

Cautionary tales

Susan Reid, January, 2011

This document is based on a catalogue essay that will accompany the Black Pram Project at KickArts, Cairns, Queensland, March 2011. Artists Barbara Dover, Robyn Baker and Anna Holan explore the domain of contemporary childhood as both a celebration of the beauty and mysteries of childhood lived and remembered and a cautionary tale of a world made confusing by adults. The artists' work encourages us to give wise consideration to the care of children while keeping vigilant against repression, loss of expression and censorship.

The use of children in art has been practiced since antiquity and the hallowed halls of Europe's galleries and places of worship are filled to the brim with vintage images of baby boys sitting naked on their mother's lap. Childhood itself is a fascinating concept, entirely contingent on economics, education, health, gender, culture and nationality. Childhood provides a potent realm for artists to explore and many do this by using images of children.

Meanwhile, community discussion about what constitutes childhood has become muddled due to growing collective anxiety about the safety of children and their exploitation by the media. Increasing reports of global paedophile and child slavery rings and the sea of imagery available on the internet, television and magazines have stoked the fear. Contributing to the confusion is the aggressive targeting of children by product manufacturers, and sexualised and/or violent content delivered by television programming, gaming and films all readily accessed online. It is right that art should find itself embroiled in these debates if it either intentionally or indirectly stimulates reflection or discussion. However, the pitch of the community response, reporting by news media and narrowness of debate threatens to now imperil the civil liberties of Australian artists with calls for tightening of censorship laws.

The community concern about the use of children in media does not appear to be about the general care, well-being or safety of children. If it were, millions of the world's children who are neglected, abused, carrying bombs, starving or being killed might warrant more needy attention by our affluent society. Rather the particular concerns seem to be that the media's manipulation of children's imagery contributes to their sexualisation and exploitation. Community fears that this imagery may be accessed and fetishised by paedophiles, putting children's safety at risk, prompts knee-jerk calls for broader censorship laws and tighter restrictions on content providers, broadcasters and publishers. Media academic, Catherine Lumby, has raised the related problem of the broader community and media fetishising innocence. Lumby questions the efficacy of censorship and, as an example, asks whether just because a school uniform may titillate a paedophile would banning school uniforms provide a real solution.ⁱ

The community is spooked. Photographs of children per se are discouraged, if not censored, for fear they will make their way to criminal paedophile labyrinths. Happy snaps on the beach are no longer the norm as both professional and recreational photographers are being barred from freely taking photographs in public places used by children. Max Dupain would have been appalled.

When the Rose Bay police removed Bill Henson's photographs depicting images of naked teenagers from his 2008 exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney, a shudder ran through the collective spirit of the art world and civil libertarians. In his documentation of the extraordinary events that ensued, journalist David Marr describes how the exhibition's signature piece, *Untitled #30*, which depicts a fourteen year old girl naked against a broody landscape, explores Henson's interest in the 'wilderness of adolescence'.ⁱⁱ It is a beautiful image that is equally disturbing and confusing. Though the image is powerful and commands attention, protective thoughts surface about who will view the image. Henson believes artists have 'a right to produce disquieting images ... 'I'm looking at something that my brain finds appalling but I'm finding very beautiful'^{iii iv}

High profile anti-paedophile campaigner, Hetty Johnson, said of Henson, 'He has a tendency to depict children naked and that is porn'^v. The then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd said of the images that they were 'revolting beyond description'.^{vi} As the debate cooled, the Department of Public Prosecutions declared that 'Mere nudity is not sufficient to create a sexual context'^{vii}. Perhaps the furore might have been less had *Untitled #30* not been selected as the exhibition's signature piece, used for the invitation that was posted to thousands of gallery patrons, and then uploaded to the Roslyn Oxley9 website. Once uploaded to the internet, however, *Untitled #30* could then be assessed objectively by the Classification Board and cleared: 'An image of nudity that is very mild in viewing impact and justified by context that is not sexualized to any degree. The content therefore warrants a G classification'.^{viii}

Following the Bill Henson incident, Art Monthly published its July 2008 issue with a front cover image of Polixeni Papapetrou's photograph, 'Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch before White Cliffs', featuring her six-year-old daughter Olympia, sitting naked on a canvas backdrop painted by her father. The politicians and media had another field day; the issue was withdrawn and later cleared for unrestricted sale by the Classification Board, with an M classification for mature audiences. It was noted that the magazine's images and text related to an ongoing community debate about the difference between art and pornography, what constitutes pedophilic images and the perceived sexualisation of children in the media and the arts.^{ix}

Subsequent to these incidents the Australia Council was pressured into publishing *Protocols for the use of children in art*.^x This is despite the Arts Law Centre of Australia's assertions that existing federal and state laws and regulations provided adequate protection.^{xi} Artists and arts organisations seeking Australia Council funding and whose work includes contemporary images of fully or partly naked children are required to consult relevant state laws. If uncertain about whether their works comply with these laws, they are advised to submit their work to the Classification Board for assessment prior to publication.^{xii}

Robert Nelson, art critic and partner of Papapetrou, reported on another recent incident involving the withdrawal of Del Kathryn Barton's photograph from a fundraising exhibition for the Sydney Children's Hospital because it breached visual protocols.^{xiii} The whole charity exhibition was subsequently cancelled. The photograph is of Barton's young son, Kell, and on his bare chest are googly eyes that appear to mock the viewer's own gaze. Nelson expresses the bewilderment that many of us feel at the Hospital's response. The censoring of this work confirms that we are indeed in very confusing times. The boy is not in danger, his mother is the photographer, he is not naked and this is art for a hospital's

fundraising exhibition.^{xiv} This is not porn. As Lumby also warns, the trouble begins when we start looking at every image through the lens of a paedophile.^{xv}

If we are disconcerted by an image is this sufficient reason not to publish it? Art is not a comfort blanket; it is there to provide us opportunity to reflect on our world and our responses to it. As these examples show, the liberty of Australians to read, hear and see what they wish is not a given, neither it seems is artistic freedom of expression.

The Senate inquiry Australia's Classification scheme will encompass a review of the application of the National Classification Scheme to works of art and the role of artistic merit in classification decisions.^{xvi} Unfortunately limited resources may prevent arts organisations and artists potentially affected by the Classification Scheme from responding with submissions prior to the March 2011 deadline. Certainly this will be the case with those based in Brisbane and other flood affected regions.

Susan Reid, January 2011
BA, Grad Dip Gallery Mgt, MA Design, LLB
Member Civil Liberties Australia

Susan Reid is an Arts Writer, Developer and Curator. She has recently left her executive role with an arts and cultural development agency in North Queensland to pursue professional creative interests and to complete further legal studies.

ⁱ Lumby, Catherine, *Art not Porn. Or vice versa? Story 1*. The Sunday Age Sunday May 25, 2008, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/art-not-porn/2008/05/24/1211183187056.html>

ⁱⁱ Marr, David, *The Henson Case*, The Text Publishing Company, 2008, pp 67-8

ⁱⁱⁱ Marr, David p 34-5

^{iv} It should be noted that Henson works with young models where they and their parents have consented to participate and following lengthy discussions with all involved.

^v Johnson cited in Marr, David p 46

^{vi} Age, 2 October 2008, p1. cited in Marr, David

^{vii} Marr, David p 123

^{viii} Marr, David p 116

^{ix} Marr, David p 141

^x *Protocols for working with children in art*, Australia Council, 2009,

http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about_us/strategies_2/children_in_art

^{xi} *Working with children protocols*, Arts Law Centre of Australia submission to Australia Council for the Arts about working with children protocols.<http://www.artslaw.com.au/advocacy/entry/working-with-children-protocols/>

^{xii} *Protocols for working with children in art*

^{xiii} Nelson, Robert , *Knee-jerk fear seems the rule in matters of children and art*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 6, 2011 <<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/kneejerk-fear-seems-the-rule-in-matters-of-children-and-art-20110105-19g9e.html?comments=78>>

^{xiv} Nelson, Robert

^{xv} Lumby, Catherine

^{xvi} **Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee**, Senate, Parliament of Australia, http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_ctte/classification_board/info.htm.