POLITICS AND PERSONAE IN THE PORTRAITURE OF TEXTAQUEEN
BY JANE RAFFAN

Executed in gloriously colourful felt-tip pen, TextaQueen’s drawings are rich in iconography, with multi-layered meanings smartly critiquing stereotyping and socio-cultural politics.

Colouring-in is a well-loved children’s pastime, but socialisation encourages us to cast aside childish things. The parallel in art practice is drawing, which is often considered a stepping stone on the path to painting. While sculpture and other plastic arts have had a recent resurgence in the contemporary art world, monotone styles are devoted to exploring other media. And so it was with TextaQueen, who ‘drew a bit’ at art school while concentrating on experimental video and photography. The focus on drawing with felt-tip pen occurred after art school largely through necessity: ‘I turned to Textas because I could get them at the supermarket and they were portable’. TextaQueen’s portraiture-based oeuvre is also unusual in contemporary art. This choice, however, was deeply personal. ‘Portraiture has been a way to connect with people. It’s part of my personality – being awkward, really socially anxious, but really sociable. In big social circumstances it’s hard to have real connections with people. Drawing people intimately is a really beautiful way of getting to know them; not that I did it for that, but it became an extension of my social relationships.’

Apart from large-scale drawings, TextaQueen’s nudes have appeared on playing cards, in collaborative animations for the National Portrait Gallery, SBS TV Australia and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, in zines, murals, postcards and calendars. They’ve been woven into a tapestry, appeared on tea towels and once on a surfboard. The works are filled with the faces of friends and ‘unique women’, many of whom are artists and activists, musicians and queer performers. Those drawings, with their sitters characterised as ‘performative personalities’, are collectively described as Textanudes and have been the subject of national and international solo shows since 2001.

In Un-dressed-up, a 2004 solo show at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, the rationale for the body of nude drawings was explained as having been conceived for a Manga-esque soft-porn website, with the works ‘re-contextualising’ the tradition of the salon nude through a feminist rejection of the assumed privileged male-only object/gaze. Each work intimately depicts its subject in personal settings, ‘undressed-up’ in their bedrooms, homes and gardens, usually surrounded by life’s paraphernalia and/or prosaic descriptive captions. This approach was employed over subsequent series, culminating in the 2011 show, Textanudes 54 Pin-Up Playing Cards Mark II.

The disarming qualities of TextaQueen’s drawings usually mask incisive social commentaries. This tension, to invoke pleasure and discomfort, lies at the heart of the artist’s oeuvre, and to a great extent, in the works of Jen Jen, Alice Kelly and Alex Kelly, who are all Alice Springs residents. In Jen Jen, the artist invites the viewer to consider the idea of winning a book voucher in a short story competition, as Jen Jen contemplates winning a book voucher in a short story competition in the Adelaide Advertiser newspaper. In Creature from the Black Platoon, the artist draws attention to the idea of winning a book voucher in a short story competition, as Jen Jen contemplates winning a book voucher in a short story competition in the Adelaide Advertiser newspaper.
people of colour drawn as characters in fictional movie posters. The protagonists pose as outlaws in what the artist terms ‘their post-apocalypse’ post-colonial world. While it is not unusual for Indigenous people of colour living in settler colonial societies to utilise the apocalypse paradigm, the appropriation of the term genetics for exploring the experiences of post-colonialism is particularly artful in laying bare the ironies and socio-political realities of anti-heroes. Collaboration is inherent in portraiture and TextaQueen extends this process by inviting protagonists to write their movie poster descriptions. Indigenous activist and historian, Gary Fiseky, features in Creature From The Black Planet... in Armageddon Outta Here, Trusty Rurpublic blogger/activist Robbie Thorpe is Djuran Bunjileenee: ‘a time against his race, he must race against time... Speeding back through 200 years of history, Djuran Bunjileenee travels to his ancestral home via his digital crystal 5th dimension time belt. Armed with his sonic combustion didgel, he must destroy the roots of Armageddon; the arrival of the British crown. It’s pay back time... Can he change history and if so, can he return to the present time, on time?’. Pandie Panther, a Melbourne performance, video and sound artist is a Pacific warrior princess, created a monster assimilationist cane toad that lurks in the rain forests of North Queensland threatening to turn black folk into white people. The only person who can save the Aboriginal nation is the Black Power Hero, Creature From The Black Planet... In Armageddon Outta Here, Trusty Rurpublic blogger/activist Robbie Thorpe is Djuran Bunjileenee: ‘a time against his race, he must race against time... Speeding back through 200 years of history, Djuran Bunjileenee travels to his ancestral home via his digital crystal 5th dimension time belt. Armed with his sonic combustion didgel, he must destroy the roots of Armageddon; the arrival of the British crown. It’s pay back time... Can he change history and if so, can he return to the present time, on time?’. Pandie Panther, a Melbourne performance, video and sound artist is a Pacific warrior princess, fighting for the future of her people and their developing island nation in the face of man-made climate change induced rising seas and ravaged natural resources, exploiting by global conglomerates and nearby ‘friendly’ first world countries. And the explosive Ladies of Colour Agency is a wry comment on the way women of colour have always been exsiced by Western societies (our fine art histories are filled with examples) and is the most pertinent of the series to TextaQueen’s personal experience of being racially dislicted. The subjects, friends in the Melbourne performance troops, Ladies of Colour Agency (LOCA), are two people of east Asian ancestry and another of Indian ancestry. In the poster, with its ‘exotic escape’ Bollywood title, a tiger, a Chinese opera panda and an Indian bride-as-cobra are depicted breaking out of a zoo. The subjects de cry their attempted ‘taming’ by the white man, breaking loose to wreak havoc on the world. TextaQueen’s most recent series is a group of highly finished, iconographically complex, and intensely wrought self portraits, described in the 2013 Unknown Artist (Self Portraits) self-published book as ‘an exploration of the personal evolution of identity, incorporating graphic elements into largely fictional metaphorical inner narratives’. Contemplating one’s identity necessitates musing on one’s past, where memory is rarely easy to render others obsolete. Memories we cherish and try selectively access and refresh tell as much about absences and omissions as they do content. With this in mind, child psychologists utilise drawings to tease out pictures of various unspoken realities. The majority of the works in Unknown Artist frame identity as a visual palimpsest of experiences, where the fictional inner narratives are not so much fictional imaginations, but remembrances and reflections recontextualised in complex and richly poetic visual conceits. Sub-cultural Charms, a work TextaQueen describes as ‘my Gothic ethnic picture’, depicts the artist adorned with piercings linked by a chain laden with charms. It’s a marvellously striking visual pun on our hang-ups and the things that hold us back, our ‘balls and chain’ or ‘baggage’. For TextaQueen, the charms aren’t good luck totems, rather things that have influenced the
artist’s own socialisation and acculturation: ‘Being gendered female (the rattle says it’s a girl); a family portrait from a supermarket photo booth, the building block of my language – English; the wedding cake referring to heteronormative culture; being an Australian born Indian (as quoted in a recent interview, which sounds really strange to me); and a map of India in it … India really strange to me); and a map of Australia with India in it … India.

One of the most cryptic works exploring an inner narrative is Call of the Crocotta, a wonderfully eerie portrayal of the artist as half human, half animal. The crocotta is a mystical Indo-African beast on record in the west since Roman times, and famed for employing magic arts, including being able to simulate human speech in order to call people out of their homes and devour them. TextaQueen’s self-portrait engages with gender politics, and specifically, heteronormative sexual hegemonies: ‘A few friends have said I remind them of a hyena … and the crocotta is based partly on the hyena … They can change between male and female, and I have what I feel is a fluid gender identity … It’s empowering to reclaim mythology.’

Another work that engages with racism and gender politics is Colonial Desire: Animal Whirls, the animal in this case being the Muppet character, depicted as a puppeteer with the artist as puppet, portrayed in a white wig and girl’s dress, and holding what looks to be a Ken doll in a wedding suit. TextaQueen’s self-portrait appears to be a clear critique of the assimilatory pressures of white socialisation and its patriarchal and heterosexual hegemonies. Animal’s presence, however, reveals a deeper aspect: ‘On Sesame Street people of colour were happy and accepted and centred. I watched it all the time, not understanding what it all meant to me. I had this thing.’

This aspect of the artist’s childhood is also touched on in Grown. Flown. Unknown, which depicts TextaQueen blossoming, flower-like, centred and surrounded by rainbow-coloured feathers, the title a reclamation of racist taunt ‘we grew here, you flew here.’

Colouring-in is absorbing and time-consuming. Drawing and colouring a series of self portraits requires countless additional hours of self-reflection. TextaQueen was once asked how long it took to complete a self portrait entitled Save Yourself? Self Love. Responding ‘it took me thirty-seven years to make that portrait … to be able to lift yourself above what it is that keeps you down.’ The secret to TextaQueen’s appeal is well and truly out – thoughtful, humorous, disarmingly clever and visually compelling works – and we can all look forward to the next instalment in the franchise.