

Sam Cranstoun
Geronimo!

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**CREATIVE
 VICTORIA**



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Geronimo!
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Sam Cranstoun's practice focuses on the importance of contemporary image culture in shaping a collective understanding of the past. As history strives to obtain some level of historical 'truth', we as viewers grow to rely on photographs, videos, re-enactments and dramatizations as a way of interpreting and decoding past events. This dependence on highly visual and inherently flawed systems of representation becomes problematic, forcing us to question the veracity of history as a construct. For this exhibition, Cranstoun explores the 2011 assassination of Osama bin Laden (code name Geronimo). Cranstoun investigates the visual language used to depict this event, as well as the different ways it has been represented through recent popular culture.

Based in Brisbane, Sam Cranstoun graduated from the Queensland University of Technology in 2010 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours). Since then, Cranstoun has exhibited extensively throughout Australia in various group and solo shows, as well as taking part in the Tokyo Cool Downtown Media Festival in 2010. His recent solo exhibitions include *The Divine Right of Hands* at Metro Arts as well as *Oil!* at Boxcopy, both in 2011, and *Fox River Rising* at Milani Gallery in Brisbane.

Sam Cranstoun: in absentia of an image ('Geronimo')

1.

So far, Brisbane-based artist Sam Cranstoun has created a body of work that could be understood as an anthology: Each exhibition bounces off from one of his many research interests whence it collides with and returns from encounters with parallel narratives; Each exhibition is self-contained and begins the process anew. In this schema, individual works find form as interrelated yet abstracted souvenirs consumed/collected/produced along the way.

2.

To this end Cranstoun has made models, tiny furniture and slick three-dimensional objects but is probably best known for his achingly adroit drawings. He is an artist with an eye for what Roland Barthes called punctum. Of course the thing about punctum is that, while it is almost universally detectable, it is too slippery to willfully engineer. And yet Cranstoun re-renders such a thing by hand. Because of this I have come to think of his expanding suite of images outside of their singular contexts of production and as part of a broader image-collecting project. In a genealogy of these images, I would include German art historian Aby Warburg's mapping of the nachleben (afterlife) of images in his Mnemosyne Atlas. When it comes to Cranstoun and Warburg's images we're not talking about a parity of scale – or intention – but there is a mutual sympathy for image rhetoric.

3.

For philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, Warburg's central tenet for the discipline was that of psychopathology by which "the entire history of images necessarily falls within the realm of a psychology of expression." It is significant that Warburg's concern with expression in representational art – Warburg associates this quality with pathosformeln (pathos formulae) – in Didi-Huberman's reading does not indict a straightforward semiotic or symbolic reading of gesture. Expression here should thus be understood as symptom, which is "the return of the repressed in the image." (Thinking in today's crude terms we might consider this the 'money' in the 'money shot'.) I suggest, in a perverse but also likely predictable way, that Cranstoun's 2013 exhibition 'Geronimo' at Bus Projects, Melbourne is symptomatic of a (collective) image search.

4.

The name 'Geronimo' belonged to an Apache warrior who resisted colonising forces from the late 19th century but we came to know it through pop culture's cumulative appropriations. The tagline for Geronimo! (1962) tells us this is so: 'The World Took His Name and Made It a War Cry for All Time.' Outrageously you will remember 'Geronimo' was also the code word for Operation Neptune Spear's successful capture or assassination of Osama bin Laden (UBL to the CIA) at his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan in 2011. Hinging between this information, Cranstoun gives us:

a. A digital print of a 'Geronimo' title extracted from a movie poster – Untitled (Geronimo!)

b. Abbottabad's coordinates in an italicised serif font and US/UK-patriotic red, white and blue palette – Untitled (Geronimo! [Abbottabad Compound Coordinates])

c. a crappy poem (or textual parapraxis) about Abbottabad c.1853 written by eponym Sir James Abbott and laid out on Pakistan-flag green – Untitled (Geronimo! [The Worst Poem Ever Written; by James Abbott])

d. a pared back and downscaled version of Abbott's funerary monument in Surrey realised in the style of 3D printing – Untitled (Geronimo! [Sir James Abbott Tombstone; Surrey, UK])

d. an arm-sized model of the top secret stealth helicopter tail left at the scene – Untitled (Geronimo! [Neptune Spear Rotor])

e. some attractive patterned lattice lifted from details of the compound's security grills – Untitled (Geronimo! [Abbottabad Compound Window Shutter Abstract])

f. and a graphite recreation of an image apparently shown to President Obama and company in full fidelity but to us as censored pixel grain - Untitled (Geronimo! [Abbottabad Compound Aerial View, Redacted]).

5.

'Geronimo' the exhibition, the man, and the mission easily open up well-tread ideas about originals and copies. However, let's leave this to one side and address the gaping lacuna. Even before 2001, bin Laden's key presence in the US was as a media phenomena. We might even say that there was a correlation between the proliferation/circulation of his image and the anxiety about the physical absence of his body. That this absence was (/is) sustained after his death, vis-à-vis the unsolved inconsistencies surrounding the raid, kill and subsequent at-sea-disposal of the body, has generated its

own host of anxieties. One manifestation of this was a lawsuit in 2012 that sought videos and photographs to resolve unanswered questions. In a response for The Guardian, journalist Glenn Greenwald cannily differentiated between good leaks – strategic leaks that help administrations – and bad leaks – actual whistleblowers – and how they are treated accordingly “in the name of national security”. Greenwald cites flattering classified information handed to Hollywood filmmakers for a forthcoming film, which we now know as 2013 pro-torture blockbuster Zero Dark Thirty, and a book by one of the Navy Seals involved in the raid, as two examples of assisted leaks i.e. propaganda.

6.

Without giving the movie too much air time, one key moment, which is somewhat mirrored in Cranstoun’s Untitled (Geronimo! [Abbottabad Compound Aerial View, Redacted]), is the blurring of bin Laden’s face in the penultimate scene. There is a twinning here with a related event that was similarly skewered between iconophilia and iconoclasm: In 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations in a campaign for the attack on Iraq. Before doing so, however, the US requested that the tapestry reproduction of Picasso’s Guernica, which would have been the speaker’s backdrop, be covered or substituted. Philosopher and card-carrying Lacanian Slavoj Žižek uses this story to help explain Lacan’s ideation of repression (or maybe it’s the other way):

[I]t was clear to everyone what the US delegation was afraid of: that Guernica, the painting that commemorates the catastrophic results of the German aerial bombing of the Spanish city during the civil war, would give rise to the ‘wrong kind of associations’ if it were to serve as the background to Powell advocating the bombing of Iraq by the far superior US air force. This is what Lacan means when he claims that repression and the return of the repressed are one and the same process... it was this very gesture that drew attention to the association and confirmed its truth.

In both instances, it is therefor far less about what pictures want, or what we want from them, and much more about what sometimes they can’t help but be, even in absentia.







Not only but also

Bus Projects is an independent arts organisation dedicated to supporting the critical, conceptual and interdisciplinary practices of Australian artists. Since its establishment in 2001, Bus Projects has acted as a space to produce, present, discuss and engage with contemporary art. In addition to its core gallery-based program of exhibitions, events and residencies, Bus Projects collaborates with a range of artists and like-minded organisations to produce projects off-site and within the public realm. Through this diverse programming, Bus Projects continues to be a crucial convergence point for art, artist and audiences.

This exhibition and publication series, *Not Only But Also*, invests in the creation of innovative works by 24 young and emerging Australian artists and writers, forming an integral part of Bus Projects' inaugural artistic program in its new galleries on Rokeby Street in Collingwood.

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