

Surfing Through Art

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Ashleigh Wadman

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A surprisingly deep look at the sport and culture of surfing.



Image: <http://www.theartscentregc.com.au>

Home to soaring stretches of undulating coastline and some of the best surf breaks in the world, the Gold Coast has long been an inspirational location for surfers, photographers and artists alike.

Cutback: Surfing Through Art presented by the Gold Coast Art Gallery, collates the deep-thinking responses of seven contemporary Australian artists to surfing and the culture surrounding it.

The show features a cross section of multi-disciplinary artworks from Chris Bennie, Shaun Gladwell, Andrew Kidman, William Mackinnon, Nanda Ormond, Ben Rak and Joel Rea. Although each work is of a commanding scale and subject, their presence together in a relatively small room is not disruptive. The beauty of having such a clear curatorial vision: only seven artists and one theme, is that the display is clean and flowing. One can move organically from one work to the next and interact with the theme and pieces without distraction. This reviewer found the calm this imposed a welcome respite from other, decidedly busier exhibitions.

The intersection between surfing and identity is the focus of Ben Rak's suite of works composed of acrylic silkscreen on aluminium panels, *Performance Anxiety 5*. The immediacy and reproductive capabilities of printing suggests that they are easily reproducible - a comment replicated in his statement on identity performance. Rak plays with the idea that everyone wants to be unique...just like everybody else (my apologies to Margaret Mead for bastardising her portentous quote).

Our identities are formed by cultural and social influences and in his large scale works, Rak lays bare his own. A series of figures twist themselves into different poses, as if they are dancing. They are overlaid with images of Jewish leaders and floral patterns reminiscent of Hawaiian shirts. This amalgamation of heritage, performance and surfing illustrates Rak's personal display of action and reaction, mirroring our own dance with identity.

Similarly affecting were the works around the corner by John Rea. Rea's two hyper-real oil on canvas paintings darkly reveal the deadlier side to the glossy images of Gold Coast beaches that we know so well. In *Resolution*, a tsunami wave looks set to engulf the artist, who has painted himself into the scene as a standard office worker. This office worker could be any one of us and his very placement asks us a question: when death comes, are you who you want to be? He is misplaced and dressed for neither the beach nor his death, suggesting an untimely death. Indeed, all he can do to stop the inevitable is hold up a stack of papers to uselessly quell his foe.

Other works not to be missed in this exhibition are those by Shaun Gladwell, who is the focus of a special event held by the Gallery on March 8. Philosophically inclined, these works ask you to stop a moment and ponder the deeper meanings of the surf.

While I found this exhibition interesting and well conceived, I couldn't help but despair at the unequal representations it offered. Only two works out of the entire display feature women and the panel of artists is composed entirely of men. I understand that curators cannot operate in an ideal society, however I hope that the growing contribution of female surfers is recognised by artistic description (hopefully of increasingly female creation) at a faster rate.

Cutback: Surfing Through Art is an exhibition that is surprising in its depth. It delves beneath the surface of surf culture, addressing issues not usually tackled in that domain. As a result, the artists allow us a heightened engagement with the sport, culture and ocean itself. Whether you are a fan of surfing or not, you will surely find something that piques your interest.

***Cutback: Surfing Through Art* is on at the Gold Coast City Gallery until 22 March, 2015**

About the author

Freelance Curator and Researcher working in South East Queensland.

<http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/reviews/visual-arts/surfing-through-art-247305>