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Reconciling the Local and the Global in the Art of Adam Cullen

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In 2000, Adam Cullen won the Archibald Prize for his 'Portrait of David Wenham'. The Archibald prize is possibly Australia's best-known art prize and a central part of Australia's 'conservative' art establishment. During the 1990s, however, Cullen's art work was more closely aligned with avant gardist contemporary art discourse. For a time in the early 1990s, some commentators saw Cullen's work as part of the avant-gardist 'grunge art' movement. This paper provides a detailed discussion of Cullen's 'grunge' work in the early 1990s, examining the relationship between his work and its broader cultural contexts. It registers the significant shift in Cullen's work throughout the 1990s, that plots a trajectory of an artist from obscurity to fame and from the margins to the mainstream. Importantly, this trajectory also plots a change in the scope of Cullen's artistic concerns, from the global to the local. To this end, this article examines a handful of key words in Cullen's oeuvre and discusses how they reflect this changing relationship between this Australian artist and the locality of Australia.

Keywords: *grunge; Archibald Prize; Australian art; abject art; abjection.*

In 2000, Australia's Archibald Prize for portrait painting went to Adam Cullen for his *Portrait of David Wenham*. At the time, Wenham was riding on the crest of his fame having just recently played 'Diver Dan', the popular love-interest character in the ABC's TV series, *Seachange*. Adam Cullen on the other hand was hardly a household name, and was generally spoken of in the media as 'the cousin of Max Cullen, the actor'. At a floor talk on the Sunday following the announcement, Cullen fielded questions like "what was your previous work like?" from a public wanting to know more about their new Archibald star. Some followers of the Archibald may have been introduced to Adam Cullen's work in 1997, when his portrait of the comedian Mikey Robbins made the Archibald finalists' exhibition, but few would have been familiar with Cullen's work in the earlier 1990s.

Seven years earlier, Cullen was fabricating art works from garbage in a damp studio at the back of an old unit block in Sydney. His sculptures combined materials like a dead cat, an empty beer keg, a broken stereo and old scientific specimens in formalin, stuck together with tape to make bizarre machines or "creatures".¹ This avant gardist practice, producing work that deals with everyday detritus, now seems entirely incongruous with his winning of this particularly conservative Prize. The Archibald is an Australian national institution, not only because it is hosted at the sandstone classicism of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, but also because portraiture, after all, is all about institution. For Australian audiences, portrait painting is infused with associations of gentility. To be painted in a portrait is to be socially exalted, effectively slotted into the aristocratic lineage of Reynolds or Gainsborough's sitters. This conservatism at a social level is doubled by portraiture's particular position in art discourse. At the core of this genre is the humanistic idea of capturing the 'essence' of the sitter through the autographic expression of the artist. While many contemporary artists have challenged these modernist ideas they remain the mainstay of the Archibald Prize. Cullen's rise to the top of this institution, and from obscurity to notoriety, parallels the profound metamorphosis of his work.

This is not to say that Cullen's rise is the result of a careerist abandoning of vanguardist art, a 'selling-out'. Rather, although Cullen's work has changed significantly over ten years, a common thread runs throughout. Cullen is a strategist, rather than a careerist. Comparing Cullen's work of the early to mid-1990s with the work leading up to his Archibald win, a narrative emerges that reveals a shifting from international concerns towards matters that are more contingent upon the local. Through his earlier work, Cullen negotiated

and adopted various contextual frameworks that originate primarily from outside Australia. Loosely around 1993, Cullen absorbed aesthetic and conceptual concerns that positioned his work variously within the American sub-cultural phenomenon of 'grunge' and an American filtering of French theory in 'abject art'. This is contrasted with Cullen's work after 1997, when one of his portraits (of the comedian Mikey Robbins) was first selected for the Archibald finalists' exhibition. Looking at these two contrasting moments, this essay plots the development of a nuanced articulation of regionality in the artist's work.

Cullen has produced art since the 1980s, but only arose with any degree of prominence in the early 1990s. In early 1993, he was part of a generation of Australian artists that included Hany Armanious, Mikala Dwyer, Nikki Savvas, Troy Skewes and Justene Williams, amongst others, producing art that shared a similar aesthetic sensibility, created from the "aura-rich residue"² of the detritus of urban life. These artists used materials that might be usually discarded as garbage, objects like broken furniture, plastic bags, old 'blu-tak', old cosmetics, old clothes and old records. Cullen's artworks amalgamated these kinds of materials into small sculptural works. Compared with the grandiose 'museum scale' art produced in the 1980s by artists like David Salle or Robert Longo, these works were pointedly pathetic. For example, Cullen's *The Otherness When It Comes*, 1993 (Figure 1), is constructed from a stuffed dead cat, masking tape, toothpaste and ethafoam. The dead cat reclines on the gallery floor, body and legs bound with masking tape and with a pair of pointy antennae taped to its head. The work is 'low tech' and deliberately rough-finished, so that the facture of its construction is obvious. The work is self-consciously *not* slick. Of course, these aesthetic choices also manifest a particular attitude that was emerging in both art and popular culture at that time, an *apathetic* attitude or, to be more accurate, an attitude that refuses to waste energy in engaging in the histrionics of the contemporary art of the late 1980s.

Art with a similar aesthetic and attitude had emerged in the United States in the very first years of the 1990s. For example, Mike Kelley's work at that time uses an aesthetic that is "pathetic and often home-crafted."³ *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) For an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry*, 1991, reproduces scratchy and deteriorated photocopies of poorly drawn office jokes. The text for one proposed conference room reads: "If assholes could fly - this place would be an airport!" The work uses the kind of photocopied office jokes that are found in the backrooms of big business, the office kitchens, secretarial cubicles and

mailrooms. These jokes represent the amateur and familiar hidden underbelly of hard-nosed corporate life, excluded from the homogeneous order of the corporate boardroom. Likewise, Cary S. Leibowitz (a.k.a. Candyass) created *Candyass Kitchen* in 1990 from six old porcelain plates, upon which she scrawled handwritten text with a permanent marker. The materials, porcelain plates and marker, are everyday objects usually found in a domestic scenario. The construction of the work has the same 'low tech' expedient homemade aesthetic as Cullen's *The Otherness When It Comes*. There's none of the seamless finish of the text-based art of the 1980s of Barbara Kruger or Jenny Holzer. Rather, the text is messy and handwritten, with mistakes simply scribbled-out. It shares the same pathetic aesthetic and attitude as Cullen's dead cat: one dish begins with the words "A whiney asshole... I hate myself". Leibowitz clarifies the purpose of this aesthetic when she imagines what it would be like to see an image in *Vogue* magazine with the caption reading "when this photo was taken, Karl Lagerfeld hadn't bathed for three weeks".⁴ For the American writer and critic, Rhonda Lieberman, the aesthetic of Leibowitz's work was part of a turning cultural tide, against the opulent and affluent fashion of the late 1980s. She comments:

the zeitgeist is grungy in fashion as well as in the art world, where the hardass antimastery of the '80s has been challenged, or rather has withered into the kinder, gentler, 'pathetic aesthetic' of the '90s.⁵

This connection with the emerging subcultural fashion of grunge and the 'pathetic aesthetic' in art was also drawn by the Australian art journal, *Art + Text*, in an article by Jeff Gibson, 'Avant Grunge'.⁶

In his article Gibson identifies Cullen along with Armanious, Dwyer, Savvas, Skewes and Williams as Australia's 'grunge artists'.⁷ He notes that their work shared an aesthetic of dereliction and urban decay, and argues that the term 'grunge' is an appropriate label for this work, since "the illegitimate etymology of grunge leads us through grime, sludge, fungus, and scum."⁸ Importantly, Gibson's article speaks of grunge as an artistic movement, with Cullen as one of its main protagonists. Although Gibson could be accused of riding roughshod over significant differences between the works of these artists, his collectivising of these artists as 'grunge' artists is understandable. After all, in early 1993, various permutations of these 'grunge' artists appeared in group exhibitions: "Adams",⁹ "Shirthead",¹⁰ "Rad Scunge",¹¹ "Monster Field"¹² and "Scrounge Time".¹³ Taken together,

these exhibitions cohered in the minds of audiences, critics and commentators, and Gibson's label for these artists stuck.¹⁴ The greatest point of coherence for this group was perhaps between March 1993, when Dale Frank curated the "Rad Scunge" exhibition, and May 1993, with the "sequel"¹⁵ exhibition, "Shirthead."

Arguing the case for the 'grunge art' label, Gibson notes that these artists employ the ragged aesthetics of grunge fashion and music in the gallery space, and he follows its lineage back through the roots of this fashion: "part recession fashion, part obsessive recycling compulsion, grunge is also the (ideo)logical antidote to the crispy clean cutesiness of late-eighties yuppiedom."¹⁶ This is certainly accurate. At its point of genesis, generally agreed to be Seattle, Grunge was an American reaction to an American condition. The fashion of the late 1980s was dominated by the executive-grey 'slick' of the New York stockbroker. Following the 1987 stock market crash, grunge decentred fashion from the shiny glass skyscrapers of the city-centre and reclaimed it for suburbia, taking fashion into parents' mothballed wardrobes and second-hand recycled clothes shops. This sub-cultural aesthetic was rough and ready-worn, with clothes in faded and washed-out colours. This unfinished and unpolished aesthetic ran through the sound of grunge music. Grunge bands, such as Mudhoney, Nirvana, Pearl Jam and Hole, began to emerge in the early 1990s, producing a raw, noise driven, expedient and simplified sound. This aesthetic also combined a certain attitude, hence the "loser aesthetic",¹⁷ glorifying apathy, banality and boredom. Symbolically, the swagger of that 1980s dynamic go-getter, the New York stockbroker, was transformed at that time into the dark and sadistic serial killer of Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho*.

Unlike the idea of *arte povera*, which seeks to transform garbage into art, the low-tech aesthetic of grunge did not attempt to transubstantiate its impoverished materials with the aura of art. Instead, works like Cullen's *The Otherness When It Comes*, with its dead cat or, likewise, Armanious's "used and abused materials, 'crippled' armchairs, discarded appliances, packaging, plastic utensils and so on"¹⁸, sought to retain the uselessness of these materials, and this was a matter of positioning grunge. Grunge art had no economic imperative. As Catharine Lumby notes in 1993:

Like many artists of his generation ... Cullen has no expectation of making money from his practice. "It's a non-issue," he says. "Totally irrelevant." It's an attitude which has spawned an entirely fresh approach to art and exhibition practice.¹⁹

So grunge art did not attempt to recuperate garbage into any system of economic exchange and return it to the commodity culture that cast it out. This resistance to commodification through strategic downward mobility stands in contrast to the art produced and sold during the art market boom of the affluent 1980s.

This forms part of a resistant if not obstinate strand that characterises Cullen's early work. While Cullen's materials refused to be commodified as art, the titles of this early work resisted the tendency in much 1980s art towards intellectual authority backed by complex theoretical structures. Take for example the title of Cullen's *Residual paroxysm of unspoken and extended closures interrogated by a malady of necrogenic subterfuge with a nice exit*, 1993. For a time in the 1980s, cultural theory practically set the agenda for art practitioners and provided the dominant frameworks for critical understandings of art. In Australia in 1981, the launch of the journal *Art & Text* effectively drew a stronger connection between theoretical discourse and practice.²⁰ Interest in the new cultural theory was so feverish by the time of the *Futur*Fall* conference at The University of Sydney in 1984 that Jean Baudrillard, French theorist and darling of postmodernist art, was actually mobbed by fans when he turned up to give his paper.²¹ By the late 1980s in Australia, the new theory was institutionalised to the extent that it became a central part of the lecturing programmes of most Australian art schools. Australian art theory essays favoured unwieldy titles like "On Some Alternatives to the Code in the Age of Hyperreality; the Hermit and the City Dweller",²² and as John Roberts likewise notes in Britain, exhibition titles were "serious, vaguely poetic, [and] intellectually authoritative."²³ The titles of Cullen's works in the early 1990s parodied the verbosity of much 1980s cultural theory and its pretentious professionalism, intellectual propriety and academic rigour.

Another work by Cullen, *Cosmological Satellite Mother Denied Depressed Speech*, 1993 (Figure 2), is a beer keg with a glass encased umbilical chord attached to its side. In this case, Cullen seems to equate theoretical prolixity (that of psychoanalysis in this case) with that of a babbling drunk, or in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, "'drunk' with hyperbole".²⁴ To paraphrase Benjamin D'Israeli, Cullen's works were *inebriated on the exuberance of their own verbosity*. Cullen's "drunken logic"²⁵ aimed to undermine the authority of art theory by foreclosing avenues through which the work may be theoretically engaged. By attempting to put his work 'outside' of the reach of theory, Cullen adopted a strategic 'dumbness'. This 'dumbness' went beyond the

titles, into the works themselves. Cullen's *Residual paroxysm of unspoken and extended closures interrogated by a malady of necrogenic subterfuge with a nice exit*, 1993, assembled from an old bath, medical tubing, babies' nappies and a broken TV set, is described by Edward Colless as one of Cullen's "machines."²⁶ Cullen's machines are 'dumb' in the sense of being ungrammatical, resisting flow and function. Likewise, his "creatures",²⁷ like the cat in *The Otherness When It Comes*, are dead. The cat sits up, but does nothing. Its eyes will not see, it will not hear and it will not move.

Like much art emerging in the early 1990s, this was a strategy in Cullen's work that attempted to take art "out of the domain of academic reference onto the 'streets'".²⁸ As the British theorist, John Roberts, notes:

Playing dumb, shouting 'ARSE' and taking your knickers down has become an attractive move in the face of the institutionalisation of critical theory in art in the 80s.²⁹

This 'playing dumb' was a strategy adopted by the loose 'grunge' collective with which Cullen was associated, particularly in the titles of their group exhibitions: "Shirthead", "Rad Scunge" and "Scrounge Time". Whereas the titles of exhibitions in the 1980s tended towards a lofty intellectuality, many exhibitions of the early-1990s aimed at the base. As Roberts notes:

To organise a show today [in the 1990s] entitled 'Identity, Representation and the Dialogic' would seem as smart and vital a move as Tachisms' existentialist gibberings did to many Seventies conceptualists.³⁰

The grunge exhibition titles were *anti-exhibition* titles that mock "the assiduousness of theory led-curatorship."³¹ However, none of this is to say that the 'dumbness' of Cullen's early work was simply an ignorant philistinism. Rather, it is of the kind that Roberts describes:

in the hands of some, the dumb-routines, behaving badly and cheesiness have a specific aim: to unsettle the bureaucratic smoothness of critical postmodernism.³²

So, the anti-theory inclination of Cullen's early works should not be misunderstood as simple anti-intellectualism. Its purpose was to act dumb as "a matter of ethical positioning",³³ specifically to undermine,

through parody, the discursive hegemony of theory that had emerged in contemporary art in the 1980s. As Eve Sullivan argues, grunge art was "an antidote to the rigid theorisation" of art.³⁴

To a certain extent, Cullen's grunge art can be regarded as a rhetorical appropriation of the American subculture of grunge in early 1993. I say 'rhetorical' because grunge provided a stylistic vocabulary infused with the signs of sub-cultural resistance that goes back to punk.³⁵ The grunge aesthetic and attitude was adopted for the expedient and short-term purposes of defining a generational space characteristically different from the one preceding. Cullen drew upon grunge's associations with American sub-cultural resistance and so signified a decisive break with the concerns of the preceding art. However, in this distanced and rhetorical 'citation' of grunge subculture, Cullen allowed himself leeway to cut associations with this aesthetic once it moved from subculture to the mainstream, which happened in mid-1993. Christopher Chapman noted in his paper at the Sculpture Triennial Forum in Melbourne, September 1993:

Here in Australia, we really know the 'grunge' word has credibility when it appears on the cover of *New Idea* to describe Elle MacPherson in a cardigan, or in the pages of a K-Mart catalogue where youths wearing bandannas and stick-on tattoos pose beneath the headline 'Get Into Grunge'.³⁶

By the second half of 1993 fashion assimilated grunge, from *haute couture* to K-Mart. Consequently, the subcultural associations of the label 'grunge' were quickly exhausted and turned into high fashion (somewhat ironically, given Liebowitz's earlier comment about Karl Lagerfeld). The label of 'grunge art', which was never particularly popular, became a highly contentious issue. Advocates for the artists argued against the use of the label, complaining that it was "not entirely appropriate",³⁷ and the 'grunge' artists themselves complained that the label trivialised their work.³⁸ Judy Annear notes in her review of Australian art in 1993 that the debates surrounding the label of 'grunge' were "ferocious".³⁹

In fact, by Annear's end-of-1993 review, the debates around grunge art had petered-out. A number of artists whose work had been labelled grunge, including Cullen, began to reposition their work. The popularising of the grunge aesthetic into high-street fashion made its abandonment all the more urgent. The 'dumbness' of Cullen's work, its resistance to being easily read, meant that the grunge associations could be abandoned simply by giving a voice to his work, which would

provide it an alternative contextual framework. Of course, this entailed relinquishing the 'ethical positioning' of this particular strategy of 'playing dumb' (in Robert's terms). However, this particular positioning was no longer so relevant, since Cullen and other 'grunge artists' had certainly succeeded in debunking some degree of the authority of the preceding generation of theory-informed artists, and were now finding places in commercial galleries and receiving critical attention on their own terms. So, within months of Jeff Gibson's contentious christening of 'grunge art', its artists were bailing out. As Chris Chapman registers in his paper of September 1993:

The term [grunge] flirted with art but never really stuck. I find it interesting how the art-form I'm referring to has appeared to pose so many problems in terms of interpretation. In a very short space of time the work has been approached from the angle of popular street culture (or grunge), comedy and irony, and now art history as filtered in through French philosophy.⁴⁰

Ironically, given grunge's 'ethical positioning' against the theory-heavy art of the late 1980s, Cullen's work began to be interpreted in terms of French philosophy or, to be more accurate, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as expounded in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.⁴¹

One article that marks Cullen's shift, as well as his burgeoning critical profile, is a feature in the very first issue of the new international art magazine, *World Art* (now defunct), in November 1993. In the article by Catharine Lumby, Cullen is at pains to point out that his most recent work, which was about to be included in the *Australian Perspectives 1993* exhibition at the end of the year, has "nothing to do with jumping on the grunge bandwagon."⁴² Instead, Cullen claims that it is influenced by Elizabeth Grosz's "work on abjection and Kristeva".⁴³ In a similarly pointed way, Edward Colless's catalogue essay for Cullen in *Perspecta '93* states that "Adam Cullen names his sculptural idiom 'para hi-tech' rather than 'grunge'." In *Perspecta '93's Curator's Introduction*, Victoria Lynn also discusses the work of Cullen (as well as Mikala Dywer) as part of the "fixation in recent years on the 'abject'."⁴⁴ In actuality, Lynn is cooking the books, since the adoption of abjection into Australian art was much more recent and expedient than "recent years" implies. As Felicity Fenner notes: "[w]hen grunge was declared dead just months after its incarnation, the term 'abjection' was adopted to describe the grungey-looking art that continued to flourish."⁴⁵

Fenner talks about this shift from grunge to abjection as “unabashed absorption of America.”⁴⁶ Although Kristeva is a *French* theorist, Fenner is referring here more to the of debates about ‘abject art’ which had been brewing in the United States and reached an apex in mid-1993 with the Whitney Museum of American Art’s exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*.⁴⁷ Since the English language translation of *Powers of Horror* was published in 1982, Kristeva’s theory of abjection had steadily gained interest in studies of visual culture, helped by essays such as Barbara Creed’s *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection* in 1986.⁴⁸ However, it moved to the centre of art discourse after the events of the ‘Culture Wars’ in the US in 1989, when Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, a photographic image of a crucifix immersed in urine, ignited the “firestorms over funding and censorship.”⁴⁹ Conservative US Senators had reacted violently to the idea that government money (albeit a 360,000th of one cent for every American)⁵⁰ had been used to fund “this so-called piece of art”, this “deplorable, despicable, display of vulgarity.”⁵¹ The furore broke out into a general attack on art in America, and took the US artworld by surprise. In the aftermath, the analysis of Serrano’s work focused on the political effects of his use of urine in the work. Serrano’s work was readily subsumed into the discourses around abjection that were hovering on the fringes of art theory at that point.

The blustering and spluttering rage of American conservatives seemed to be the vocalisation of a deep-seated and unspeakable internal disturbance caused by *Piss Christ*, a verbalised gagging at the sight of at this *display of vulgarity*. Kristeva’s theory of abjection was apt to explaining this reaction. According to her theory, abjection is the condition in which we are repulsed by bodily matter, like piss, shit, sweat, blood, semen and so on. These are materials that were once part of our bodies but are now outside our boundaries, neither subject nor object, but *abject*. The abject disrupts subjectivity, because it does not fall into the neat binary of subject or object. Bourgeois subjectivity, so the theory goes, is destabilised and called into question. Applied in analyses of the role of *Piss Christ* in the Culture Wars “the concept of ‘abjection,’” in the words of Simon Taylor, “entered the critical syntax of contemporary art.”⁵² The disturbance to the psyche, which abject matter was seen to cause, accordingly provoked the revulsion to the piss in *Piss Christ*. Therefore, the possibility that *Piss Christ* could affect so profoundly at such a level, through the use of abjection, opened up potential for an ‘abject art’, a type of art that, through the use or representation of abject matter, could be psychologically *affective*

and politically *effective*. As Hal Foster accurately notes, “abject art sought to represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation”.⁵³

So, following the Culture Wars in the US, ‘abject art’ emerged as a recognisable form of art. As Frazer Ward observed, “abject art constitutes a trend, if not a movement.”⁵⁴ However, it was more thoroughly solidified as an art movement in mid-1993 when the Whitney presented its *Abject Art* exhibition. Of course, the exhibition included Serrano’s *Piss Christ* as the figurehead of a generational movement that includes Robert Mapplethorpe’s ‘bullwhip’ picture (*Self-portrait*, 1978) and works by Kiki Smith, John Miller, David Wojnarowicz, Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley, David Hammons and Robert Gober. The first page of the *Introduction* to the exhibition’s catalogue issues the disclaimer:

‘abject art’...does not connote an art movement so much as it describes a body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials.

But despite this self-conscious denial, both the exhibition and its catalogue comprehensively formulate abject art as a contemporary generational movement, urgently reacting to the conservative politics that led to the Culture Wars.⁵⁶ The *Abject Art* catalogue is extensive and stands on its own as theoretical treatise. With its numerous authoritative essays, it is effectively a *manifesto of abject art*.

So, when the Whitney’s exhibition and catalogue presented a fully-fledged consolidated abject art movement, it transmitted the idea of abject art throughout English-speaking world. While the theoretical structures which underlie abject art are French in origin, its growing international popularity in late-1993 had more to do with the particular interpretation of *Kristevan* ideas in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s *Abject Art*. Kristeva’s original text on abjection became canonical, but most of its evangelists adapted it more colloquially. In the United Kingdom, abject art manifested itself in Ron Mueck’s grotesque and life-like latex bodies and, perhaps to a lesser extent, in much of the work of Damien Hirst and Marc Quinn. Certainly the work of Jake and Dinos Chapman, their life-sized mannequins of conjoined bodies with displaced orifices, fits into its definition. In Australia, Patricia Piccinini’s *Lifeform with Unevolved Mutant Properties (LUMP)* works, disturbingly hyperreal computer-rendered images of a grotesque anencephalic toy-like monster, fell into the emerging abject art genre.

Although Cullen and other writers contextualised his work at *Perspecta '93* (the elaborately titled *Residual Paroxysm of unspoken and extended closures interrogated by a malady of necrogenic subterfuge with a nice exit*) in terms of abjection, it does not quite fit this particular theoretical context. The work itself has none of the viscous and visceral materiality of other work that fell under the rubric of abject art. Compare, for example Cullen's *Residual Paroxysm*, with Robert Gober's *Leg with Candle*, 1991, which was used to illustrate the cover of the Whitney's *Abject Art* catalogue.⁵⁷ Gober's work is a hyper-realistic life-sized sculpture of a dismembered male leg, rendered in wax, minutely detailed with individual human hairs, dressed in its single trouser leg, sock and shoe. Through the knee of the trousers a candle protrudes, its fatty wax looking very much like the 'human' fat of the leg. Cullen's *Residual Paroxysm*, uses materials that refer to the fluids of the body and its hygiene, such as nappies, plastic tubing and a bath, but corporeality is only obliquely present in these references. In fact, when Cullen's work shifted away from its contextualisation in grunge it had also shifted away from more abject matter. Ironically, Cullen's 'abject' work was less abject than his grunge work. Earlier works like *The Otherness When It Comes* and *Cosmological Satellite Mother Denied Depressed Speech* included actual necrotic matter, such as the dead cat and an umbilical cord (respectively). *Residual Paroxysm*, although contextualised by abjection, was much more "desiccated."⁵⁸ This stripping-back of Cullen's visual vocabulary continued when Cullen was adopted into the stable of Yuill/Crowley, a commercial gallery in Sydney, in 1994. His first solo exhibition at the gallery, *Soft Material Facts*, demonstrates this. In a large gallery space, Cullen assembled a small collection of objects on the floor and walls of one corner. Four rectangles of wood and plastic were laid out in an orderly fashion on the floor, with clay forms and office pens arranged on them. Taped to the walls were educational aids for junior maths students, a stained file divider and ink drawings on plastic. Gone were the 'creatures' and 'machines'.

'Grunge' and 'abject art' provide contexts in which to understand Cullen's work in the early-1990s, but neither is entirely unproblematic. When the label of grunge was put on his work, Cullen rejected it and, conversely, when Cullen and other writers attempt to sway readings of his work towards ideas about 'abject art' the work itself could not make the stretch adequately. Consequently, Cullen's early work always seems to sit uncomfortably within its purported contexts. In the cases of both 'grunge' and 'abject art', American structures were brought to bear on Cullen's work. This is not to say that this Americanisation is

necessarily problematic, America-centred globalised culture is naturalised in Australia, as it is in many 'provinces'. However, throughout Cullen's practice, he seems to be concerned with articulating the *dagginess* of the local (and I use this colloquialism advisedly). In his earlier work, there is a cultural cringe that underwrites his visual vocabulary. It is as though Cullen wants to talk colloquially, but adopts more international forms out of the need to be more broadly understood and accepted. In this sense at least, Cullen's early work fails, because these two functions are never satisfactorily reconciled.

Cullen's work in the late-1990s achieves greater success in this articulation of the local. A prime example of this is Cullen's *Hotel Motel* exhibition at Yuill/Crowley Gallery in Sydney, in mid-1999. The title work of the exhibition is a panel bordered with a rough line and with the words 'HOTEL MOTEL' sprayed in white onto a dark rectangle. The text still has that 'Candyass' scraw about it, but the words have resonance with the local. Hotel motels are generic, like airports they're pretty much the same the world over. But 'HOTEL MOTEL' also makes reference to a song by AC/DC, a band which originated in Australia and is still popular. The roughness of the text also signifies the local, this is not a sign for international visitors. Instead it has connotations of a dosshouse, a place for deadbeats. This is further reinforced with Cullen's *Gaol Sex*, 1999 (Figure 3) a painting of a shirtless male figure with a handlebar moustache and pair of sunglasses rendered in thick uneven lines. The brushstrokes are running daubs and the body of the figure is disproportionate, a short neck, thick torso and its folded arms disappear into each other. It looks like graffiti, although not the funky 'subway' kind, but the 'daggy' kind found in public toilets. In this respect, this aesthetic combines with the brutish homoeroticism of the title. The figure resembles Mark "Chopper" Read, the Australian former convicted hit man who has achieved fame through his books about crime and prison life (in 2002, Reed and Cullen actually collaborated on a child's book, *Hookey the Cripple: The Grim Tale of a Hunchback Who Triumphs*, with Read supplying the text and Cullen the images).⁵⁹

Bruce James, reviewing *Hotel Motel*, describes Cullen as a "pidgin artist" and interprets his work in terms of a kind of primitivist expressionism.⁶⁰ Cullen can certainly be considered a 'pidgin artist' to the extent that the idiom of his later work succeeds more readily in reconciling the local and the global. James's reading of Cullen's work as a kind of primitive "grunt,"⁶¹ however, misconstrues the local in his work as simply unsophisticated. James performs a microcosmic

repetition of the Eurocentrism of twentieth-century modernist primitivism or nineteenth-century orientalism, and sees the nominally 'regional' as merely backward. More accurately, the roughness of Cullen's later work is about speaking in language that is local and familiar. It is possibly for this reason that a number of Cullen's portraits have been finalists for the Archibald Prize and why his *Portrait of David Wenham* won in 2000 (Figure 4). Cullen's 'daggy' reconciliation of local and global is most present in his winning painting. *Portrait of David Wenham* is not a naturalistic painting, in fact it actually looks a little like caricature of Wenham. Cullen's coarse brushwork and his rendering of Wenham's thin cheeks and orange beard draws heavily upon the aesthetic of Van Gogh's self-portraits. This reference to Van Gogh is too obvious to be coincidental. The citation, however, is not a straightforward reference to Van Gogh. Rather, it articulates a more emphatically-localized artistic lineage, particularly in the context of the Archibald. Cullen's *Portrait of David Wenham* resonates with the work from the 1970s of another Australian artist, Brett Whiteley. Whiteley's signature style strongly referenced Van Gogh's work, subtly and, sometimes, overtly. Whiteley is, for all intents and purposes, Australia's surrogate Van Gogh; its very own home-grown archetypal suffering artist-hero, living-on-the-edge and, more recently, dying young. Whiteley himself won the Archibald Prize in 1976 and 1978. Cullen's winning *Portrait of David Wenham* undoubtedly resonates with Whiteley's colloquial re-articulation of Van Gogh.

Of course, the Archibald Prize, with its humanist concerns with portraiture and that quaint seventeenth-century notion of *je ne sais quoi*, along with Brett Whiteley's modernist artist-hero persona, are worlds away from works like Cullen's *The Otherness When It Comes* from 1993. It is fair to say that in the Australian art world, the Archibald falls into the 'old school' camp, rather than the postmodernist inclined 'contemporary'⁶² camp to which Cullen's earlier work belongs. I have compared Cullen's early with his more recent work in terms of a visible shift, but it is the critical contexts into which these works are variously placed that has shifted most significantly over the last ten years. This shift traces a trajectory from international to more local concerns. In this process, Cullen's favoured aesthetics remain *grungey*, but his artistic vocabulary has become more specifically-Australian in inflection. In this respect, the articulation of the contingencies of place in Cullen's work has become greatly refined as his aesthetic 'accent' has become stronger.

NOTES

1. Colless, Edward, 'Adam Cullen', *Australian Perspectives 1993*, (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993), p. 24. Catalogue essay of *Australian Perspectives 1993*, curated by Victoria Lynn, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, November 1993.
2. Lieberman, Rhonda, 'Springtime for Grunge', *Artforum*, April (1993), p. 8.
3. Powell, Corey S., 'Mike Kelley', *World Art*, Vol 1(1) March (1994), p. 103.
4. Lieberman, p. 8.
5. *ibid.*, p. 9.
6. Gibson, Jeff, 'Avant-Grunge', *Art + Text*, 45, April (1993), pp. 23-25.
7. *ibid.*, p. 23.
8. *ibid.*
9. 'Adams' curated by Hany Armanious, at Kunst Gallery in Sydney, March 21-April 17, 1993.
10. 'Shirthead', at Mori Gallery in Sydney, May 7-21, 1993.
11. 'Rad Scunge' curated by Dale Frank, at the Karyn Lovegrove Gallery in Melbourne, March 3-26, 1993.
12. 'Monster Field' curated by ADS Donaldson, at The Ivan Dougherty Gallery in Sydney, May 6-29, 1993.
13. 'Scrounge Time' curated by Edward Colless and David McDowell, at Plimsol Gallery, Centre for the Arts, Hobart, 1993.
14. For example, the following articles use the term 'grunge' in relation to these artists: Chapman, Chris, 'The Invisibility of Sculpture', paper presented to 1993 *Sculpture Triennial*, held in Melbourne, September 12th, 1993; Fenner, Felicity, 'A genre beyond grunge', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3/6/94 p. 27; Forsyth, Graham, 'Monster Field', in *Art + Text*, 46, September (1993), p. 74; Forsyth, Graham, 'Standard Deviation', in *Art + Text*, 47, January (1994), p. 12-14; 13.
15. Rankin-Reid, Jane, 'Shirthead', *Art + Text*, 46, September (1993), p. 78.
16. Gibson, p. 23.
17. Lieberman, Rhonda, 'The Loser Thing', *Artforum*, September (1992), p. 79.
18. Gibson, Jeff, 'Hany Armanious', *Art + Text*, 43, September (1992), p. 70.
19. Lumby, Catharine, 'Hanging around at home', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8/11/93, p. 20.
20. There are many examples of *Art & Text's* interest in theories relating to postmodernity from the 1981 to 1985: Annear, Judy, 'Review of Michel Foucault's 'The History of Sexuality Part 1'', *Art & Text*, 4, Summer (1981), p. 55-61; Baudrillard, Jean, 'The Precession of the Simulacrum', *Art & Text*, 11, Spring (1983), p. 3-47, (first translated into English by the current editor of *Art + Text*, Paul Foss, along with Paul Patton); Arthur, K., 'Bakhtin, Kristeva and Carnival', *Art & Text*, 11, Spring (1983), p. 48-53; Feyerabend, Paul, 'Science as Art', *Art & Text*, 12 & 13, Autumn (1984), p. 16-46; Foucault, Michel, 'The Regard for Truth', *Art & Text*, 16, Summer (1984/85), p. 20-31; Morris, M., 'Postmodernity and Lyotard's Sublime', *Art & Text*, 16, Summer (1984/85), p.44-67; Lyotard, J-F., 'Les Immatériaux', *Art & Text*, 17, Spring (1985), p. 47-57.
21. *Futur*Fall* was a conference organised by Alan Cholodenko, Ted Colless, Elisabeth Grosz and Terry Threadgold, held at the University of Sydney, Australia, July 26-29, 1984.
22. Young, John and Blake, Terry, 'On Some Alternatives to the Code in the Age of Hyperreality; the Hermit and the City Dweller', *Art & Text*, 2, Winter (1981), p. 4.
23. Roberts, John, 'Mad For It! Philistinism, the Everyday and the New British Art' *Third Text*, 35, Summer (1996), p. 30.
24. Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky, (Minneapolis: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968), p. 307.
25. Gibson, 'Avant-Grunge', p. 25.
26. Colless, p. 24.
27. *ibid.*

28. Roberts, John, 'Mad For It! Philistinism, the Everyday and the New British Art' *Third Text*, 35, Summer 1996, p. 30.
29. *ibid.*, p. 29.
30. *ibid.*
31. *ibid.*
32. *ibid.*, p. 35.
33. *ibid.*, p. 34-35. Emphasis added.
34. Sullivan, Eve, 'The artist as curator', *Art Monthly Australia*, 61, July (1993), p. 33.
35. Gibson, 'Avant-Grunge', p. 23.
36. Chapman, Chris, 'The Invisibility of Sculpture', paper presented to *1993 Sculpture Triennial*, held in Melbourne, September 12th, 1993.
37. Sullivan, Eve, 'The artist as curator', *Art Monthly Australia*, 61, July (1993), pp. 32-34.
38. Hutak, Michael, 'Body of decor in overdrive', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17/6/94, p. 28.
39. Annear, Judy, 'Money, Movements and Museums', *Art and Australia*, 31, No.3, Autumn (1994), p. 330.
40. Chapman, *ibid.*
41. Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
42. Lumby, Catharine, 'The Readymade Saboteur', *World Art*, 1, November (1993), p. 34.
43. *ibid.*, p. 37.
44. Lynn, Victoria, 'Curator's Introduction', *Australian Perspectives 1993*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 1993, pp. vii-viii. My emphasis.
45. Fenner, Felicity, 'A genre beyond grunge', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3/6/94 p. 27.
46. Fenner, *ibid.*
47. 'Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art', Whitney Museum of American Art, June 23-August 29, 1993.
48. Creed, Barbara, 'Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection', *Screen*, 27, January-February (1986).
49. Messer, William, 'Update', *The New Art Examiner*, November (1994), p. 52.
50. Hughes, Robert, *Culture of Complaint*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 137.
51. US Senator Alphonse D'Amato, quoted in Vance, Carole S., 'Issues and Commentary: The War on Culture', *Art in America*, Volume 77, September (1989), p. 39.
52. Taylor, Simon, 'The Phobic Object: Abjection in contemporary art', *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, ed. Philbrick, Jane, Whitney Independent Study Program, ISP Papers, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), p. 59.
53. Foster, Hal, *Return of the Real*, (Minneapolis: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996), p. 157.
54. Ward, Frazer, 'Abject Lessons', *Art + Text*, 48, May (1994), p. 47.
55. Ben-Levi, Jack, et al., 'Introduction', *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, ed. Philbrick, Jane, Whitney Independent Study Program, ISP Papers, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, USA), 1993, p. 8.
56. *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
57. *ibid.*, cover.
58. Colless, p. 24.
59. Read, Mark, *Hooky the Cripple: The Grim Tale of a Hunchback Who Triumphs*, illustrated by Adam Cullen, Pluto Press, Annandale, 2002.
60. James, Bruce, 'Finding Diamonds in the Rough', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday July 31, 1999, p. 12s.
61. *ibid.*
62. I use 'contemporary' here in a specific sense, as a particular genre or style of 'contemporary art'.

FIGURES

1. Adam Cullen, *The Otherness When It Comes*, 1993, cat, ethafoam, masking tape, gel toothpaste, variable dimensions. Courtesy Yuill/Crowley.
2. Adam Cullen, *Cosmological Satellite Mother Denied Depressed Speech*, 1993, umbilical cord, rubber, stainless steel, sticky tape, variable dimensions. Courtesy Yuill/Crowley.
3. Adam Cullen, *Gaol Sex*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 152. Courtesy Yuill/Crowley.