists whose works are referenced in different ways in Bennett's work include Hans Heysen, Margaret Preston, Imants Tillers, Vincent van Gogh, Jackson Pollock, Colin McCahon and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Bennett's referencing, appropriation and recontextualisation of familiar images and art styles challenges conventional ways of viewing and thinking and opens up new possibilities for understanding the subjects Bennett explores.

In 1999 Bennett adopted an alter ego and began making and exhibiting Pop Art inspired images under the name of John Citizen, a persona representative of the Australian 'Mr Average'. Bennett adopted this alter ego to liberate himself from the preconceptions that were often associated with his Aboriginal heritage and his identity and reputation as the artist Gordon Bennett. Since 2003 Bennett has been working on a series of non-representational abstract paintings that mark another significant shift in his practice. These paintings reflect Bennett's belief that after the *Notes to Basquiat* series of 2003, *I had gone as far I could with the postcolonial project I was working through*¹. The emphasis on making 'art about art' which is the focus of his non-representational abstract paintings, contrasts clearly with the focus on social critique that was integral to

Bennett's earlier work, and is intended also *to make people aware that I am an artist first and not a professional 'Aborigine'*.² In this respect, Bennett's non representational abstract works, despite their overt emphasis on visual concerns, may be seen as reflecting an ongoing engagement with questions of identity, knowledge and perception.

The Exhibition

This major retrospective exhibition comprises 85 works. It brings together raw expressionist paintings produced early in the artist's career, many of the *Notes to Basquiat* paintings, and selected works from the *Home Décor* series. It also includes a number of paintings by the artist's alter ego, John Citizen and some of the artist's most recent non-representational abstract paintings. The exhibition presents students with the opportunity to explore both the developments and shifts that have characterised the artist's practice over the last twenty years, and the conceptual unity that underpins Bennett's projects.

The exhibition includes artworks drawn from public and private collections, including many artworks which students will be familiar with through current art education texts.

Curriculum Links

The range of artistic, cultural and social issues and ideas explored in the work of Gordon Bennett make the exhibition a valuable resource for exploring questions and ideas in several areas of the Middle and Senior Years' curriculum including the Visual Arts, English, History and Studies of society, and Philosophy and the Thinking curriculum.

Visual Arts

*Unafraid of big issues for art, like individual and national identity, life and death, and the role of imagery in representation itself, questioning is at the heart of Bennett's project.*³

- Interdisciplinary art practice, including the use of a range of materials and techniques to communicate meanings and messages. What influence have new technologies had on the artist's practice?
- The role of signs and symbols in communicating meaning and messages
- The role of the audience in constructing meaning. What strategies does the artist use to actively engage the audience in his work?
- Sources of inspiration and influence including personal experiences, historical, social and cultural events and debates
- The influence of postmodernism, including referencing and appropriation of images drawn from diverse sources. What conceptual and ethical issues and ideas are associated with this appropriation and referencing?
- The relationship between the artist and the art industry. How does the art industry influence the public perception of art and artists? What evidence can be found in Bennett's work of the artist exploring issues related to the art industry?
- What shifts and developments are evident in the body of work produced by Gordon Bennett over the last twenty years? What evidence of conceptual unity can be found in this body of work?
- How does the concept of 'individual style' relate to Bennett's art practice?
- What is the role of the artist in society? How might Bennett be seen as a social commentator and/ or an artist's artist?

History / Studies of Society

Despite his claim to be a history painter, Bennett wants to undo the hold of the usual stories told by modern historians. He is interested in what Australians historians do not say, in what they leave out....Bennett is not the chronicler of

- Art as a means of deconstructing history and exposing the ideologies and structures that shape history
- Comparisons and links between Bennett's perspectives on Australian history and culture with those of historians and writers such as Henry Reynolds and John Pilger
- Issues of national and cultural identity, including factors that influence how these identities have been constructed in the past and present
- Bennett's work as a context for exploring political, social and cultural events, issues and debates including the 1988 Bicentenary, Sovereignty (land rights), Aboriginal deaths in custody, Republicanism, Citizenship, the 9-11 terrorist attacks, the Iraq War

English

*I do believe art can function to expand one's consciousness, to act as a catalyst perhaps, to exceed the boundaries of language and how it defines and limits understanding of the world in which we live.*⁵

- Bennett's work as text. How does Bennett's work communicate meaning and messages? What forms of language are used?
- How are words and images used in Bennett's artwork? What does this reveal about the power and role of words and images in defining understandings of the world in which we live?
- Bennett's work as a context for other texts exploring issues related to personal and cultural identity and/or social and cultural issues and debates
- Bennett's work as inspiration for creative and critical writing

Philosophy / Thinking curriculum

*Bennett's pictures leave us with questions rather than answers, with complexities rather than simplicities – as if the origins of truth, identity and ideology are in metaphors and signs rather than in things, and hence are layered and relative.*⁶

- Art as a means of interrogating the constructed nature of knowledge, perception and understanding, including race as a social and cultural construct
- Critical enquiry into how language, including visual representations structures ideologies social and cultural systems
- Philosophical enquiry into role of art and the artist in society. The role of art and artists in challenging social complacency

¹ Bill Wright's interview with Gordon Bennett in Gellatly K with contributions by Clemens, Justin; Devery, Jane; and Wright, Bill *Gordon Bennett* National Gallery of Victoria exhibition catalogue, Melbourne, 2007

² *ibid*

³ Wright, Simon 'Into the printout' *Out of Print*, exhibition catalogue, Griffith Artworks, Brisbane, 2005 p. 79

⁴ Ian McLean 'Gordon Bennett's Existentialism' in McLean I. and Bennett G. *The Art of Gordon Bennett* Craftsmen House / G + B International, Australia 1996 p. 70

⁵ Gordon Bennett 'The Manifest Toe' in McLean I. and Bennett G. 1996 op cit p. 53

⁶ Ian McLean 'Gordon Bennett's Existentialism' in McLean I. and Bennett G. 1996 op cit p. 69