

Confronting the stereotype with defiance and affection

By Anne Loxley
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For *Errors of Judgement*, his debut exhibition at Sarah Cottier Gallery, Tony Schwensen has made a series of confronting videos and sculptures. His usual sculptural vocabulary of suburban building and backyard materials looks especially defiant in the elegant gallery, nonetheless the three-dimensional works do not achieve the complexity of the videos - *Riverrun Reverse Assistance*, *Rhinoceros Hide* and *This is where we live*.

Each is a compelling self-portrait - in the first the artist bounces back and forth in a bath; in the second he submerges his snorkelled head in a bucket; and in the third he repeatedly hits his face. The obsessive absurdist activities, the artist's testy gaze, and his vulnerable nakedness prompt vivid and painful questions about white Australian male cultures.

Schwensen can also be seen in *Boofheads and Scrubbers' Revenge*, the latest of the Penrith Regional Gallery's exhibitions to take on key "westie" issues. This time a group of Sydney artists has been asked to respond to the incendiary title. The result is an extremely vivid and often raw exhibition, displayed Aussie barbecue-style - women on one side and men on another.

The exhibition is a rabble of raucous conversations on Australian gender and class stereotypes. Coming from one of the heartlands of the vernacular, western Sydney, the exhibition morphs into critiques of contemporary Australian society.

As with any authentic bunch of scrubbers and boofheads, there are a couple of flashers. Eugenia Raskopoulos was inspired to make a bald statement of womanhood, *Portrait in Pinks* - close-up photographs of her lips, nipples and vagina. Robert Young's "found" photograph of a man "chucking a brown-eye" is the stylistic opposite of Raskopoulos's confronting theatricality, but here, too, we see an essential statement of identity.

Young's found-object assemblages take him into activities which could be read as tropes of scrubber and boofhead society. But his arrangements of found condoms, syringes and bongs are so highly aestheticised that it takes some time to recognise the tawdry components.

Another work made specifically for the exhibition, Regina Walter's *In* is a poetic meditation on society's attitude to women smokers. Using no sound and an evocative golden light, Walter shows a series of women inhaling on their cigarettes. The women appear variously vulnerable, oblivious, defiant and cheeky.

Michael Butler's axe, table and beer bottles decoupage with male nudes speak eloquently about male violence and homophobia, while Karen Coull's scrubbing brush and rubber gloves encrusted with rose-thorns remind us of the neurotic potential in domestic duties.

Justene Williams's *Baglady* photographs are less about vernacular and gender concerns than issues of over-consumption and paranoia. Made during a recent residency in Tokyo, these portraits of the artist wrapped in plastic are unnerving.

Brook Andrew is represented by two works which play with male and female identities in global media - *bungal-gara-gara*, combines the wiradjuri for "all over the place" with a blurred photograph of the car in which Princess Diana was killed.

In meticulously crafted paintings, Steve Smith shows us contemporary society in a dreamlike, surrealistic light. There is beauty and hope in Smith's world of tattooed and bearded men and well-endowed women wearing green lipstick.

Boofheads and Scrubbers' Revenge has many fine works but the standout has to be Williams's *Strippers*. Made in 1999, these large, luscious blurry photographs of a dancing stripper are contemporary renditions of the monumental femininity of such archetypes as the Venus of Willendorf.

Curator John Kirkman says the "boofhead" and "scrubber" labels are both derisive and affectionate - and there is a lot of celebration in *Boofheads and Scrubbers' Revenge*. But this loud and provocative exhibition sneakily transforms itself into a defiant celebration of western Sydney culture - and, given the postcodes of most of the exhibitors, western Sydney artists.

Tony Schwensen - Errors of Judgement: Sarah Cottier Gallery, 585 Elizabeth Street, Redfern. Until August 30. Inquiries: 96993633, <http://www.cottier.com.au>

Boofheads and Scrubbers' Revenge: Penrith Regional Gallery, 86 River Road, Emu Plains. Until September 28. Inquiries: 47351100, <http://www.penrithcity.nsw.gov.au/penrithgallery/>