

## *Working the Angles: A Ben-efaction*

By Kent Wilson

The interface of an Australian posturing around work ethic and the derogatory implications of artists' lifestyles sets the tone for Ben Aitken's latest body of work. With a painter's eye to composition and a tradesperson's honouring of labour, Aitken weaves together a 'yeah-nah' attitude with a semi-fetishised material acuity. Object, image and text are put to play in his work, blurring divisions between high and low, art and design, the artist's hand and the found object. A desire to unlock complex notions of identity, and the authorship of clichéd colloquialism and anonymous digital communications, propels Aitken's assemblages of form and meaning.

From an outside view, looking through the liminal zone of construction fencing into the glitzy world of red carpet openings, press cameras and pouted selfies, it might look like Archibald Prize finalists and inner-city gallerists and tattooed wunderkind are swanning about with a beer in one hand and an open calendar of languid rumination. Double-click to like and accumulate a following of thousands. Put your arm around this month's magazine profile and photobomb a late night dinner event. But that's just cartoonish simplicity, with the elastic tenacity of occy straps.

Work ethic is a gravedigger in a hi-vis vest – relentless, menial and authentic in its single-minded obsession. Grunt work is binary code spamming millions of channels with the poetry of need. After all, a laboured joke about the humour of labour might only work when clamped to a framework of unitised absence. What holds it all together is the working of the work. There is no such thing as work|life balance if the field of separation is a permeable membrane of daily grind.

Let's pass a cheeky dart through the gaps. Share a moment, as it were, in a slippage of surface. Crack a wry smile over the effort to hold it together. Wax lyrical on the wilful intensity of the constant, constant grind.

Aitken is relentless. He works on his art, he works for his art, and at various times, if you catch him in the right light, he himself is being worked by art. He channels it, like a buzzing, pulsing network server running malware through the industry's LAN racks. Everything is compositional. Like all good painters it's line, form, balance, colour, mark, relationship. But it's software into hardware, coding into motherboards. It's hacktivism through incursion with a copy and paste neutrality that disguises an inert logic building long-form essays out of strings of digits.

You'll note the clues – workwear, tools, equipment. Drawn to him as much as by him, through a focus of labouring intent that magnetises language to object and tumbles forward with a momentum of inevitability. The ham-fisted dad-joke stylings in impact font belie an underlying subtlety of motion. There's a fluidity inside this momentary lock down of tenuous fabrication. There's something up ahead that's dictated by what's already been.

Aitken pursues a course of action that sees his efforts flex a form of gravity. A swirling vortex of conversational connection and compositional coordination. There is a reaching out, a willing of relations, that gives his work a sense of openness and honesty. It downplays itself in a way that allows it to circumvent its own dedication to rigour, but keeps the door open in invitation. And beyond all the myriad ways this artist deploys his skills in the service of art, this is his most generous gift.