

painter | versus poet

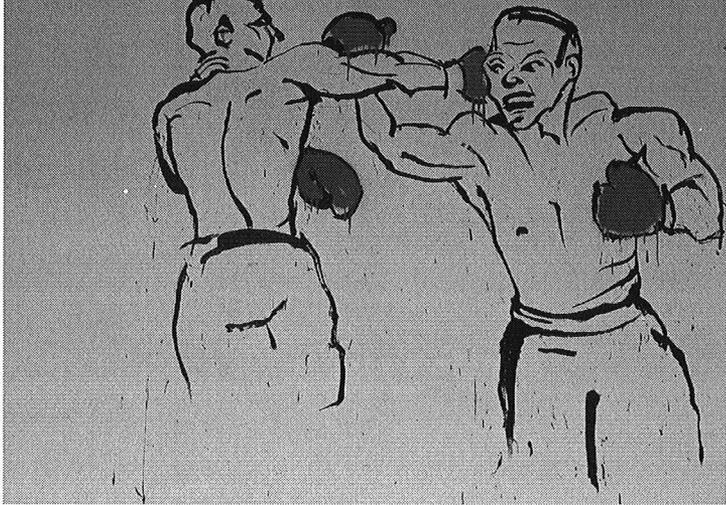
Shut up, nobody wants to hear your poems! | KERI GLASTONBURY

sonnet 173: our liberal education

isn't it weird, keri? or you touch down mid-sentence
as if someone's already been speaking, maybe for hours, & we're
arriving late for the poem, unavoidably delayed in transit
or just not giving a shit it's not (but it is) up to us to decide
& that could be where we disappoint or enrage,
like a parody that doesn't negate anything that came before
it just enlivens the view a little, modifying the way we think
or choose to feel as if everything's as rational as that & these bodies
continue ticking on like cars or a form of public transport
we understand the timetables of. not likely, is it?
then it's time for lunch & if we don't like someone we just
won't read them it's a hangover shaped like a lesson in morals
we learn to avoid & you're the cure not a voice that says stop drinking
but a great CD to make us dance.¹

— AS POETICS SPASM, AND FEEDBACK STAINS YOUR SHIRT

This piece stages a friendly title bout between two male artists of my generation, painter Adam Cullen and poet Ted Nielsen, and is adapted from a longer essay on 'grunge poetics'. While my chosen exemplars share a 'turn of the century' cultural moment, there is also a large disparity in their respective levels of success (hence one possible reading of the 'shut



Adam Cullen, *Finding Ways to Forgive Yourself*, 2001, acrylic, ink and enamel on canvas, 153 x 213 cm

up, nobody wants to hear your poems!' title). Though roughly the same age, Cullen is currently one of Australia's most collectable artists and Nielsen is considered in poetry circles to be an 'emerging' poet (in a potentially 'submerging' art form). While I may

fall sway to the 'glamour' of a famous painter, one of the central investigations remains a questioning of how poetry sits within the montage effect of placing both artists' work side by side, rather than, as the title suggests, simply squaring them off against each other.

Beyond the fact that both Cullen and Nielsen consider their practices to be essentially suburban, I've made a relatively intuitive call and cull, plucking them out of a much broader pool of artists and poets (with potentially similar aesthetics) who began exhibiting and publishing in Australia in the 1990s. It was Cullen's use of language, his 'textual twitch', which initially gave me the idea of coopting his work into an essay on poetics and in simultaneously looking at the poetics of his work with that of a poet, to open up the field of literary studies to wider engagements. Cullen has exhibited a number of purely text-based works, such as *My Dad Had Sex with My Mum* (1997), and he often employs quirky aphorisms as titles—one of my many favourites is *Don't Poke Holes in the Air, You'll Suffocate the Fairies* (1997). In the left margin of one of his most recent works *Death is Gay* (2005), Cullen scrawls a list of sporting and arts world acronyms 'NRL is Gay, AFL is Gay ... MCA is Gay'. While I began this comparison by thinking literally about uses of text in painting and poetry as my main overlap, it clearly goes beyond that to include a broader visual and verbal sensibility. Although Nielsen doesn't have the benefit of a visual medium to deface with words in quite the same way Cullen has, and while overall his poetry is more mannered, both are working with language in similar ways: positioning phrases like metonymic decoys, as if awaiting the muscular force of the

constitutive currents that can take hold of even the most banal cliché. It is language that often works ideogramatically, fragments of text wielding wider reference than they immediately present on the page or canvas.

In employing a seemingly outmoded conceit—the painter and poet alliance—and an analysis of traditional forms, both of which you might expect to be somewhat passé for artists assuming the more reactionary stance of what might still pass for avant-gardism—this anti-attitude of ‘shut up’, ‘enough already’—a questioning of the currency of artistic tradition in a local contemporary context is inherent to my project. Also mediating the relationship I’m fleshing out in the otherwise unarticulated space between their work are broadly anti-aesthetic attitudes of my own. For example, behind the title of this essay is my own beef with poetry, as both a reader and writer of it. This is possibly another reason why I’ve included a visual artist, as any discrete analysis of poetry and poetics felt like it would remain too based in language—and why I’m also avowing my affective responses to the material, rather than suggesting complete critical objectivity. While these are by no means the only two artists whose work has had a strong impact on me in recent years, exposure to both their work has, at various times, made me smile and feel elated, rising above the saturation point of cursory nods at gallery walls or puncturing the generic tedium of the poetry reading.

The first time I saw Adam Cullen’s work was in the 1996 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia. His contribution to this group show included *Special Lite Nude* (1995), a painting of a prawn-like human foetus with a six-pack balanced on its head, and *Pluto Pup* (1995), a photograph of a retiree with a salty white moustache wearing a pair of budgie smugglers. He’s cutting into a birthday cake—a supine lion, propped up on its elbow and holding a tennis racket—with ‘Happy Birthday Kevin’ written in icing. Caught in this celebratory moment, both benignly infantile and yet strangely self-lacerating, Cullen characteristically captures a recognisably masculine humour and pathos. For me, then in my mid-twenties, this Adelaide biennial exhibition also resonated with a feeling of generational simpatico I’d never experienced in a state gallery. An attitudinal shift pervaded and I was sutured into a sense of shared iconography, as stark as in Scott Redford’s *I Hate Myself and Want to Die. My Kurt Cobain. and Drink from Me and Live Forever. My River Phoenix*. I instantly identified with Redford’s queer idolising of these dead straight boys, just as Cullen’s suburban lexicon of beer and backyards from birth to the twilight years became mine too. This exhibition, held about four years after most of the artists had begun exhibiting in artist-run spaces and were starting to become noticed in the early 1990s, marked one of the moments when Australian grunge art’s desiccated take on pop became institutionally recognised.

One of the things that perhaps saw Cullen's work destined for wider exposure and market translation—beyond its brief grunge canonisation—was that he had moved out of three-dimensional sculptural work and begun to exhibit paintings. At the time it seemed 'grunge' artists preferred to work with installation, photomedia, assemblage, video and film: works on canvas were not part of the subculture. For example, another artist in the Adelaide biennial show, tattooist eX De Medici, exhibited snapshots of her clients displaying freshly minted tattoos, hung alongside used paper towelling, with imprints of the designs made visible in dried bloodstains. From an art collector's perspective, Cullen cannily ensured that owning a piece of 'avant-grunge' can have more of a crossover currency for commercial galleries; and from within its contemporary context, as well as in a more traditional painterly one, he maintains that he is doing 'old fashioned art, old world painting except it is happening now'.² The day I interviewed him at his Blue Mountains studio in September 2003, he'd just finished a portrait of Joey Bishop, fourth in a series of five members of the 1950s Hollywood 'Rat Pack'. I later couriered the painting down to Sydney to drop off to a couple in their multimillion-dollar waterfront apartment in Glebe, where it was duly hung between Sammy Davis Jnr and Frank Sinatra. The grey paint of the backgrounds perfectly matched the kitchen 'gallery' wall and the black suits of the figures were offset by the black granite bench top. Cullen had swapped with these friends of his this series of portraits for an old piece of chrome, a 1957 FC Holden. When I explained to Cullen that I'd be looking at his work and its possible synergies with the work of a poet, he seemed pleased with the anachronistic hue. He offered to show me some of his own poems (his 'Fatty & Skinny' series) and asked if I'd read any of Charles Bukowski's: 'so sad, inward and melancholy; alcoholic and lost'.³

Boozy, womanising mythologies associated with poets such as Bukowski, the dereliction of a pre-grunge bygone era, or craggy jazz crooners made over in Cullen's messy brushstrokes, aren't really analogous with anything in Nielsen's repertoire. The thematic overlap is in Nielsen's engagements with the contemporaneity of suburban life and the local, offset by a similar sense of deploying a traditional medium—here devoid of painting's market currency. The work of Nielsen's that prompted me to make this association with Cullen is an unpublished 'sonnet' manuscript, *life during foreplay*, which consists of 95 fourteen-line poems mostly written in Townsville during the 1990s.⁴ Reading it, I felt something similar to what I'd experienced when I saw the 1996 Adelaide Biennial, something that short-circuited my usual poetry eye-glaze. The title, a variation on Talking Heads's 'Life During Wartime', suggested the experience of a protracted adolescence familiar to Generation X, or perhaps to someone living in a regional Australian city, of life being all foreplay rather than working up to anything (as in 'this

paper plane says be all you can be/ but doesn't fly', something that might resonate equally with the promise of a poetry career).⁵ Much of *life during foreplay* was written during Nielsen's failed attempt to complete a PhD in Literature, with the sonnets eventuating in place of the required theoretical work—the product of a displacement activity. As a form of foreplay, perhaps writing poetry can provide a satisfying form of textual autoeroticism, although I often feel poetry's pleasure (or lack of) for me as writer, or reader, is more masochistic. As contemporary Australian poet John Kinsella states, 'To write poetry doesn't mean you have to like it'—which may also gesture towards the reason why it often feels as if poets far outnumber poetry readers.⁶ However, part of my enjoyment reading *life during foreplay* was that I experienced less resistance than usual, and as with Cullen's paintings, responded to the local translations of a decidedly suburban aesthetic, sharing in their sense of bemusement. It was a pleasant shock to find his poetry 'sexy', or seductive, without all the blatant or clichéd eroticism that usually implies.

life during foreplay

tired of images & the voice on the phone
chanting, 'honesty, honesty', we roll over
& scratch our arses, reflectively,
staring out different windows, thinking,
'the function of art is to entertain or instruct?'
& wondering about reductionism
as it applies to wardrobe, for instance,
is the least you could wear without catching a chill
really me, & is that the type of question
we should be asking each other? meanwhile,
back in the land of confidence, the telephone
keeps dialling itself & the tv changes channels.
i'm walking to work, imagining peoples' expressions
on the verge of orgasm.⁷

As in Frank O'Hara's opening lines in his poem 'Why I am not a painter' ('I am not a painter, I am a poet. / Why? I think I would rather be / a painter, but I am not'), I could make a similar claim—on a bad day substituting 'painter' for almost anything else.⁸ But this creates a dialectic of desire and disavowal, an inverse narcissistic angst, since I have published two chapbooks of poetry (incidentally in the same two series as Nielsen, whom

I first met through the Five Islands Press New Poets publishing program in 1999). Unlike John Kinsella, who writes: 'I DO NOT WANT TO WRITE OR READ POETRY. I am addicted, compelled. I cannot stop', I am at a loss to know why I still write and read it, or write about it.⁹ I assume I am working towards closure, letting my poetry practice peter out of its own accord while hoping that I might muster other, perhaps less discrete, forms of writing and poetics to come. Still, this essay, and my continued creative practice as a poet thus far (I'm always writing my 'last' poem) is a testimony to the fact that I do have the volition, even passion, to continue to work this process through, to involve—or even to salvage something from—poetry. The alternative, it seems, is to remain a victim of the vagaries of my own aesthetic judgements and, in reaction, possibly find my writing limited to strictly critical paradigms and buttoned-down closures. While I'm generally derisive of poetry, and/or poets, I wouldn't want to instigate an expressive world favouring only dry critical cynicism—a risk especially pertinent to the body of work that I'm looking at. The fullness of my engagement is also reliant to a large extent on my responsiveness to the poetics intrinsic to these paintings and poems, that which remains expressive of the otherwise ineffable 'poetry' of culture and life; or else, shut up, nobody wants to hear your (or my) anything?

Deciding to write about the work of two male contemporaries has provided a way of *not* writing about my own poetry and practice. If I was going to explore my poetics with a visual art parallel, it wouldn't be too hard to find a comparable local female grunge artist among Cullen's contemporaries. I'm deliberately avoiding writing on female embodiment and my own work, however, in order to explore terrain somewhat outside the jurisdiction of my own inner life (and its broader critical and aesthetic contexts in my poetry). It is yet another displacement, reflected in my desire to try to engage with these artists' masculine energies, and the difference in stance that this engenders. While I share with them a generational overlap and Anglo-Australian cultural background, this about-turn towards the more culturally dominant paradigm of the male artist is partly an expansionistic urge on my part. I'm taking up Cullen's challenge to 'get yourself a white man' times two, while grappling with ways to hone a literacy in some of the more masculine mythologies associated with nonetheless familiar sociocultural moments and places, connecting me to a sense of sharing art practices sourced in a particular recent time period. Perhaps this essay also arises out of a sense of an incommensurable mis-identification with the underlying, though respectively quite different, masculine subjectivity in both Cullen's and Nielsen's work (angry young*ish* artist versus sappy young*ish* poet?). Any perceived potency may be borne out of no more than envy for their pithy elucidations, while simultaneously working through any ambivalence around the clever posturing versus

suspected vulnerabilities of a couple of male grunge auteurs (or in their Australian context, 'arty jobs').

Physics Tells Us not to be so Stupid

but years of training are hard to shake
& who's to say what's strategy
& what's a lack of preparation?
the philosophical problems of life
compete for your attention
with more immediate questions
as your relationship sets in the west
& a raft of survivors paddles up the river.
what can you tell them?
read the media critically?
but where is that river & where is it heading?
as each soundbite tilts its head
the ghosts of lyrical possibility
flap around your ears.
what you want is a verse that's intellectual
& tough, sensual & understated
in a range of colours to suit your mood.
god knows you don't wanna work at it.¹⁰

Like the writer of ideal verse in 'Physics Tells Us not to be so Stupid', I'd similarly like to write as the longed-for poet/critic hybrid, fashioning an ideal form of criticism freed up by its mix of illuminating percepts and moments of thoughtful aperçu. I feel clear about the role my imagination played in instigating this topic, in conceptualising an idiosyncratic and intuitive comparison, though I wonder if it will play more than this curatorial role, and make its presence felt throughout. Just as neither of these artists assume a magisterial position (one which would see them making elevated pronouncements on the world), but instead engage in a more productivist enterprise, my writing will ideally be irreducible to critical/reflective *commentary*. This would be the best of all possible exegeses, a play on Australian poet John Forbes's 'The Best of All Possible Poems', which is always impossible to realise as it 'relaxes asleep / in the tropical surf'.¹¹ Though as I try to write critically—and creatively—about art, poetry and aesthetics, every

line of argument feels more and more like an authoritative fiction, especially when I write within the paradigms of close textual (or visual) analysis or start drawing on sociological generalisations. It's made me think: Is this just something I thought I had to do or have fallen back on? Should I have started from a different premise? Because there's something else I'd like to do; something more fragmented, mutated and elliptical, where the onus is on my writing to constitute its own event, itself engaging with the energy and processes of culture. There remains a conflict with the part of me that wants to leave literary studies behind, to 'progress' to a more cultural studies approach, where choosing to write about the work of specific artists or authors could be considered too disciplinary. Ostensibly, I'm writing about Adam Cullen's and Ted Nielsen's creative practices and my responses to material aesthetic products, the work of two living artists working within my immediate cultural landscape. It's not a metadiscourse on writing about art—though this is now something I'm re-thinking as I go—nor does it approach the departure into cultural studies of Meaghan Morris's *Ecstasy and Economics: American Essays for John Forbes*,¹² which takes the work of Australian poet John Forbes as its starting point and then avoids poetry criticism altogether.

— WHEN I GREW UP I COULD GLOW IN THE DARK

In his recent essay 'Two Versions of Australian Pastoral: Les Murray and William Robinson', Robert Dixon spends some time examining the 'biographical legends' of these two artists (also painter and poet):

that is, the persona or public version of the self a writer or artist creates both through the biographical element of their creative work and by their active attempt in essays, interviews and other public forms to shape the critical reception of their work.¹³

It's useful for me to do something similar with Cullen and Nielsen, whose practices could superficially be read in reaction as 'Two Versions of Australian Anti-Pastoral', and whose personas are decidedly sans moleskins, RM Williams and family dairy-farm buy-backs (which isn't to say that their work doesn't have an investment in the rural or regional, or isn't just as distinctly concerned with notions of 'Australian-ness'). It seems unproductive to continue to stoke tensions since the 1960s between landscape/pastoral artists and urban modernist/postmodernist artists in Australia—'with pastoral's reputation for social conservatism, anti-modernism, and opposition to the fashionable and materialistic values of the metropolis'.¹⁴ In any case this is now less of a fault line. While both Cullen and Nielsen are to certain extents working against a 'romantic landscape tradition' (and more broadly the romantic idea of the author or artist), they are working after decades of postmodernist practice that has offered similar critiques. My aim isn't

simply to position them as ‘anti-landscape’ in form and rhetoric—because that is almost invariably followed by something along the lines of ‘but postmodernism has been doing that for years’, as if it’s all been done—a classic move of the type examined in Mark Davis’s *Gangland*.¹⁵ It’s not that either artist is interested so much in positioning himself against the Australian landscape tradition, but more in looking at and working with the landscape he inhabits and inherits: Cullen’s ‘What does it mean to be a white-wog middle-class Australian male of Irish descent?’ and Nielsen’s Townsville full of ‘Service stations. Pizzerias. Coffee shops in shopping malls. Dumb Hollywood blockbusters because the cinema society only showed foreign films once every two weeks and we didn’t get SBS’.¹⁶ To my mind both artists seem quite happy to consider their being in a cultural backwater as one of their works’ preconditions.

I’m including some of my more informal musings on these artists’ lives and ‘psyches’, gleaned from engagements with their work, personal correspondence and also through discussions with them, despite the fact that biographical readings don’t really sit with the postromanticism of contemporary criticism and determinations that if anything’s to be celebrated it should be the art, not the artist. In questioning how these artists’ identities might impact on their work and its reception, I hope to avoid reproducing the disavowals that can arise at the extremes of either pure literary theory or essentialist identity politics. The process of writing about art already feels aberrant enough to the actual art-making and leaves me no choice but to embrace this schism I find myself inhabiting. I’m quite interested in the idea of ‘artist practice’ (with all the romantic connotations that brings with it) and also in telling some of the story about how I connect in person (as a ‘critic’) with the artists whose work I’m writing about.

Adam Cullen (born 1965) grew up around Sydney’s northern beaches and studied in the inner city at the University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts, while Ted Nielsen (born 1968) is from a working-class background in Townsville, studied literature at James Cook University and remained in the suburbs of the regional city until moving to Sydney in 1999 (he has since relocated to Tokyo in 2004). Cullen’s practice moved on from ready-made object-based work to painting (with the occasional video installation) and he continues to exhibit in commercial galleries (with buyers including Sir Elton John—the 1990s here speaking to the 1980s?) and contemporary art spaces and museums. Nielsen has published two chapbooks of poetry—*search engine* (1999) in the Five Islands Press New Poets Series and *wet robot* (2001) with the small press Vagabond—and he has a large body of unpublished work. Not surprisingly, given the commercial pre-eminence of the visual arts over poetry, Cullen has developed more of a ‘biographical legend’ than Nielsen

and must deal more directly with the discomfiting aspects of artist as (minor) celebrity. As Trevor Smith writes in his catalogue essay for Cullen's exhibition 'The Placebo Effect':

Cullen is no stranger to the fame game. Strategically working it to his own ends, he has positioned himself as both a serious artist and as something of a media figure in his own right (in part through his winning of the 2000 Archibald Prize with a portrait of actor David Wenham).¹⁷

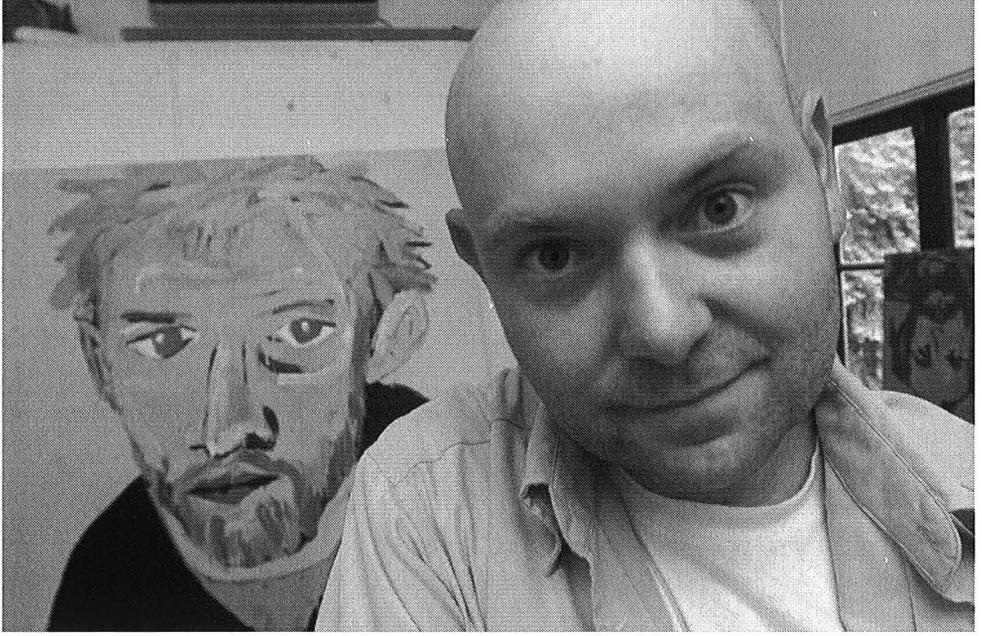
The Wenham portrait—which allegedly took Cullen just four hours to paint—created the requisite controversy, placing Cullen in the spotlight. The figure's big eyes and bold colours were perceived as too cartoonish or caricatured, especially by some more conservative arts critics, including Giles Auty, here speaking on ABC radio's *PM* program:

You know, there's no actual accuracy in the whole thing. The artist isn't Picasso. Picasso can rearrange the human face and capture an absolutely extraordinary psychological insight, and I think that was perhaps the greatest achievement of all made by Picasso. But I'm afraid this guy isn't Picasso, and probably I'd like to see a little bit more evidence of some serious hard work.¹⁸

Cullen is also a particularly quotable artist in media terms (his response to the Archibald hoopla was to call it a 'horse race') and he has become the grunge art pin-up boy for 'my' generation. In a *Spectrum* cover story on past Archibald winners he happily plays the odd one out in the painterly pantheon:

Not that confidence has ever been lacking in Cullen, who won in 2000 with his edgy portrait of actor David Wenham, in the role of the vicious killer he played in the movie *The Boys*. 'I changed the meaning of what portraiture is,' he says. His win opened to contemporary artists what has long been considered as a conservative prize, he says. He has memorised one critic's comment that in 2000 the doors of the academy had parted and the bad boy of grunge had entered.¹⁹

While Cullen doesn't give any indication of a 'double-consciousness' at play here, I doubt he really thinks that his win metamorphosed the institutionalised machine for judging art that is the Archibald, beyond the one-off year when it became the Archibald Prize for grunge portraiture, eliciting critic John McDonald's verdict of 'slapdash'.²⁰ While the arrogance of Cullen's public statements often surprise me—'I changed the meaning of what portraiture is'—I suspect this is part provocation, part naive self-importance and part taking the piss. And it has been strangely reassuring to see Cullen's intermittent presence in the media while I've been writing this; my desire for generational alliance dies hard. Such public visibility is also antidotal to the microcosm of the contemporary poetry



scene. It's seemingly impossible to imagine Nielsen, for example, being interviewed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as highly commended in the 2002 Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize for 'Townsville User's Manual'. Perhaps a couple of hundred people know about this prize and I doubt Nielsen, even if he had the media platform, would ever publicly speak of himself as ushering in a new poetics, as distinct from the usual prize-winning poems (often jokingly given the acronym 'PWP').

Adam Cullen and his portrait of David Wenham, *Sydney Morning Herald*

Cullen's provocations are more sustained than a recent concentration on portraits of murderers (most infamously his Anita Coby Killers portrait series). He is always finding new ways to incarnate his 'bad boy' tag. In person, I found he errs on the side of anti-intellectual (I'm reminded of a quote from Andy Warhol that Cullen uses in his MFA thesis 'Birth of an Idiot or Where I Would Have Got If I'd Been Stupid': 'Artists are never intellectuals, that's why they're artists') and anti-politically correct, as if these are necessary screens or filters for his creative algorithms to remain intuitive and beyond self-serving transparency.²¹ This way, he avoids getting trapped into earnest critical endgames, while nevertheless retaining an ambitious interest in the kinds of responses his work provokes, intellectually and politically, as much to see where such vectors might carry him. I shouldn't have been so surprised that he retains legacies of this rather romanticised 'artist' persona and is attracted to the 'outsider' status of both criminals and artists alike, to the point where he almost sees himself from the outside, which is how he speaks.

After immersing myself in catalogue essays on Cullen's work and reading other published interviews with him, I had to recalibrate when we finally met. I was too ready

to raise all the dialectics his work skirts, as if once I'd gained his insights these would all miraculously resolve—everything I've ever learnt about the 'death of the artist' jettisoned by my desire to find a font for my critical wish fulfilment. Cullen has obviously been very conscious of his works' place in a mediated popular visual art culture (as if something he'd decided, for a bet, to succeed at), though he wasn't about to give me any magic formula for his practice's conceptual substratum. If anything, I realised conversely how important the 'poetic' or 'perceptual' is to Cullen's sense of his work, the affective and intuitive realm that fuels his visions of our contemporary arcane.

After the interview we sat at a Wentworth Falls café reading the papers which were full of pictures of the recently deceased Slim Dusty, his face increasingly wizened by age, with rheumy eyes looking out from underneath an Akubra. Cullen was considering doing a portrait, soaking up the beery mateship mythologies from the *Daily Telegraph's* portal, like the bar towels in a photograph of the Town and Country (suggesting good old-fashioned Australian pubs from another eon). I suggested a title, 'The Real Slim Dusty', a play on white rapper Eminem's 'The Real Slim Shady' (my wannabe side exposing itself), but this isn't the kind of popular culture frisson Cullen courts. We continued talking about Australian Country and Western icons and Adam mentioned painting Jimmy Little's portrait (and I remember thinking, entering it in the Archibald in the year that black actors dominated the Oscars) and then told me about seeing Chad Morgan live years ago, singing 'They Call Me the Sheik from Scrubby Creek', which I suggest could be a particularly resonant portrait and title—especially *now*. Plus, Chad Morgan has the requisite 'ugly' mug, whereas a commission by the National Portrait Gallery to do a painting of Neil Armfield had him flummoxed. He's a pretty universally liked and respected guy, with nothing unusual about his appearance, and one of Cullen's strengths is in making aesthetic decisions with inherent strategic leverage.

Cullen and I have since kept in intermittent contact. On one drive back down to Sydney from the mountains, we stopped at the Norman Lindsay gallery and wandered around all the faux-boho-greco-roman schmaltzy statuary in the garden, while admiring Lindsay's illustrated *Antichrist* and gazing wryly at the overdose of water colours and oils.²² Adam thoughtfully identified, saying 'Lindsay wasn't very popular in the '80s, when everything had to be androgynous. I wasn't very popular in the '80s either'. He clearly prefers lurid male fantasy netherworlds over the neutral and insensate any day and I won't be surprised if his next show is full of concrete demons and breasted satyrs.

Being a poet is not something Ted Nielsen necessarily embraces as his 'calling' nor is his art a 'career' in the same way as it is for Cullen. The 'figure' of the poet or writer is something he questions often within his poetry. This also suggests the strong influence of literary studies on his work, which stresses its interest in the 'text', not the author per se.



My focus is also predominantly on the 'self' he develops in his work, as his poetic thinking-through of these ideas invites engagement more so than any deconstructions of his biographical persona I could offer. Though I'm also interested in why it is Nielsen makes these appeals to the 'text' rather than the author (beyond seeking to affiliate his work with prevailing critical fashion). Is it simply that he feels his real life just isn't as interesting as his imaginary or poetic one? Ted Nielsen

While Nielsen's work may be more subjective than Cullen's, both poet and painter display similarly strong urges to distance themselves from any 'authorial fallacy' in readings of their work. Though Nielsen often acknowledges the complex relationship between writers and their writing in his poems, he seems consciously aware that the self produced in his text is always a construction—his subjective voice more documentary in style than confessional. I'm suspicious, however, if he thinks he can do all this work himself poetically and cover every angle. Is it ever possible to be self-conscious enough? Might self-reflexivity also proffer another kind of shield? If so, what's excessive to this within his work that I can decipher as a reader?

Also, to be fair—and because Cullen seemed to somehow warrant this kind of attention—as well as looking at Nielsen's textual presence, I'll attempt a brief 'real world' comparison. I've often wondered how they would get along if they actually met. Would they share a sense of humour, as their work suggests? Or would they, as is more likely, be nonplussed? As really, they have mixed in very different circles. While Nielsen was a postgraduate student and aspiring poet in Townsville in the 1990s, Cullen was making grunge art reflecting the then new breed of inner-city subcultures. Friends have told me

that they often used to see Cullen at the bar at Newtown's Sandringham Hotel in the early 1990s, drinking alone and wearing a black beanie. By contrast, Nielsen is almost pathologically polite and shy in person, very much the reconstructed male when set against the drugs and drink reputation that has followed Cullen since the early grunge period, when as he says himself: 'I'd say things just to piss people off'.²³ In my experience, however, both men are now similarly quietly spoken, giving the impression that less is more, that they have already formed their at-times cynical attitudes towards art and life and so prefer to speak with careful critical understatement, rather than give too much away. Still, Cullen's ego is definitely the stronger to encounter. He buys right into his status as an artist, cultivating the self-absorbed eccentricities and character to suit by shamelessly sprouting his own mythologies (telling me, for example, that his artistic predilections were triggered when as a nine-year-old he saw Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Children* on a family visit to Spain). And while it's clear Nielsen has deliberately avoided modelling himself using any of the clichéd poet ident-i-kits, he unavoidably wears the badge of his postmodern tertiary education. His bookshelves are full of contemporary American and Australian poets, literary theory and philosophy, while his image is that of the consummate grunge suburbanite, most likely reading them from the comfort of a beanbag.

novel

tv decelerates into pages, they clunk against the table's wooden heart.
in the first chapter, a kind of voyage as if seen from afar.
it leaves you with a sense of motion & a fear of nothing moving.

chapter two proceeds by flashback, a young boy learns to masturbate
& spends an age in the shower while, outside, the early eighties go by.

the coffee's ready by chapter three, which concludes as you realise
you paid for this.

when the author digresses into literary criticism you're ready to write
the whole thing off, but something charms your better judgement
as a warm & wanting finger might stroke your inner thigh.

the middle chapters explore lingerie & fetishes, alluding to sodomy
& a fling with plastic bottles before a final, tragic image
of a box of dusty sex-toys, adrift in purple sunset.

the eighteenth chapter foresees my death, & in years to come
will be read as prophecy.

many critics remark on my fear of aging.

although but a footnote, the sunbirds of the twenty-second
are read as a metaphor figuring a summer's happiness.
it becomes true that the loves of my life decline into sadness,
& in later years the novel flickers like a paper zoetrope,
muttering its pages sotto voce as they flip away like a cheap effect
denoting 'passage of time.'

you become my monument. you, my heart.

the epilogue describes a bookcase transformed into a flock of birds,
a flight of covers that whirl up the sky & wheel,
dropping bookmarks as they head for the bay, the blue sea,
the paler blue beyond.

it's strange how that sound persists.

you try to put it down, but the novel doesn't end.²⁴

— ANTI-ART SLOUCHES OFF TO SPEND ITS GRANT MONEY WATCHING TV

In October 2003, Ted Nielsen and I drove to the Newcastle Regional Art Gallery to see Cullen's regional touring exhibition 'Our Place in the Pacific'. I was wondering if Ted would (even remotely) perceive any of the connections I've suggested might exist between Cullen's work and his own. I suspected that neither artist, if exposed to the other, would necessarily fathom why I have placed their work in such an orbital relationship. His response to Cullen's paintings was that he liked their immediacy, which was not to imply that they are necessarily 'easy to get', and that this quality is something he feels his poetry might also reflect. He also expressed some 'painter envy' for a simplicity that he suspected might be easier to achieve in a visual medium and because paintings are innately aesthetic objects in ways that a poem is not—even contemporary Australian poetry books are renowned for the production values and aesthetics of amateur bushwalking guides.

Perhaps I was trying to elicit a local instance of 'Why I am not a painter', apropos O'Hara, and Nielsen obligingly grappled with finding differences and similarities. One of the major differences he felt was that portraiture, even when allowing for Cullen's idiosyncratic style, is more effective figuratively. Similar renderings in poetry often become too discursive (leading to the laboured 'character' poem). An example of this is the heroic romanticism of Anthony Lawrence's sequence 'Blood Oath', a poetic

dramatisation of the story of two jackeroos who perished trying to escape from a remote cattle station in the 1980s.²⁵ Lawrence's sympathetic re-telling of the story (the boys' parents only recently received compensation from the owners of the property, acknowledging the harsh conditions that led to their attempt to walk out), would I'm sure, become an entirely different story in Cullen's hands. Two naive white boys wandering through an outback abounding with devil kangaroos? On poetry's plus side, Nielsen suggested that engagement with temporality is perhaps more difficult to represent on canvas, requiring Cullen to exploit the flatness of two-dimensional art in his narrative drive, with his only other options being to borrow from cartooning or to attempt large-scale series that hark back to the pictorial storyboarding of Renaissance Biblical painting. Yet this doesn't preclude Cullen's work from being concerned with the 'cultural narratives' associated with his subjects, and as these may already circulate in many media he doesn't necessarily need to tell or repeat the story himself in order to give his work its charge (as with the Anita Cobby killers' portraits).

Ted's favourite painting in the exhibition was *Let's Stick Together*, an image of a Count Dracula figure placed next to an elephant sitting awkwardly on its hindquarters. The work seemed to reference capitalist economies, as the Count has a dollar sign on his vest—like Superman's—with a line struck through the 's'. At various times we conjectured that this vampire with a snorkel—who was only just managing to keep his head above water—was the Sesame Street Count, Christopher Skase, Bryan Ferry, before deciding, with a sense of denouement, that it bore a striking resemblance to Paul Keating (becoming Cullen's 'Watching the Treasurer'). In this case the elephant might represent the Commonwealth Bank, like one of those plastic elephant-shaped moneyboxes we had as children. Perhaps 'Keating' was floating the dollar, or perhaps it was the Count from Sesame Street and the elephant was the Republican party's symbol; or perhaps the elephant signified the third-world economies of Africa, becoming Cullen's take on the global, rather than local, or the Australian/US economy.

While we were looking at the paintings, the guide on duty told us that there had already been a number of complaints about the exhibition. At first I was slightly surprised that people would 'complain' about art—perhaps a marker of my cultural 'elitism'—but also a sense that only base political or 'morally' challenging work attracted dissenters on conservative or religious grounds. Hasn't the avant-garde become so 'ho-hum' anyway that who else can be bothered? I had to look again at the works exhibited, trying to gauge what might be considered offensive, taking into consideration that a regional art gallery was not my usual milieu. Perhaps in this context Cullen was the classic avant-gardist, reanimating the possibility of producing art that is bad, banal, negative, ugly and amoral.

Only in the commercial sense are such artistic strategies rendered predictable and ineffectual, in that the market is able to accommodate the defacement by literally buying into it. Looked at through different eyes, the exhibition was full of technicolour portraits of rapists and murderers (the Anita Cobby killer series), prostitutes, a demonic goat with a paunch (in a painting called *Our Saviour*) and a picture of a naked male figure wearing a jack-o'-lantern titled *When She Goes I Dress Up*. 'Our Place in the Pacific' was, overall, an exhibition of lurid noir.

I get the feeling that Cullen has low aspirations and doesn't think that art can change things. It can, rather, go deeper into the tensions. Where does Cullen sit? His art is a kind of cocktail of envy mixed with derision for the often-violent energy that congregates around some Australian cultures: the skinheads, the heavy-metal Satanists and their air-brushed album cover demons, the beer-drinking yobbos, the rural rednecks, the new and old working class, juvenile delinquents and underworld crims—all of whom at least have a mythology, perhaps preferable to mainstream white middle-class mediocrity (though he makes sure we feel the power and pathos in that too): 'with the normality of the middle class grid comes an endless horizon of injudicious and inverse effects due to mildness. It's not the fact that TV is violent—the world is violent. Maybe it's not violent enough.'²⁶

Have I been too sycophantic here? Is this yet another acolyte's homage to the dark, driven, egotistical and romanticised male artist archetype? It does all still seem very 'boysy' and I want to be able to get beyond the artist's audacity, especially when writing about the Anita Cobby killer portraits. I'm convinced that these are a valid part of a self-reflexive culture, and as artworks provide something more than polemic or analysis once the cult of the artist is overcome. Though I've heard that groovy young parents are buying Adam Cullens for their kids' bedrooms in Surry Hills, Cullen has never represented the urbanising fashion-conscious to themselves—always sourcing his work in the socially 'outcast' of some description—though perhaps you still need metropolitan and materialistic values to appreciate it.

It is in the difference between the poetry and painting 'markets' in Australia, that this essay as a comparative study really comes apart. In finally reasserting the blokey 'painter vs poet' conceit, where acres of tired watercolours take on pulped diction? Or the heavyweight bout: Cullen versus Nielsen on the under card, Whitely versus Adamson as the main event? Supposedly we live in a visual culture. Is that why painters kick poets' arses? Is the fix always-already in?

Though poetry has in a sense always been 'fallen', it is always as important, or not, as it is now. The difference is a question of modalities, of styles, of techniques and engagements, poetries of different socio-historic moments conducting specific dialogues with their

circumstances. In her book *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, the American critic Marjorie Perloff attempts to elucidate how a small percentage of contemporary poetry is, or could be, productively conversing with other contemporary media.²⁷ As she proclaims, “‘about 90 percent of so-called poetry publication’ is at best ‘dross’” but that makes ten percent of recent poetry that isn’t.²⁸ This is perhaps an applicable, though just as harsh, critical reading of any cultural media (or human endeavour).

Working with the artistic stalwarts of poetry and painting prevents me from associating any contemporary avant-garde directly with popular or new media forms, and foregrounds the broader context of these and other social transformations in terms of the production of the innovative and ‘new’. A collapse into what requires more of an iterative notion of tradition (also carrying within it a lack of conviction around the perpetuity of a creative tradition of high art forms) is enlivened by a feeling of cathexis—energised points of interconnectivity I’m suggesting between Cullen’s and Nielsen’s practices in terms of preoccupation, generation, symptomatology and nuanced connections of perhaps more speculative interest.

A central juncture is the way that both artists engage with postromantic conceptions of the artist/author, seeing the self as inseparable from culture and textuality. There are differences in how they do this, with Nielsen employing a more directly subjective voice in a way which Cullen refuses. Perhaps this is also a symptom of the fact that Nielsen was writing more from the margins, allowing him to be more inward. In many ways his work (especially before his first book was published in 1999) was written for an absent audience of urbanised, literate postmodernists of at least a generation before. He initiated an imaginary dialogue, translating their work into his own idiom and across cultural referents, displaying this literacy while distinctly placed in a regional Australian city. Even after he left Townsville and moved to Sydney, the act of writing poetry will always remain marginal to some degree. In comparison, Cullen has been more outwardly ambitious. He mines the margins of white male cultures rather than necessarily living them out himself—another reason why his work may be less subjective. For Cullen, the ‘self’ or figure of the artist largely remains *in absentia*, his artistic presence is foregrounded in tone and attitude only. The posthumanist element of his social observation necessarily precludes any direct confessional self, just as the male figures in his work often suggest the gap between persona and performance. There is, however, the feeling that he can’t ever turn off a hyper self-consciousness that is *behind* his practice. He’ll be aware of this no matter how hard, or how little, he tries—how wasted, or not, he gets. His edge is often in making things appear more violent or loaded than they ‘really’ are—it’s a performative strategy, rather than an identity. After all, he is now a rather well-connected artist with ‘patrons’

including Barry Humphries (who, Cullen thinks, not only likes his art but senses their similar alcoholic battles). While his art still steals something of the power from the kind of devil worship represented on an Iron Maiden T-shirt on the back of a 15-year-old youth on a train to Mt Druitt, he ultimately sees himself as ‘having a foot in both camps’, sitting astride the ‘cultured’ world crossed with his latest plans to go shooting ‘vermin’ with a friend’s brother.²⁹

So despite all its eschatological theories, the expressive self survives postmodernism. Nielsen’s inner life is like a running commentary, a sometimes ironic counterpoint to the business of being, as he ultimately, through his poems, refuses to become a casualty to the recuperative force of either pop culture or the literary. While Cullen also says of his work that “‘you get the feeling I’m talking to myself”, positing internal narrative in the place of the transcendental’.³⁰ Indeed, the strongest appeal of both artists’ work may be in the portal of available access to their respective edgy and sceptical voices, as manifest in these two specific mediums. Their work stands out for me from within a period of practice typified by a highly self-reflexive stance, its zenith perhaps reached in fiction with the publication of Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* with its compulsive style of hyper-aware disclosure.³¹ Remaining ever vigilant that too much ‘cleverest boy’ rhetoric, from dumb arse to most brilliant, may itself become tiresome, Cullen and Nielsen both further negotiate and localise these tensions, as postcolonial white Australian males who are ‘knowingly’ still engaging very colonial and masculine imperatives (re-marking and recoding this as ideally a regional difference rather than sovereign identity). Both artists have somewhat repositioned the ‘avant-garde’, and at the risk of making generational pronouncements, shifted it into the more parochial and suburban. This provides a point of differentiation from the modern, and even the postmodern, as the postmodern has remained caught up in a critical endism which presumes no reception or interpretation is possible outside its own parameters. To what degree is it only really the end if we can’t express it anymore?

Section titles are taken from lines in *life during foreplay*.

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