

September Song — *Goodtime Charlie*

Artists: Paul Sloan, James Dodd, Matthys Gerber (Hugo Michel Gallery, September 15—October 15) • Pater Atkins, Darren Siwes (Greenaway Gallery, September 21—October 16) • Sam Howie (Format Collective Inc, October 12—November 9) • Ray Harris, Christine Collins (AEAF, September 29—October 29)

by Ken Bolton

The Code

“my dream a drink with Paul Sloan—
we discuss The Code of the West”
—Ted Berrigan. *The Sonnets*

I've written about Paul Sloan before. (See, on this site, 'Talking Up Paul Sloan'.) Though I have not written about these particular works. And, as it turns out, Sloan has shown these works before—at the SASA Gallery earlier this year. So maybe they're asking for attention. They don't change my view of him much. My view is that he is very good: Paul Sloan is 'on to something' and the connections are both too easy to name and complicatedly non-verbal and tantalising for being so.

At Hugo Michel (*Group Show*—James Dodd, Paul Sloan, Matthys Gerber—September 15—October 15) Sloan showed a bank of identically formatted water-colour sketches: one row above and one below, each 100 x 70 cms, fourteen images in all, all more or less monochrome-graphic and painted, drawn really, with Sloan's trademark panache, finality, and definition.

This particular set coheres very well though it presents as a series of random juxtapositions, many of them 'bad news'. It is a tough-guy kind of suite—probably jokingly so. We are meant to reel at the awful assault the group initially makes. All the images have attitude and stand for something inflexible, non-negotiable: national honour, militarism, winner-take-all, crowd-versus-individual, confrontation,

nature (though mostly ‘society’) ‘red in tooth and claw’, victories and defeats and, generally, the submission of the individual, the humane, to ‘necessity’. (A roll-call of the subjects: a tough old general, boxer and ref standing over a downed opponent, a crowd assaulting a fallen figure, a soldier on horseback, victorious soldiers holding aloft guns and arms, some birds of prey or birds *as* prey. The simple oppositions of black and white—present in all of the pictures—is explicitly the theme in one—of an abstract diamond-pattern of interlocked, repeated cubes or building blocks. Escher-like, they represent stairs, ascent and descent, possibly, or as I say, they make explicit the opposition ‘black and white’. The same opposition is present in all the pictures: they present starkly and stylishly abridged images against the white ground of the paper, that of course reads variously as atmosphere, as landscape, sky, room, as boxing ring and so on. The starkness, seeming speed, and sharpness of the perceptions is formed of this opposition. The many shades of the picture’s single colour, warm black, say, that that in some places thins out to the palest of greys, or pools darkly, constitute another, slower speed.)

In the liberal-minded, Fine Art context—that Sloan knows he is, by convention, operating within—this reads as an unconscionably binary, cruelly antagonistic, ‘male’, violent, unremitting and regrettable concatenation of scenes and vignettes. Of course it is a bit of a surprise to find one’s mind jump-started—ambushed—like this and caught-out assigning things values, summarily quickly. The paired swans’ heads look great within this context: sex? ‘love’? a stand-off? Courtship or argy-bargy? Both? Their necks curl and the heads meet to form a symmetrical heart shape.

The style is Sloan’s standard manner: seemingly quick, derived from public media, TV screen, magazine photo, advertisement. Dribbles of the thin paint run vertically down the pictures, in some more than others, their effect usually to reinforce the pictures formally: they state the surface’s flatness, often anchor or tether the image within the overall rectangle, rescuing otherwise empty spaces, or complicating the picture interestingly where it is busy already.

Canniness, humour and wit, formal intelligence, and a fascination *with* fascination, might be the things that characterise Sloan's work overall. This set should be depressing—a series of willing opponents and punitive depictions of violence offered as inevitable consequence. And perhaps it is depressing, or distressing. Its trick is that the combined energy and wit of each piece distracts us from the conclusion we might draw—or makes us aware of how the formal properties of the work become refuge from the images' import. There is the news of the day, and there's us, a stand-off.

James Dodd's work at Hugo Michel occupies a smaller, separate room. Painting—slightly surfer-van fluoro oranges and yellows, against black—of dried out, arthritic-looking branches, trees in silhouette, a skull, a sketched zombie drover on his skeletal horse. Some of these had fragments of text—looking a little like graffiti, but processed within the picture's style, not graffiti added to the picture or invading it, but well-mannered, unobtrusive. I am not sure what the point is, this mixture of psycho-billy gothic and decorous surf-culture graphic: it produces no strong reaction. It does not seem to invite irony—or to manage any particular rhetorical stance vis a vis the viewer. Perhaps the generic imagery and manner are insignia, the marks of something tiredly—but in Dodd's case confidently—sub-cultural? In which case it implies an *epater la bourgeoisie* stand-off that doesn't really come about.

The printed material made available on this work, Dodd's *Boab Inscriptions*, would have the whole as a kind of injunction that we remember these stockmen—a group, and way of life, of one particular historic phase now in danger of being forgotten. In the centre of the room—and so surrounded as by ghosts, by these mementos of past lives—is a wooden 'picnic' table carved in the manner of the Boab tree sources inscribed with their stockmen's markings. (It is from these that the lettering seen in some of the paintings is derived.)

This is not Dodd's best work, which can be a good deal stronger. Memorialising can be a fairly static and inert business. Testifying solemnly, standing on some sort of dignity, to enforce respectful

assent. The work itself tells us nothing about these people. The comic-ghoul aspect of the style and treatment might not be the way they'd have had themselves remembered. Dodd's defining problematic is his work's relation to the gallery art-world: he works often at a stand-off between his demotic art and the institution's space and presumed audience. And sometimes this ambivalence and challenge are set up to give the work real power. His graphic and design skills are always apparent. This particular project was not likely to allow such leverage: memorialising is an institutional move. No memorial, for example, can challenge the viewer with *What are you looking at!*

In this 'group show' Matthys Gerber showed two paintings—one geometric, designery and another more fluidly 'expressive' in appearance. The former had the impact and hold of good design, the latter the more tenuous but also more complex call of much loosely lyrical painting in the mode that includes Tony Tuckson, Olsen and such from the 60s, through to the Michael Taylors and Dale Franks of 'today'. It's not so much that 'progress is made' here—or that it can be—so much as newer colour sensibilities are incorporated. Gerber's 'Echo Echo' would not have been attempted once: some colours are too weak, some lines too enervated—but as popular fashions in pale pistachio greens and milky oranges, in Japanese-derived design and so on, have passed in successive waves, now these colours have a different valency—gestures that might have seemed failing, ineffectual, read now as cool, graceful, minor-key moody.

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Some of the same observations might apply to Peter Atkins' work (*painting and drawing*, Greenaway Gallery, September 21—October 16, accompanying a showing of Darren Siwes' latest work—titled *Dalabon Biyi / Dalabon Dalok*).

Atkins' pictures seem always to be pleasingly calm and to work variations around a small repertoire of shapes, colours or arrangements. These arrangements are mostly of rectangular shapes

and stripes, each typically monochrome and of slightly washed out colour. The compositions offer themselves as a series of variations—on the theme of these given shapes and colours. The continuities and resemblances constitute their unity.

These works have the air of nominating themselves as demonstrations of a particular reading of 'Painting' Any painting is that, per force. But Atkins' shows seem to signal—nonchalantly, with no heavy-breathing or self-dramatizing as to seriousness, necessity or whatever—a post 60s, literalist, formalism that could have shown at Sydney's Gallery A or Central Street Gallery with Tony McGillick et al in the early 70s. Though, in that company, they would seem cool-ly self-contained and much more concerned to please than to startle. In fact, their operation 'in series' has the very user-friendly effect of inducting the viewer, offering a way in to the decisions behind the paintings.

Atkins paints on truck tarpaulins discarded in the truck yard opposite his house, after a good deal of treatment to soften them, abrade them, render the surface suitably. So they have seams, the occasional metal stud or metal-edged hole (for a rope to have passed through), and these features are part of the composition, sometimes, probably, the imperfection or 'feature' that starts the compositional; ball rolling.

The exhibition was very well judged in its hanging: pairs of paintings wittily demonstrated their differences and similarities. There were a range of small studies for the larger pictures—again pointing up the process—and a grid of 'sources' for the designs in which were the originals of some of the forms. Colours and arrangements could be seen here as Atkins found them: an ancient 50s cover design, some advertising logos, a petrol pump, a ticket. The paintings zero in on aspects of these found arrangements and distil them, treat them to development and elaboration.

Paired with Atkins at Greenaway was Darren Siwes. His *Dalabon Biyi / Dalabon Dalok* consisted of two complementary series of large cibachrome photographs. Each series stages individuals or trios of

indigenous men or women in their land—I think at sites specific and special to them as men or women of that grouping—and framed by a metal sculptural device that invokes Leonardo da Vinci’s universal man—the Vitruvian figure in the circle. The sculptural device (placed in the landscape: Leonardo’s squared circle at appropriate life size and framing a central figure) has clear and decisive formal impact, tending to order all around it. For cultural reasons the two sequences are kept apart in the exhibition—echoing a gender division—the women in their land are upstairs, the men’s photographs in the gallery below. Both sets look strong, the men’s photos are maybe a little too samey (same composition, the figures being shuffled into different positions vis a vis the metal frame, taking turns to be the central figure or one of those flanking). While they followed this same pattern, the women’s pictures were generally stronger because the women wear a dramatically bright red dress which stands out against the scrub and trees and broken colours of the background.

The works would seem to claim or appropriate the universalising western device and use its suggestive power to celebrate the people in the photographs: it renders them emblematic of their whole people as well as pointing up their specificity and non-western ethnicity by way of contrast: they are *not* idealised, quite clearly, and are not European: they might be taken to defeat the claim to human universality, or to demand accommodation within it.

At the same time one supposes any irony that suggests itself also applies: da Vinci’s design has come to stand, almost as a logo, for the Enlightenment Project, for Kant and the European subject—and for all that can be considered the inadequate Western world view that has set about claiming the rest of the planet as its resource and as subject to its higher understanding. And so on. Here the work’s ambivalence gives a certain critical power.

Dalabon Biyi / Dalabon Dalok Is not unlike other of Darren Siwes’ projects. Siwes is of mixed Dutch and Dalabon descent. The artist has regularly brought together the indigenous with the ‘High’ European—in fact, the indigenous person or body with the European frame: previously, the well known positioning of aboriginal profile

busts on what looked like coins or commemorative medallions— where the West’s kings, queens, caesars and presidents might go. These photographs were powerfully constructed, weightily dignified profiles, on coins magnified to a metre or so square and suggestive of venerably burnished metal. Here we have the idealising, universalising, generalising of (particular) aboriginal figures. Into these images we can read victory, critique, irony, celebration, claim, restoration.

As with James Dodd’s Hugo Michel work, there is a degree of inertness to any instance of witnessing, memorialising: the proposition (if we forget its attendant clauses, riders, additions) is brief and simple. *These people were important, or are important. This degree of non-fit* (the formal strangeness the work is built around) *is the measure of injustice done and of the justice that must be done.* Sort of thing. Siwes’ work is not entirely vitiated by this limitation. For one thing, the attendant clauses, riders etcetera, are many: there is lots of history and argument, all operative in the atmosphere at the moment, and has been for decades. Less so for Dodd’s cattlemen. What does trouble me in Siwes’ work concerns the mechanism of this powerfully adamant or forthright statement. Siwes employs the tactics of advertising and design: the two elements are combined—the indigenous and the European—for the frisson of contradiction—and the juxtaposition works to call up already available responses. It taps them. Little new work is done by the art in terms of critical thinking, nor by the viewer. In fact the work does not commit itself other than to the presentation of these two parts—as ‘redoubtable’. We view the work and say ‘Yes’ quietly, as to a petition we have signed before. We see them, absorb them immediately. It is as though we have seen them before. The techniques are so familiar. Which makes the work (makes these works, if not the earlier series) a little forgettable, ‘high class’ but a little bland.

Intimations of imminent immanence

Sam Howie, in a small exhibition—*Decomposition*, at Format Collective Inc space (October 12—November 9)—works,

interestingly, with assemblies of panels that seem designed to activate our recognition of them as paintings, yet prepared almost to subside or withdraw from that recognition, that state. They intimate that the state is available to them, is imminently immanent. These held one, because the gestalt that had them register as interesting, intriguing, was deliberately courted—by the work, or by the artist—but by design was tenuous. The viewer had to will them into that state, or allow them to achieve it. One piece, a long pink rectangle made up of many regular smaller panels, was particularly good. The squares were perhaps separately painted, but more likely painted as a single assemblage, with gradations, unevenness allowed occur as the artist covered the single very large area. At a later stage the constituent rectangles would have been reshuffled, recombined. However generated, the finished effect is one of very shallow depths alternating in fairly rapid succession as the eye moves across it, and alternating frequently but not with predictable regularity or to predictable degree. Pinks beside slightly paler or darker pinks, sometimes hardly varying, and with very very occasional touches of other colours. These last showed through the pink as if breaking through an atmospheric pink skin. Where these blistered patches or whisps of colour appeared at the edge of a panel they registered as fairly definitive assertion of overall flatness and of disjunction between the parts: a mutually exclusive pair of messages. So, canny. But in large part revisiting ‘problems’ of the sixties and early seventies—Jules Olitski and others. How knowingly it is hard to gauge. An Olitski would look expensive, a luxury item. As well as giving pleasure, Howie’s emulsified and hard, oily surfaces are pretty ugly—and it strikes me that this is okay by the artist. He’s not out to make a commercial killing. Of course, an Olitski would look different, too. Should one think, rather, Ryman, the early white paintings of Rauschenberg—all perhaps kindred aesthetic ambitions? It is hard to see this literalist formalism around issues of depth, the resuscitation of this paradigm for painting, as having much leverage any more. A frisson we thought we’d never feel again, somehow still somehow alive, available?

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Ray Harris and Christine Collins showed over October (September 29—October 29) at the AEA. Harris's *Hold me Close and Let me Go* featured vast projected performance films on the two opposing sides of the gallery. At the gallery's end ran a series of five identical boxes—structures resembling guard boxes, their doors shut or just barely open. In each was a distinct 'world' to be visited. The themes of the two projections are those Harris has dealt with before, but here they are given in a more major key. Harris's work enacts situations of dependency and love-withheld/love-unacknowledged, and the urge to seek protection or to seek freedom.

Some earlier Harris filmed performances have led up to *Hold me Close*. Best known, possibly, is a short film (*me and my monkey*, 2009) in which a young woman wakes in bed, rises and goes about her day—with a life-sized figure stuck to her, joined to her at hands and feet, hugging her back. She showers, brushes her teeth, leaves the house and walks through the park, returns, does the gardening. The clinging figure (made of black material) is at first born with good will, but eventually the Harris-figure tries to shrug it off. Finally she wrestles with it at the film's end: the scene is quite cathartic and seems like a murder. It is the doppelganger scenario—that is always eerily fascinating—but here domestic, and built on resentment rather than fear. *Hold me close's* two films have less 'narrative': they are both more or less single, unbroken shots of action in one space. One shows the artist-figure kneeling and hugging an unliving shape of white, made to human enough proportions but quite evidently not alive or at all realistic. *But it will do for a fixation*. And it does. Both artist and figure surrogate are white, filmed against a deep blue ground. The upright figure made of ice, the artist stands and hugs it needily, then holds it around the knees and kneels before it imploringly, beseechingly. Finally she lies on the ground as they surrogate now melts away.

The other film has the artist lying on a white bed of what might be dough, shaped like an outline human figure. Artist again in white, the 'dough' only a little less white. The performer struggles against the cloying, gripping material. Two near whites on a bright red ground. The enormous scale makes the scene sensuous and beautiful. The

blue projection opposite is more stark and sad in colour. Very simple effects.

Ray Harris's filmed performances are very direct and single-minded in their focus on a singular relationship, on one representation of it, and on attention to the enacting of the situation rather than briefly nominating it. So the fight against possession (a mother's, an other's?) is enacted on one wall in the red code, and the expression of endless need in blue on the wall opposite. Both are lengthy and run the whole course: purging and demonic in one case, unfulfilled and hysterical in the other. Fascinating in both cases.

Harris performs these actions without embarrassment and impersonally, as if determined to stay on track and finish the job, no faltering. It makes the films compelling, and rather elemental. True to the ethos of 60s art doxa, they focus on single actions and without theatre.

And then there are the boxes—each with a distinct world or experience: one is dark, unlit and earthen, moistly warm and full of earthen smells & features a 'bottomless hole'; another is brightly lit, white, with clear plastic bags in suspension about the walls, and water running and dripping, filling the bags: clear blue plastic tubing—clinical but vaguely troubling. Yet another box contains mirrored floor, ceiling, walls—and as the walls are made up of regular square grids of mirror the whole has a curiously *Matrix* feel to it and we ourselves feel a little weightless and panicky within it. This space feels large and futuristically glamorous. Another is a bower, into which we force ourselves, of luxuriant rose and other floral specimens, lots of scent and a claustrophobic feel to it. Another room has a smaller room, a snug almost, within it and in this smaller space (a refuge, from whom? for whom?)—is arranged a vast number of children's soft toys. So that it seems a child's security site, a nest or a retreat, womb-like.

These well made boxes were popular with audiences. The light coming from their slightly ajar doors was always intriguing—brilliant white, or suggestively rich crimson, the glow of mirrors. I was of two

minds, or of at least two: that they might all have been bigger—but how much bigger, how would that be possible etc? And that the idea was, anyway, a little 80s/90s, or a regular dream for some young artist in every generation. Admittedly, they were done well executed in this instance. The filmed performances, on the other hand, I think unquestionably good.

In the smaller gallery space was Christine Collins' *I may have to see YOU again, Charlie*. For this the *noelsheridanprojectspace* was made into a small 'theatre': with film-palace curtains, and blacked-out room dimly lit by old fashioned smoking room lamps. And some rows of old leather movie seating completed the listening space. Collins's work was a sound piece—an assemblage of dialogue lifted from the great man's movies: lines of Charlton Heston's, sometimes rejoinders to another's statement. They were amusing on various levels: one got sudden impressions of grizzled jaws and unshaven chins, kerchiefs around necks etc (many were Westerns); we hear an unlikely pope saying, Okay, I *said* you could paint the ceiling! But they were more interesting than that: one realised the function of the utterances—and their efficiency in the job. Single remarks served, we could tell, to establish the character's defining and justifying *idée fixe*: search for a lost son, revenge, undying love—or the gambits served to define people or create a world of simple types and opposites, or to set up a moral hierarchy: "I've been fighting all year—I haven't had time to admire the trees." "You seem strong enough." "I've terrified you from the first, Doctor, I still do: you hate me, you're terrified of me. Why?" "You're a damn traitor." Heston's voice is oddly sure, brooking no argument. (Though argument seems often to be what is going on here.) And the whole of the installation's collaged soundtrack creates a field of truisms, of 'epistemes', of wisdom and attitude that are instantly recognisable: the Code of the West.

Tongue-in-cheek, Collins explains on the catalogue sheet Heston's fascination:—

He tells me I can like who I want, buy some people, make jokes, file a claim and cut pieces out of him.

He tells me I can't win alone, make deals, sweep the carcass under the rug or make that much money.

He tells me to tell him, tell everybody, try to get some sleep, take the camp dog, turn the air conditioner all the way up, wait and see and watch myself.

He tells me I shall drink bitter waters, get my cut, see hail fall from a clear sky and stand in judgement with the other sinners.

He tells me he is a Florentine, a soldier, a shepherd, a Jew, a scientist, a narcissist, a civilian and sick of me.

He tells me he is nothing, different, alive, immune, grateful, hungry, finished and gentle with horses.

He tells me he is sorry, lonely, afraid, looking for a wife, looking for a girl and a little boy and the only game in town.

He tells me he is not sorry, afraid, prepared to die or kneeling to a princess.

It's a world and *I may have to see YOU again*, *Charlie* takes you to it.
The pair, Ray Harris and Christine Collins, both succeed in this.