

Longing and Belonging

The art of Ben Rak in his exhibition *Double Coding* explores the idea of an individual's conception and expression of their identity, which is manifest through an affiliation with two seemingly incongruous groups. This search for a personal understanding through a desire for connection or a sense of belonging that is then transformed into art is quite understandably a well-worn creative path. However before any assumptions are made that there will be no surprises here, we can be reassured by the maxim that no one path is exactly the same. New and intriguing insights can always be gleaned. The individual in this case is the artist himself, and while not clearly defined as such, the combination of eclectic motifs presented in *Double Coding* could be interpreted as a series of depictions of the self, resplendent with insight, wit and a form of yearning motivated by a longing to belong.

While an identity may be defined as a series of distinguishing characteristics that can be attributed to a human being, its formation occurs through one's identification with significant others, be they individuals or with groups encountered during one's biographical experiences. A person's identity can be aligned to a group when there is an aspiration towards their values and beliefs or conversely rejected from a group when one wishes to be dissociated from a series of unappealing characteristics. A person's life is constantly spent negotiating and managing these influences. In Rak's case his personal history presents a collection of disparate developmental experiences in association with some distinct cultural and religious attachments, all of which pervade his art.

Born in the USA to a family with a Jewish heritage, Rak spent his formative years in Israel only to travel to Australia as an adult where he has since settled to study and pursue his creative practice. While in a secular sense Rak identifies with Judaism as his cultural group, he is inevitably aligned with the perpetual expression of its traditional cultural conventions. Maybe as a consequence Rak has described a strong and persistent feeling of personal dislocation, which could be quite equally a demonstrable result of his multiple nationalities or the sense of isolation that is commonly faced through migration. Rak says, 'Assimilation poses a form of existential dilemma regarding group belonging: how to maintain one's belonging to one's original cultural group while learning and accepting the signifiers of the new.'

One constant that has been instrumental in establishing a secure sense of identity for Rak has been surfing, a pursuit that he took up in Israel almost as an act of non-conformism. The positive sense of self-esteem Rak gained with his identification with surfing and its associated rituals was enhanced by the fact that it was a past time shared by only a fraction of the population. Moving to Australia was a different story altogether, for instead of rejoicing in his new association with a larger more established identity group he felt a sense of palpable loss. Surfing in this country may have originally been seen as a way for a small section of society to reject the values of first world culture but it has grown to become a mainstream activity that has at times informed and affected popular fashion, music, literature, films and language. From the uniqueness of Rak's experience in Israel as a definite outsider to then encounter the vast corporate surf empire of Australia, where being a part of a not so intimate 'in crowd', meant that the feeling of belonging wasn't quite the same.

Dedication and perfectionism are qualities that surfers bring to what many have regarded as a commitment to a lifestyle as much as a sport. Rak brings this type of focus to his

creative practice, and his commitment and application is clearly evident in *Double Coding*. The scope and ambition found in the printed work is very impressive. Deliberate and entirely rational choices have been made in his use of a commercial printing process like screenprinting, especially onto large-scale aluminium matrixes like those that contain the images of billboard advertising. The layering of flat strong colour using photo-stencils, created to represent striking combinations of motifs using aloha patterns, surfers, barcodes and Judaic figures in traditional orthodox accoutrements also echo consumer conventions that present a version of authentic identity based on the performance of media clichés, stereotypes, and narratives. Rak considers authenticity to be under serious threat in today's global society where the culture of consumerism sees the blatant adoption of motifs and rituals outside of their traditional historical or cultural context.

Rak also suggests that there is a performative aspect inherent within his images that reference the physical poses or gestures evident in both the balancing dynamics of surfing and the tradition of Jewish celebratory dance. This is clearly demonstrated, along with his sense of humour, in the piece *In Culture After Culture* in which a digital video depiction of the artist surfing is projected onto a Jewish Yahrzeit or remembrance candle, synchronised with precision to a sound track of Klezmar music. In addressing the concept and depiction of identity Rak postulates, 'It is my contention that all people are involved in an elaborate performance of their identity. The performance fluctuates, moving in and out of the various facets of one's self, depending on the audience and the circumstances. This performance often causes one to strengthen stereotypical attitudes while at the same time hoping to be perceived as a unique individual.'

In portraying the signifiers of his identity, Ben Rak has produced an accomplished and complex body of work and one that could be seen as a significant contribution from an artist of the diaspora. It openly and honestly depicts and to a degree questions his social and cultural influences on the one hand and his passions on the other. But what does this all mean? The more I think about it and particularly in the context of the sense of longing to belong mentioned earlier I realise that Rak is in a quandary. Like all of us he seeks to feel part of a community with which he can identify but his very nature is imbued with a natural rebellious streak. Does someone who is more comfortable as a non-conformist ever really want to belong? The group that I identify with inhabits the margins, watches from a distance, questions the orthodoxy and challenges the choices made by society in creative and enthralling ways. I like the idea of the artist as outsider and it seems to me that Ben Rak has found an appropriate home.

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