

Addiction of Choice

Ben Aitkens takes no prisoners. Or, if he does, they are left scrabbling for a safe shoal of sanity. It's nigh impossible to know where Aitkins' surfeit of strangeness is spawned – there are hints of colourful nightmares, moments of saturated psychological protest, a diabolical Walt Disney on bad, bad lysergic acid. With a juxtaposition of anarchic painterly mayhem and still-birth animation there are hints of a schizophrenic civil war occurring on the canvas, one part writhing and squirming like fly-blown maggots caught in the desert sun, the other side receding into a cutesy cacophony of light-hearted Snow White fantasy which carries the whiff of desperate escape, try to think of something nice as the drill hits the nerve...

There are vermin here, performing obscene, sadomasochistic acts for the benefit of a masturbatory voyeur while Satan erupts in a scene straight from *Fantasia*. There are greenish growths that in colour remind one of the infected mucous of a Melbourne flu, so ghastly in their texture that a hint of nausea is the only response. What may be a self-portrait sees the artist peer wide-eyed, innocent in his impending insanity, anime figures in pursuit.

Presented with cacophonous largesse, Aitkins' canvases are clearly unafraid of tackling his nightmares on an imperial scale, inviting the viewer to be subsumed in discomfort. If one knows the post-punk cacophony of the band Swans, with their utter embrace of debasement, one has been here/hear. If one has awoken to the result of a late-night vodka binge, mouth chewing on the ghastly aftermath of Cuban cigars and noxious chemicals dripping down the back of the throat and strange discombobulated memories drifting just out of reach like misshapen hallucinations, one has been here.

That Aitkins has skill and talent is beyond dispute. He understands colour and scale like an artist three times his age, even having eschewed art school, thus making him something of an *enfant terrible*. But he watches other artists' practices with an eagle eye. One can see his nods to such painters as Francis Bacon and Gareth Sansom. One can see his admiration for such Australian 'bad boys' as Peter Walsh (1958-2009) and Adam Cullen (1965-2012) and pray that he does not follow their lead too closely.

But that, thankfully, seems unlikely. Aitken emanates enthusiasm and ambition. He has, over recent years, co-founded the Melbourne gallery Nicholas Projects. He was highly

commended in the 2014 Black Swan Prize for Portraiture and was selected for the competitive 2014 NotFair art fair. He has been a finalist in the Archibald Prize for his portraits of Jon Cattapan and Natasha Bieniek and he was the winner of the Tony Fini Foundation Prize at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. He has recently shown work in Haengchen Art Museum in China and has upcoming shows at the University of Arizona, and a major solo show in Bangkok's TARS, curated by Pierre Bechon. The artist also frequently collaborates with the more senior artist Jon Cattapan and their last exhibition was held at the Latrobe Arts Institute curated by Kent Wilson. He's hungry and he's ambitious.

But there is indeed angst in these works. They are too visceral to deny an element of sincerity in every brushstroke, a battle between good thoughts and bad thoughts, both accepting and attempting to deny some nefarious act(s) in his past. Drugs and alcohol may have salved some of these issues in his younger days, but there can be no doubt that his drug of choice, his readily accepted addiction, is the creation of art, a weapon of both statement and salvation.

– Dr. Ashley Crawford