

# Introduction

## by Andrew Flatau

### ***The provocative Victor Gordon: art on the edge***

As Steven Dubin has so passionately and eloquently expressed in his *Foreword*, Victor Gordon—the artist whose political awakening during the traumatic period of South African apartheid was sustained through a powerful series of anti-apartheid art projects in exile/refuge in Australia—is an inveterate slayer of ideological dragons and a deeply committed, uncompromising and provocative advocate for individual freedoms and political justice, whose hard-edged art relentlessly challenges the viewer to engage.<sup>1</sup>

Dubin refers to the second coming of Gordon's reputation in South Africa, which is encapsulated in the repatriation, by the Ifu Lethu ('Our Heritage') Foundation, of some of his most potent political works. Although Gordon is little known in his adopted homeland, it is wonderful that the message and import of these works is being disseminated and publicly displayed throughout the world, courtesy of an international touring exhibition, curated by Carol Brown, of works drawn from the Ifu Lethu Foundation.<sup>2</sup>

As curator of the Orange Regional Gallery's survey exhibition of Victor Gordon's art, however, I have mixed feelings about all this. On one hand I rejoice in Victor's deserved international acclaim, but on the other hand I only wish we could present all his works here.

Although we have been able to put together a significant number of important works for our survey, to alleviate our loss of touring works, as well as those held in public collections overseas, such as *The Essential Arch Bull* (1994; see plate 4)—which is held in the art collection of the Constitutional Court of South Africa—we have included in this publication as many images of these works as we can.

Gordon settled in Australia in 1987 and, as Dubin has pointed out, chose exile over a mandatory second tour of duty in the South African armed forces. It is important to know, however, that another principal reason for his emigration was that the sort of art he wanted to produce, art that exposed the violent and iniquitous machinations of the apartheid system, during the so-called *Unrest*, was regarded by the State as sedition and had been forbidden under Emergency Regulations. Therefore, he could not remain in South Africa and be the artist he needed to be.

Australia served Gordon well. In spite of having to drive taxis to survive, within three years of his arrival he was in a position to

mount a powerful exhibition of his anti-apartheid art. When he could not find a mainstream commercial gallery to host the show, he wandered into the Waterside Workers Union Hall in Sydney and presented Union officials with his proposal for a show, which featured a full-scale stage set of a fascist political meeting. The officials discussed the proposal and, having appreciated Gordon's uncompromisingly satirical approach, accepted it with a proviso: the Union would give the artist the liberty of its hall, but unfortunately it could not pay him to curate the exhibition. Bless them!

*Behold the Lands where Satan reigns* (1990; see plate 5) was duly installed, complete with stage lighting as well as *Mnr Die Ware Jacob* (1986–1990; see plate 180), an elaborate assemblage which is now touring with the Ifu Lethu exhibition. It encloses a central painting of an evil-looking apparatchik, which is flanked by red panels, each featuring the provocative trinacriform, black-on-white, swastika-like insignia of the ultra-right Afrikaner Resistance Movement.

Between 1987 and 1994, the year in which democratic elections were held in South Africa, heralding the end of the State-sponsored apartheid system, Gordon operated as a member of the Struggle in exile. Fresh in his mind was all the political subterfuge and violence that had been everywhere about him during his period as a liaison officer between students and security personnel in the administration of the University of the Witwatersrand. In Australia, between 1987 and 1990, Gordon realised he had a great opportunity to expose the mechanisms of power in the system of apartheid through an examination of its very edges and interstices.

As the activist artist, Leon Golub has put it: in order to "figure out aspects of power, you have to look at power at the peripheries",<sup>3</sup> for it is at the extreme manifestations of a system of power that its contradictions and hypocrisies become most apparent. This insight is fundamental to an understanding of all Gordon's art. Not only does he represent issues in their extreme or polarised forms, he also takes his paint right to the edge. Thus the edges, borders and frames of his paintings are often as important as what is going on in the middle.

Although Gordon is a prolific artist, often working late into the night, he is not obsessed with the commercial viability of his work. Rather, his focus has always been on the working out of his concerns and ideas. His day job has been teaching—at first in Sydney, then in Broken Hill and now in Orange. For many years



5. Stage installation for  
**Behold the Lands where Satan reigns** 1990  
Multiple canvasses in situ on stage at the  
Waterside Workers Union Hall, Sydney NSW

the Head Teacher of Arts and Media at the Orange campus of TAFE Western, Gordon has tried to foster in his students a respect for ideas. Once he senses his students have reached a level of technical competency and are ready to develop a body of original work, he passes on his own epigram: "Ideas are the currency of Art".

Quite the aphorist and thoroughly entertaining, Gordon can dress up, don funny hats and dance the night away, but beneath this radiant surface a deep-seated pessimism courses through his veins. As he is fond of saying: "Sun shining—Blood everywhere". Gordon's wit—like his art—is a condensation and often wry expression of some very serious ideas.

Gordon's work ultimately reflects a sharp, satirical critique of all he sees around him that is unjust, and all that is brutal, demeaning or hypocritical. In his examination of corporate and institutional ethics, one senses a brooding discontent with the governance of our society and the surveillance of the individual. He exposes racism, sexism, exploitation and corruption, wherever they reign, and shies not from the discussion of social mores, game playing and taboos. Although his art has served as a tool of social commentary and political engagement, Gordon is also interested in the history, politics and production of Art itself and the subtle ways in which art bureaucrats and dealers operate to dispense favours and dictate fashion.

Indeed, I can't think of any cultural or political issue Gordon has been afraid to tackle: he just goes for all of it.

Gordon's self-confessed pessimism is based on the lessons of history, including his own experience with the system of apartheid in South Africa, but for Gordon the problem is that, even though fascist and totalitarian régimes may be overthrown, individual liberties are always under threat from vested interests and opportunistic, powerful corporate and religious institutions.

Gordon admits that he has a "Schopenhauer-esque approach" to much of his work,<sup>4</sup> and indeed there is some common ground between them, apart from a predilection for aphorisms. Schopenhauer was also a pessimist and, like Gordon, he also believed that it was pointless to publish anything unless one had *something to say*.<sup>5</sup> Schopenhauer also stated that "all religion is antagonistic towards culture",<sup>6</sup> a sentiment with which Gordon would have some sympathy. On the other hand, Schopenhauer's pessimism was not based on the oppression of the individual by pervasive external powers; rather, in his metaphysical theory of *the world as will and representation*, each individual is an ego with a *will to live*, thus bringing individuals into inevitable and terrible conflict.<sup>7</sup>

All this sounds very bad indeed, but do we really need to be dragged into Schopenhauer's metaphysical abyss, where the only way out is denial? Can we not take heart in the fact that some

people do think things through and get together to discuss, debate and try to resolve the issues of the day?

In spite of his pessimism, which is more a product of how he views the world, rather than any loss of faith in humanity itself, Gordon continues to be both productive and provocative. He has said that he produces art as a "cathartic auto-psychoanalytical tool".<sup>8</sup> It seems to me, however, that although this may well be true to a certain extent, Gordon is essentially interested in communication.

A viewer is often implied in Gordon's work and the challenge for the viewer is to engage. For example, in *Business as usual—A day at the office* (2007; see plate 138) the camouflaged, oval composition has, at its centre, a pupil-like dot. It is in effect the eye of the viewer, who is invited to witness what is going on in the scene: in this case a figure has had his head covered with a bucket and is possibly being subjected to some form of torture.

Even if only a few viewers respond with concern or a change in their attitudes, that is a start: surely it provides a flicker of hope. When I questioned Victor about the veracity of "*and/or*"—*Broken Hill* (2002; see plate 53), he burst into animation, explaining that he had actually seen council workers in Broken Hill remove a tree guard to chop down a tree and then faithfully replace the guard to protect the stump! A simple absurdity can be such a joy.

In order to understand Victor Gordon's art as a whole, it is necessary to have some knowledge of his cultural and political concerns as well as his artistic language and influences. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to provide some sort of background to the work of a very complex artist, to open up avenues of interpretation and ways of seeing.

Gordon often plays with realism and uses all sorts of provocative modernist devices, visual illusions and ambiguities to engage the viewer and stimulate a response. This is thoughtful art for thoughtful viewers. Indeed, Gordon's art encourages viewers to become critical thinkers, to recognise the differences between appearance and reality, and slice through all the gobbledegook served up to us; after all, as Gordon himself experienced first hand in South Africa, it is only through political awakening and the thoughtful working out of ideas that meaningful social and political changes can come.

### ***The playful Victor Gordon: from Homo ludens to Dada***

Gordon has always understood that social, cultural and political activities, no matter how seriously they are valued, are embedded in rituals and games. Indeed, this insight informs his artistic grammar and the eclectic choice of subject matter for his work.



6. **Noel Tovey** 2009  
Oil on canvas  
122 x 183 cm  
**Bathurst Community Portrait Prize 2010—Winner**

*Actor, dancer, singer, director, choreographer, writer, teacher and author of "Little Black Bastard".*



7. **Mischling** 1996  
Oil on canvas  
56 x 56 cm

In *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture*, Johan Huizinga introduced the concept of Man the Player, crystallising what he had long believed: “that civilisation arises and unfolds in and as play”—and “never leaves it”.<sup>9</sup> Huizinga discusses the nature and significance of play, including its interrelationship with seriousness, and how it is part of all human activities. With respect to the play-forms in art, however, Huizinga seems more interested in music than the visual arts; nevertheless, he locates the development of the latter in “competitive artisanship”, which was best illustrated in the classical Greek competitions for the most beautiful statue.<sup>10</sup>

We don’t need to look very far for a modern equivalent. Each year the Archibald Prize is awarded amidst much fanfare and frolic, and for many years it has been masterfully milked by the Director of the Art Gallery of NSW, who squeezes every possible ounce of publicity out of it; in the modern exemplar, however, the aesthetic primacy of sculpture in ancient Greece is supplanted by a painting, which must be the best submitted portrait, “painted from life”, by an Australian, of someone “distinguished in Art, Letters, Science or Politics” (see the Conditions of Entry)<sup>11</sup>—just as long as it is very big and very newsworthy!

In the title of *The Essential Arch Bull* (1994; see plate 4) Gordon lampoons the Archibald Prize. The sculpture itself is a bureaucratic set of drawers, mounted with rather dangerous-looking cow horns and mobilised on polished brass castors, as if ready to charge. The *essential* part of the work is what is inside the drawers. Although each of them is labelled according to specific art-historical categories, every drawer actually contains an identical copy of *The Art of Self Promotion*, an Australia Council publication offering artists advice on how to bedazzle art bureaucrats and critics and get ahead with galleries, all in the remote hope that thereby they will launch their wonderful careers. Oh yes, everyone’s a player in this game!

Notwithstanding all the hype and all the great opportunities for satire, the Archibald Prize is a tantalising challenge that few artists can resist, and Gordon is no exception. Although all his entries so far have been sadly overlooked by the Trustees (but really—what can you expect from a group, largely comprised of people rather more qualified to be the subjects of Archibald Prize portraits than its judges?), he has submitted some very good paintings, none stronger than his portrait of *Noel Tovey* (2009; see plate 6), the multi-talented actor/director and author of *Little Black Bastard*.

This large-scale composition, with its photo-realist attention to every detail of the face, cropped to the right eyebrow above and through the chin below, at first glance seems to be a representation of a fashionable close-up photograph, taken from a low viewpoint to the right, with front lighting from the left,

towards which the subject gazes. But as the viewer begins to absorb the flat, two-toned background (with its low, lined horizon on the left), the perspective becomes more complex. The darker area below the horizon introduces a somewhat disturbing visual tension, in that it creates an illusion of a three dimensional space with a high viewpoint, as if the head of the subject is sitting on a horizontal surface, perhaps even a stage.

Gordon’s juxtaposition of naturalist and modernist techniques invites the viewer to contemplate whether the subject himself can be viewed in different ways. His set mouth and off-set, pensive gaze now seem to convey a sense of introspection and the hint that we are in the presence of someone with a more complicated life than we had initially thought, and on the right the horizon is lost in dark shadows.

Ironically, Gordon did become a finalist in the 2007 Sulman Prize for subject/genre painting for a portrait of Mike Parr, whose performance art has included the stalking of galleries in drag. In *Mike Parr at the MCA* (2006; see plate 25), Gordon attempts to capture the psychological intensity of an artist we know (from his *Self-Portrait Project*) to be obsessed with the representation of the ego. Gordon portrays Parr deep in thought and leaning against a gallery wall, as if he owns it, while a blurred female figure (perhaps his feminine alter ego) walks right past him. Painted in *sfumato*, she is a smoky spectre, roaming free of the focal plane—and not, in my view, unlike a Gerhard Richter figure, who might at any point descend a public staircase—but more of that later.

Gordon was also a finalist in the 1996 Blake Prize for a truly remarkable painting of a wafer of unleavened bread (*matzo*), prepared for the Jewish Passover, which sits somewhat uncomfortably in iconic tension, if you like, in the mouth of a predatory hot cross-bun, its dark, raisin-eye keeping close tabs on the viewer. Gordon regards *Mischling* (1996; see plate 7) as a “non-objective *self portrait*”.<sup>12</sup> The rationale for this definition is compelling: the matzo represents his paternal heritage—his father being, unless adverse circumstances prevailed, a non-practising Jew—while the bun represents his maternal heritage—his mother being a Methodist, whose fundamentalist fixation on predestination and the decisive intervention of the Cross, did not prevent her from cajoling her children to accept the veracity of Old Testament stories (i.e. of a God who might, at a whim, exact terrible vengeance on disobedience or, for that matter, any minor act of self indulgence).

In German, *mischling* has a general meaning of ‘cross-breed’, ‘half-breed’ or ‘mongrel’, but during the Third Reich it became a highly-charged political term to differentiate individuals deemed to have only partial Aryan ancestry. Historically, leaving aside the offensive complaints of revisionists, these individuals became



8. **The Silence of Herstory** 2008  
Oil on canvas  
87 x 100 cm  
Collection: Dr Andrew Flatau

pawns in a battle for ideological and racial purity. Gordon places his cross-bred cross-bun on a chessboard, with its cross on a diagonal to the squares. The squares of this chessboard reflect the colours of the bun and its entrapped wafer, as if avoiding attention; however, the wafer, caught in crosslight, casts a shadow on the board. In the lower left corner, the shadow interacts with the squares to form an outline of *half* a Star of David. In the disarming juxtaposition of compositional elements (the bun, the wafer and the board) which are, in themselves, naturalist representations, Gordon overlays the realism with symbolism and modernist devices such as visual grids and stage lighting. This is not a glib postmodernist presentation; rather, it is meaningful and challenging art, produced with conviction.

The chessboard is the quintessential representation of the play element of culture. It provides the formal structure of a game, but it invokes a deadly serious battleground, in which all the forces of culture engage. Gordon returns to it again and again.

In *The Silence of Herstory* (2008; see plate 8), Gordon depicts two women playing chess, in a game that cuts across time and space. On the left, facing the viewer, is an elegant Renaissance lady, dressed in her finery, her hands delicately poised over the board, as if playing a piano. On the right, facing her competitor, is a shaved-headed, naked woman that looks like a sci-fi clone asserting its right to exist. Gordon's painting is based on Sofonisba Anguissola's *Lucia, Minerva and Europa Anguissola playing chess* (1555), in which her daughters are captured in a happy domestic scene.

Gordon closely adapts the figurative elements of the scene, including the hand gestures of the competitors and the watchful face of a mystery woman in the top right corner (perhaps Anguissola herself), but deletes the figure of the youngest child at board side as well as the classical background landscape. In place of the latter, and suspended in space like a hologram, is a representation of Rachel Whiteread's award winning, public sculpture *House* (1993),<sup>13</sup> which, in spite of its ephemeral space-time co-ordinates—it was built at 193 Grove Road, Bow Neighbourhood, London, between August and late October, 1993 and, in November that year (amidst much controversy), it simultaneously won the Tate Gallery's Turner Prize and was ordered to be demolished by the local Council—it created an enduring public and artistic memory.

The focus of Gordon's painting, however, is the chessboard itself, towards which we are drawn by primary colours: the red tablecloth and the blue chessboard frame. It is no ordinary chess set; rather, it is Man Ray's *Chess Set* (1926). Man Ray learned chess from Marcel Duchamp (more of Duchamp later)<sup>14</sup> and, like many Dada and Surrealist artists, valued it as a metaphor for creativity—in the face of the grotesque absurdity of the Great War (WWI).

In *Rugger Buggers #2* (2009; see plate 9), one of a series of paintings examining the gladiatorial, ritualistic and divertive aspects of contact sport in Australia, not to mention the taboo of portraying male nudity, Gordon presents a player being tackled, with the dislodged ball (represented in this case by an ostrich egg) falling onto a chessboard, which appears to be hovering in space, given that its horizon is firmly lined part way up a wall. The viewer is invited to reflect on the tackle (and perhaps there is more than one) as an illusion, a diversion from the real game, and of life itself. What else is really going on here?

Gordon's introduction of an ostrich egg is a clue that the whole scene is not quite what it seems. The ostrich egg shifts the context of the scene and suggests additional layers of meaning. This egg is prized and often decorated by the Khoi San, the South African Bushman, out of respect for a natural habitat, but here it is slipping away, while the prize on the wall is a rather cheap and nasty replica of a trophy for hunting (as a blood sport, but not of necessity).

The chalk markings on the wall, however, become more disturbing on closer examination. They are not Roman score marks, crossed off in fives; rather, they are endless sets of seven marks, representing the days of the week. These markings of time, in this picture, must have significance and the viewer once again is invited to reflect on their meaning. Is the viewer, as a spectator, marking time or could the marks be those of a prisoner, counting out the days of incarceration?

The Dadaist provocative interventions and the later, more organised Surrealist movement, led by André Breton, have been rejected by many critics of late. Paul Johnson, for example, asserts that "Dada was pretentious, contemptuous, destructive, very *chic*, publicity-seeking and ultimately pointless".<sup>15</sup> This is a gross misrepresentation of the historical context of these early twentieth-century endeavours. The cataclysm that was the Great War not only churned out indescribable suffering and loss: it also had a devastating effect on intellectual life. As Bernard Smith has argued,<sup>16</sup> Dada inaugurated a modernism that had its roots in the relative autonomy of the nineteenth-century European art world, and was latent in the pre-war collages of Picasso, but it was the War that gave it impetus:

The horrific carnage of 1914–18 endowed Dada's nihilism with an all-powerful imperative. In Dada, changes within the world of art and beyond it in the field of naked power coalesce. The Dadaists attacked art as an institution because it had for them in fact collapsed in the chaos of war. . . . Dada was not a style like Fauvism or Cubism, it was an attitude, a frame of mind *directly* induced by war.



- above left*  
 9. **Rugger Buggers # 2** 2009  
 Oil on canvas  
 152.3 x 152.3 cm

- above*  
 10. **Untitled** 2001  
 Mixed media: Bicycle fork  
 and perforated steam iron  
 plate  
 61 x 11.8 cm

- left*  
 11. **Untitled** 1979  
 Mixed media: Printed  
 Linoleum, antique kiaat  
 wood toilet seat, oak frame  
 41 x 36 cm

Dadaist attitudes to social, artistic and political institutions burst out of historical necessity. They were not provocative and witty, just for show. They weren't eighteenth-century fops and dandies. Their wit was a response to war and the absurdities and complete incompetency they perceived in the ruling system. As George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde, both prominent members of Berlin Dada, put it: "We saw then the insane end products of the ruling order of society and burst into laughter".<sup>17</sup>

Dada has re-emerged in the work of many twentieth-century artists who have adopted its techniques in their artistic, socio-political engagement. One thinks here of Jasper Johns, Larry Rivers, Robert Rauschenberg and others who have sometimes been labelled as Neo-Dadaists. Surrealism, too, has continued to have its advocates, none more so than the great artist and art historian, James Gleeson, who regarded it as a way of realising, of bringing to the surface, the subconscious material of our 'imagination' and making this repository ("the store house of surrealism", as he called it) available for interpretation:

Surrealism, then, is an attempt, not to abandon reason, but to make reason reasonable, to rejuvenate the concept of reason. It is the phantastic, used as a method of elucidation. It aims at the re-orientation of values through a broadening of the concept of reality.<sup>18</sup>

In my view, Gordon's interest in Dada and Surrealism is primarily based on a shared 'attitude': a horror of war and institutional oppression (and in Gordon's case, apartheid), a need to discuss realism (perhaps even re-configure what is perceived as real), the recognition of the importance of chance and play, and an acceptance that subconscious activity is insightful, creative and productive. The latter consideration was fundamental in the early Surrealist literature,<sup>19</sup> and Gordon acknowledges it in *The Confessional* (2010; see plate 12), a composition based on Freud's consulting room, which is stripped of his collectibles, the focus being on the patient's bed, which is covered enticingly with highly decorative fabric. The bed extends to, and beyond, the right edge of the painting, as if suggesting that there is more to be revealed in this place. To the left of the bed, but partially hidden by it, is an unobtrusive, leather-clad psychoanalyst's chair.

Dadaist techniques abound in Gordon's work. It may be as simple as a steam iron plate, suspended as a wall hanging, in *Untitled* (2001; see 10), a reference to Man Ray's *Cadeau* (1921). We also note surprising and witty juxtapositions of 'found' or domestic objects that we would not normally expect to cohabit space. The effect is not only surprising: it can also produce feelings of estrangement or alienation. In *Untitled* (1979; see plate 11), a 'found' fragment of linoleum, masquerading as parquetry, is framed (in a modernist oval format) within a splendid, wooden toilet seat. Indeed, the

seat is made of a valued South African timber (kiaat) and was redeemed by Gordon from the first house that he owned. The frame is thus imbued with personal memories and memorabilia, but the 'content' of the work is an 'artefact.'

In his masterfully crafted sculptures, Gordon often assembles 'found' objects with surprising effect. In *Est Id* (1991; see plate 13), beauty and danger are one: an elegant serpentine metal object has been mounted on a wooden plinth, its superior surface carved with a gentle concavity that echoes, but does not touch, the curve of the metal object. The object itself, however, has ambiguous properties, its aesthetic form counterbalanced by an implied potential to harm. Not only does its horizontal arm come to a spear-like conical point, it also has an attached sighting (targeting?) device, made out of antique mini-shears. The juxtaposition of beauty and danger is also captured in *Philosopede* (1993; see plate 151), the title of the sculpture being taken from one of Charles Leland's late nineteenth-century, broken-English *Hans Breitmann Ballads*, called *Schnitzerl's philosopede*, which tells the tale of an inventor, Schnitzerl, whose super-fast monocycle ends up slicing him in two.

In a recent work, *Dead Ringer* (2000–2012; see plate 15), Gordon casts a wry eye over Australian domestic life. He takes an old broken-down wringer, which he had kept from his garage in Broken Hill, and replaces the rolling-pins with an old turned log and adds a nice set of wheels, giving it a recycled life as a mobile machine: a 'dead ringer', so to speak, for a pet rodent, complete with a wispy pink garden hose tail. It is given pride of place on an ironing board, covered in synthetic turf and adjustable for customised viewing.

In another recent sculpture, *Cardinal Sin* (1994–2012; see plate 14), a small mitred Cardinal is captured reading a book—perhaps it is a canonical text, perhaps not—astride a cannon that represents an oversized phallus. The supporting under-carriage sits on a raised wooden block, which itself is mounted on a plinth, carpeted in the red of cardinal office. We can't help but think that Gordon really enjoyed making this one. As we read the titles of many of his works, which are often sacrilegious, witty or gamesome,<sup>20</sup> and as we study his sculptures of 'found' and/or transformed objects—whatever their level of seriousness—we inevitably find Victor Gordon at play.

## ***The philosophical Victor Gordon***

Thus far we have discussed the provocative, agitative and playful elements in Gordon's work as well as some of the artistic strategies he has deployed in his engagement with, and ongoing critique of, pictorial realism. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to present a comprehensive analysis of Gordon's work, it is important to gain an understanding of the wide-ranging philosophical and political issues with which he has been fundamentally concerned.



Some of these issues have been covered above or elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> We will focus now, albeit briefly, on some of his major current interests in aesthetics, the politics and philosophy of the body and natural justice.

**(i) On the Paragone: a debate about artistic representation**

One of the major concerns of the Italian Renaissance was about the relative merits of various forms of artistic representation. Of particular concern was the *paragone* ('comparison'): a debate about whether it was painting or sculpture that could best represent nature. In a treatise on painting, *Trattato della pittura*, posthumously compiled from the artist's notes, Leonardo argued for the superiority of painting.

The depth of feeling that surrounded this debate may be discerned by the story, told by Vasari in his *Lives*, of Leonardo's contemporary, Giorgione, who fell into an argument with a group of sculptors. They argued that "sculpture was superior to painting, which could represent only one aspect of any given subject". Giorgione argued, on the contrary, that a painter could present "different gestures" in multiple viewpoints, which the viewer could appreciate from one spot, whereas the viewer of sculpture needs to "change his position and viewpoint" to achieve the same effect. To demonstrate his argument, Giorgione reputedly produced a "greatly praised and admired" painting (that, alas, has not survived), in which he displayed "in a single view of one picture the front, back, and two profiles" of a nude figure. He did this by painting reflections of the three non-presenting views of the figure in a "limpid stream of water", a mirror and a "burnished cuirass that the man had taken off".<sup>22</sup>

Enter Victor Gordon. His take on the debate, of course, is as you would expect, sharply contemporary. Not only does he break down the distinctions and barriers between painting and sculpture, and explores their inter-connections, he also examines the impact of kinetic sculpture, film and virtual art on the way we value forms of artistic representation.

In *Paragone of Virtues* (2011; see plate 16), a sculpture representing a traditional stretched blank canvas has been cast in bronze, using a traditional lost wax technique, and mounted on a beautiful wooden plinth. As we read the work from side to side, however, we realise that we have been presented not only with a view of a flat, two-dimensional painting surface, but also simultaneously the reverse three-dimensional view of the painting stretcher, complete with its supporting framework and corner

wedges. What Giorgione would have made of this retort from a painter/sculptor can only be imagined, but it does represent the culmination of Gordon's extensive explorations of the debate.

There is evidence that Gordon had been working on this theme intermittently for over thirty years, with some interesting variations. In *Paradoxos* (2007; see plate 58), for example, we are presented with the reverse view of half a stretcher, with corner wedges in place, but the canvas is covered in calligraphy. The text, ironically, is that of *Exodus* 20:4—repeated just to be sure in *Deuteronomy* 5:8—the commandment God conveyed to the children of Israel, through Moses, that they must not make any naturalistic carving or other likeness of anything in heaven, on the earth or in the waters. Although the main idea of the commandment, confirmed in its corollary in the next verse (and perhaps clarified in *Leviticus* 26:1), was that they must not worship those sculptures or images that were made to be idols, the text Gordon cites could be interpreted in isolation as a pretty clear-cut ban on creativity itself, with sculpture leading the way to damnation.

In *Paste Postmodern* (2011; see plate 163), Gordon produces a cheeky white, acrylic resin version of *Paragone of virtues*. It is mounted on a dark plinth that mocks the simple shapes (a rectangle, triangle and circle), so commonly utilised in the most facile forms of postmodern architecture. As with his picture frames, Gordon takes great care in choosing plinths that are appropriate, indeed an important part of, the works themselves. As Gordon himself acknowledges, his use of dedicated and integrated plinths was inspired by the Henry Moore's maquettes and working models, mounted on finely finished plinths, which he saw at the Henry Moore exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1992.<sup>23</sup>

The emergence of photography, film and conceptual art as popular forms of artistic expression in the twentieth century has resurrected the old debates about medium supremacy and the very nature of Art. Gordon revisits the issues, deliberately messing them up, in a major painting, with an appropriately rambling discursive title: *Simon Schama makes a guest appearance on set, during the re-enactment and filming of the biblical narrative of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, overseen by Klee's drypoint etching Angelus Novus* (2011; see Genesis 39:1–20 and plate 17). According to the Old Testament story, Joseph was "handsome in form", indeed a wonderful subject for sculpture; Gordon depicts him as the *Dying Gaul*, a bald and circumcised (Hebraic) version of the original bronze sculpture from Pergamum, considered by many to be the supreme example of Hellenistic realism.

12. *opposite*  
**The Confessional** 2010  
Oil on canvas  
122 x 91.5 cm



- above left*
13. **Est Id** 1991  
Mixed media: Metal hook, metal washer, circular metal magnet, metal javelin point, mini shears for fabric testing, brass knob on custom shaped wooden plinth  
32.5 x 49.2 x 9.2 cm



- above right*
14. **Cardinal Sin** 1994-2012  
Mixed media: Found metal objects, rubber door stop, synthetic cat's eye, custom built cedar gun carriage and leather  
31 x 26 x 37.2 cm

- left*
15. **Dead Ringer** 2000-2012  
Mixed media: Old washing machine ringer, wooden log, length of hose, paint brush handle, metal wheels with rubber tyres, ironing board and synthetic turf  
105 x 125 x 40 cm

- opposite*
16. **Paragone of Virtues** 2011  
Cast bronze on wooden plinth on small Art Deco table  
95.8 x 76 x 45.2 cm,  
Bronze only 37 x 26.4 cm





17. **Simon Schama makes a guest appearance on set, during the re-enactment and filming of the biblical narrative of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, overseen by Klee's drypoint etching *Angelus Novus* 2011**  
Oil on canvas  
122 x 91.5 cm

As the Bible story goes, Potiphar's wife "cast longing eyes" on Joseph, begging him to sleep with her. He refused her advances, pointing out that to accede to her requests was completely unacceptable to him: it would be a betrayal of his responsibilities to her husband (his master) and a "sin against God". One day, however, she found him naked and absolutely went for it. He fled, leaving his clothes behind him. Scorned, she flew into a fury, presenting his clothes to the "men of her house", and later also to Potiphar, as evidence of a spurious claim that Joseph had attempted to rape her and thereby mocked them all. And that is how Joseph ended up in prison with Pharaoh's chief butler and baker—and a whole lot of dream psychoanalysis heading his way.

In Gordon's version, the narrative is being distorted to fit in with the dramatic requirements of a screenplay. On this stage-set Joseph does not run away; rather, he slumps to the floor in abject defeat, while Potiphar's deceitful and rather scantily clad wife delivers her accusations. Victor Gordon, resplendent in one of his funny caps, is preoccupied as the cinematographer, stage right, so some interpretation is clearly required. Enter Simon Schama. Schama's entry beneath an image of Klee's etching/watercolour, *Angelus Novus* (1920),<sup>24</sup> reinforces the pictorial fact that Gordon's representation is a modern re-enactment and shatters the imperative, common to both film and illusionistic painting, to suspend the viewer's disbelief.

It is remarkable that Gordon's re-enactment scene, even with its overt modernist interventions and self-conscious stage-craft, remains faithful to a key feature of the original narrative: Joseph's nakedness. It is in his nakedness that Joseph is exposed and vulnerable to exploitation, for he is one of the subjugated people. In this context, the stereotypical gender roles are reversed. In the interpretations by Tintoretto (c. 1544), Guercino (1649), Cignani (1670–1680) and Nattier Jean-Baptiste (1711), however, it is Potiphar's wife who is depicted as a reclining nude, a seductress reaching out towards the clothed Joseph. But why would he be any where near her bed, when he was avoiding her? In Rembrandt's interpretation, *Joseph accused by Potiphar's wife* (1655), the wife is portrayed bedside and explaining to Potiphar what has happened, while a clothed Joseph stands respectfully on the other side of the bed, to heighten the drama.

Gordon's naked Joseph thus exposes the illusionistic nature of the realism of traditional representations, with all their painterly technique, and all the *chiaroscuro*, solely devoted to producing a dramatic effect. As Schopenhauer put it: "Truth is fairest naked, and the simpler its expression the profounder its influence".<sup>25</sup>

## (ii) *On Fragments and Metaphors*

In *The body in pieces: the fragment as a metaphor of modernity*,<sup>26</sup> Linda Nochlin argues that fragmentation, mutilation, destruction and image cropping in visual representation "constitute the essence of representational modernism" (p.8). She introduces her subject with an illuminating discussion of Henri Fuseli's red chalk and sepia wash drawing, *The artist overwhelmed by the grandeur of antique ruins* (1778–79), which portrays an artist slumped in grief at the base of a giant fragmented statue, one hand covering his face, the other caressing the fragmented foot. The artist, who is portrayed whole, but rendered sightless and with less modelling than the statue fragment, is devastated by the loss of a "vanished wholeness".

Nochlin examines the various roles of the fragment, which reflect specific historical contexts. In the French Revolution, for example, the "omnipresence of the fragment" could be related to the overthrow of one civilisation for another: glorified depictions of the severed heads of aristocrats were thus "central to the Revolutionary discourse of destruction" (pp. 10–11). Nochlin moves from a discussion of Géricault's gruesome series of paintings of severed limbs and heads (1818–19) to more subtle fragmentations, which can serve as social, psychological and metaphysical markers. It is the "loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value" that "mark modern experience", and reflect modernity itself (pp. 23–24).

Nochlin's analysis strikes a chord with Gordon, who has extensively explored the role of fragments as signifiers. Although he is fundamentally concerned with the human condition, in its various social and historical contexts, it is important to note, before we move on with our main discussion, that Gordon is also concerned about the management of our natural environment. In *Haathi Mere Saathi* (2006; see plate 19), the Hindi phrase for "I like elephants", Gordon portrays a set of elephant feet fragments covered in zebra hide to serve as domestic furniture. A small figure of the revered and elephant-headed Hindu deity, Ganesha, floats above. In the centre of the composition is a target, aimed at a space where the body of the elephant should be.<sup>27</sup> The painting uses fragments to stimulate eco-political awareness and reflects Gordon's own disgust with the hunting and dismemberment of elephants in his native homeland.

In his *Xeuxian Fragments* (1996; see plates 43 and 44), Gordon reflects on the ancient Greek mythological story of Xeuxis of Heraclea (often referred to as Zeuxis), who lived in the fifth century BC. Pliny the Elder tells the tale of Zeuxis's commission to paint the perfect woman:

Zeuxis is generally censured for making the heads and articulations of his figures out of proportion. And yet, so



18. **Suffer Little Children** 2008  
Oil on board  
128 x 70 cm



19. **Haathi Mere Saathi** 2006  
Oil on canvas  
76.5 x 61.2 cm

scrupulously careful was he, that on one occasion, when he was about to execute a painting for the people of Agrigentum, . . . he had the the young maidens of the place stripped for examination, and selected five of them, in order to adopt in his picture, the most commendable points in the form of each.<sup>28</sup>

Gordon often creates composite figures but retains the integrity of the juxtaposed fragments. In *Improvvisatori* (1996; see plate 50), Gordon positions a cropped black and white image of an upper torso on top of a cropped colour image of a lower torso. As Gordon notes: “The depiction of a *revitalised* realism” in the composite image “is then juxtaposed against a flat [modernist] minimalist backplane”.<sup>29</sup>

In *Catambulare* (1993–1996; see plate 35), Gordon’s take on the much painted subject of the Three Graces (in Greek mythology the triple embodiment of such ideals as beauty, charm and joy) three robotic mannequins parade on a cat walk, but each one of them has incorporated into their figure a personalised naturalist fragment. However, the public exposure of what is personal, in the context of a parade, objectifies the fragments, which are now to be interpreted as representing the three erogenous zones, commonly attributed to the heterosexual male gaze.

Gordon’s use of mannequins, so reminiscent of De Chirico’s metaphysical paintings, allows him to play with classical iconography, as he does in his *Venus after Titian* (1993; see plate 32) and his later series of six *Diminutive Venus paintings* (2005; for example, see plates 33 and 34), or make serious political statements about suffering and loss. In *Suffer Little Children* (2008; see plate 18), Gordon portrays a doll with a beautiful, rosy-cheeked face from a high viewpoint, directing the viewer’s attention to her mannequin-like arms that are suggestive of prosthetic replacement. Is she a landmine victim? Or has she been subjected to medical experimentation? An identification number, just visible on the left forearm, is often used by Gordon to signify that the figure represents a Holocaust camp inmate/victim. Our response is overwhelmingly one of compassion, driven by the Red Cross on her simple garment, and a resolution that no child should be allowed to suffer so.

### **(iii) On some matters Germanic**

Gordon’s interest in German history is not confined to the history of the Holocaust, which is exemplified in his haunting portrait, *44070—St Edith Stein—Finite, Eternal Being* (2001; see plate 21),<sup>30</sup> and paintings such as *The Fall of the Cards* (1992; see plate 67); Gordon has drawn much inspiration from contemporary German artists, such as Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter and Hans Haacke,

who have been brave enough, not only to address the issues of the internationalised consumer society and the preservation of the natural environment, but also to confront the past and re-evaluate foundation Germanic myths and national ideologies.

In *Landscape and memory*,<sup>31</sup> Simon Schama devotes a section of his book (pp. 120–134) to the work of Anselm Kiefer, who was born in Germany at the end of WWII. Kiefer was interested in German tribal arboreal mythology, the significance of the ancient *sylvia Hercynia*, and admired the art activism of Joseph Beuys and the Greens, who began protesting about forest death (*Waldsterben*) in the 1970s and 1980s. He is still remembered, however, for his early work in which, as Schama puts it, “he was committed to becoming a cultural nuisance, worrying away at the scabs of memory until they revealed open and livid wounds again”.

In his first solo exhibition, *Besetzungen (Occupations)*, at Galerie am Kaiserplatz in Karlsruhe in 1969, Kiefer exhibited “a series of photographs of himself in boots and breeches making the Nazi *Sieg heil* salute on different European sites”, one of which had Kiefer saluting out to sea from wave-washed rocks and referencing Caspar David Friedrich’s *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (1818). In this provocative juxtaposition, Kiefer challenges the German people to re-evaluate their Romantic and heroic traditions and mythology in the light of recent historical events.

Photographs of German officers in uniform certainly grab attention. On the front cover of *Gerhard Richter (October Files 8, 2009)*,<sup>32</sup> we are faced with one of Richter’s hallmark blurred black and white photo-paintings, *Uncle Rudi* (1965), an image of a German officer standing at ease and smiling as the world seemingly passes him by.

In *My shadow falls over the feeding chair* (2012; see plate 20), a disarming, self-effacing, but captivating collage on plywood, Victor Gordon presents a portrait of the artist as a young military conscript standing at ease, still attached to the feeding chair by his shadow. Surely he is still too young to serve; indeed, he is so small that he requires the assistance of a bright orange ottoman for his head to reach above the chair!

The relationship between Gordon’s and Richter’s work is interesting, in particular the mutual influence of Duchamp. In an interview with Benjamin Buchloh in 1986,<sup>33</sup> Richter becomes a little touchy when Buchloh says he finds it “hard to believe” that Richter had claimed to be unfamiliar with Duchamp’s work, when his *Four panes of glass* (1967) seems to relate to Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, and that Richter had been to the Duchamp exhibition in Krefeld in 1963. And Richter’s blurred photo-painting, *Ena (Nude on a staircase)* of 1966 is of course quoting Duchamp’s iconic *Nude descending a staircase*, which he admitted he had seen in



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reproduction. Although he also claimed in hindsight that his works then involved “something of an anti-Duchamp attitude”, he reiterated that he thought Duchamp’s *Nude*, while “utterly traditional”, was “a very beautiful painting”.

Gordon’s *Ascension—Nude ascending a staircase* (2006; see plate 41) references both Duchamp’s and Richter’s work, but with significant departures. Instead of a completely blurred nude, descending the staircase in full frontal view (as in Richter’s *Ema*), Gordon’s pixellated nude ascends a staircase, made up of books (each even larger in size than an elephant folio) and overlaid with red carpet. The nude is being watched by a curious angel, who is letting her fingers do the walking on a sill. On the wall beside her is a bookcase and the balustrade above the nude is made of arch lever files. The nude seems to be sleep walking, but maybe all the books, documents and reportage in the world could not tell us what is really going on here—and, just maybe, that’s the point!

Hans Haacke is another contemporary German artist of interest to Gordon, and he too has something to say about Duchamp, stating that he was “the first artist to think about the aura that surrounds art and artefacts, and the power of context”.<sup>34</sup> Context is all-important in Haacke’s projects. As Grasskamp states: “For every exhibition Haacke devises a work whose aesthetic and thematic co-ordinates derive directly from its local context”. Both Haacke and Gordon (see plate; 121, *Collage Photographs and Text* 1981) advocate the need for corporate accountability and use mock advertisements to highlight unethical practice. Haacke, for example, produced a travel advertisement, which featured a couple of hippopotamuses (one with its mouth wide open, as if yawning) and the text:

IF “HIPPOCRACY” BORES YOU . . . COME SEE THE REAL SOUTH AFRICA

In *Fantasize—Go All The Way* (1986–1988; see plate 176); Gordon emphasises satirically the dislocation between the illusionary reality of advertising material and real life; in this apartheid-era painting, Gordon targets advertisements for Fanta (a product of the Coca Cola Co.) and Lion Beer (with its ad., “Go all the way”). The advertisements, promoting self-gratification, distract the viewer from witnessing in the background a densely packed and troubled township, which is going up in smoke.

Like Anselm Kiefer, Hans Haacke has been unafraid to confront Germany’s past. At the 1993 Venice Biennale, for example, Haacke’s award-winning installation, *Germania*, emphasised the German pavilion’s undeniable roots in the 1933 pavilion, which Hitler

himself visited during his first official trip abroad. At the entrance of the pavilion, and blocking the view of the interior, Haacke placed a red wall with a black and white photograph of Hitler’s visit to the pavilion in 1934. In his installation, Haacke ripped up the floor of the pavilion, in remembrance of Hitler’s insistence that the parquet floor of the pavilion be replaced with marble, but in his revisitation, Haacke’s rubble seemed to proclaim that his nation’s foundation myths and Speer’s and Hitler’s vision of post-war Berlin (as *Germania*) had now been completely smashed.

Haacke’s monumental installation was a timely reminder of the power of art both to represent and change ideas. It is important to note, however, that Gordon’s installation, *Behold the Lands where Satan reigns* (1990) preceded Haacke’s and that Gordon’s extremely brave and confronting close-up colour photograph of Eugene Terreblanche, giving a fascist salute at an Afrikaner Resistance Movement rally, was taken in 1987 (see plate 166). In other words, although Gordon has been influenced by post-war German artists, his work is an original contribution. As far as I am concerned, the output of all these artists is actually a matter of great minds thinking somewhat alike, and is yet another example of *zeitgeist*.

#### (iv) *On Art and Justice*

In Victor Gordon’s work as a whole, we see a deep commitment to expose institutional and corporate exploitation and corrupt governance and promote individual freedoms and natural justice. As we have seen, his anti-apartheid work has been greatly appreciated in South Africa, where institutions such as the Constitutional Court have recognised the important role which artists have played and continue to play in society. Indeed, the title of the official catalogue of the art collection of the Constitutional Court of South Africa is *Art and Justice*.<sup>35</sup>

In Australia, Gordon has continued to produce art to challenge our historical perceptions of justice in this country. He is concerned with a number of issues. For example, racism persists and is expressed in its manifestations, such as the disproportionate number of Aboriginal deaths in custody. In *J’accuse!* (2008; see plate 23), an Aboriginal protester confronts the viewer with a determined gaze. The title of the work quotes Émile Zola’s famous letter to the President of France, Félix Faure—published on the front page of *L’aurore* under the bold headline, “J’accuse . . . !”—accusing his government of anti-Semitism and the false conviction of Alfred Dreyfus, a French Army General Staff officer for espionage. Although he was not alone in his defence of Dreyfus, it came at a

20. *opposite*  
**My shadow falls over the feeding chair** 2012  
Collage on plywood  
41 x 32.5 cm



21. **44070—St Edith Stein—Finite, Eternal Being** 2001  
 Oil on board  
 60 x 39 cm  
 Collection: Constitutional Court,  
 South Africa

- opposite*  
 22. **Sanguine Terminus at White Rocks—Broken Hill**  
**1.1.1915** 2000–2009  
 Oil on canvas under coloured acrylic  
 76 x 102 cm

great personal cost: he was found guilty of libel and was forced to flee to England to escape imprisonment. In a way, then, Gordon's commitment to activist art echoes Zola's dedication to the pursuit of justice.

*Sanguine Terminus at White Rocks—Broken Hill 1.1.1915* (2000–2009; see plate 22), reflects Gordon's long standing interest in the events surrounding the so-called *Battle of Broken Hill* or the *Broken Hill Massacre* on 1 January, 1915. Although this was prior to the Gallipoli campaign, two Muslim men, who saw themselves as defenders of their faith, and the Ottoman Empire, against British military aggression, ambushed a train conveying passengers from Broken Hill to Silverton (the venue of the Manchester Unity Order of Oddfellows annual picnic), fatally shooting two passengers and injuring another seven.

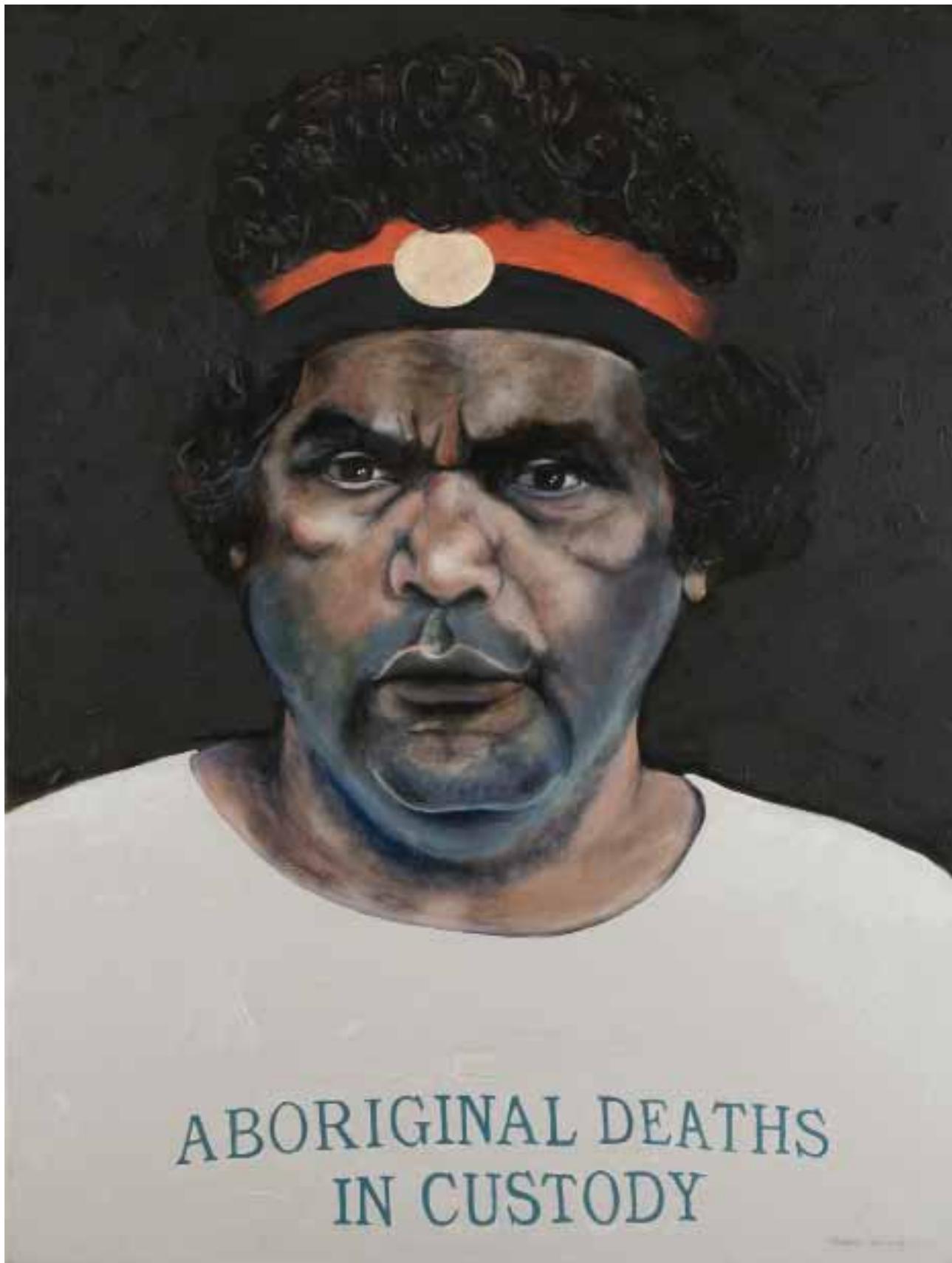
Gordon's concern here is that the response to this terrible act turned out to be rough justice, meted out by vigilantes: a mob joined the police and military in a one-sided gun battle at a white

quartz outcrop. Both men were killed, but eyewitness accounts suggest that one of the men, Bashda Mahommed Gool, was cut down by gunfire as he stood with a white rag tied to his rifle. The mob would not allow the bodies of the men to be taken away and the police disposed of them in secret. In Gordon's picture, which he has covered in red acrylic, the spent shell cases lying on the ground are the only material evidence of what has taken place that fateful day. The hard-edged rocks stand as silent sentinels over an eerily desolate scene. There is here a loss of humanity, as if no-one really cares.

Victor Gordon cares.

In this survey we have introduced the work of an artist who challenges the viewer not only to reflect upon our history and our culture, but also to engage with those important socio-political issues that do require discussion, and are of the utmost importance for the development of a fairer and more just society.





23. **J'Accuse! (20,000 years of dreamtime—220 years of nightmare)** 2008  
Oil on canvas  
122.5 x 91.5 cm

# Notes

- For further reading on Victor Gordon's place in the Struggle Art of South Africa, and an informative review of the genesis of the Ifa Lethu Foundation and its inaugural exhibition, *Home and away: a return to the South*, see Steven Dubin's South Africa Report, 'Exiles' return', in *Art in America*, November, 2010, pp. 69–76.
- See the catalogue, *Coming home: An exhibition of South African art repatriated by the Ifa Lethu Foundation*, edited by Carol Brown (Groenkloof: Ifa Lethu Foundation, undated), sometime after the inaugural exhibition, in the Old Fort at Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, from June to August, 2010. The exhibition, initially entitled *Home and Away*, has subsequently been touring internationally, including a stop-over exhibition at the Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra, which was opened by Malcolm Fraser.
- Leon Golub, quoted in Dan Cameron's review, 'Content in context: the retrospectives of Leon Golub and George McNeil', in *Arts Magazine*, March, 1985, pp. 115–117; quote on p. 116. In his essay, 'What about what if is as or is is', in *Victor Gordon: Retrospective* (Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, pp. 2–5; quote on p. 3), Gordon himself stated: I have always tended to polarise issues, to understand them by framing them in their extreme context or manifestation; after all I was born in the land of 'black and white'.
- Victor Gordon, personal communication.
- See Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and aphorisms* (selected from the second volume of *Parerga and Paralipomena*, originally published in 1851, and translated from the German with an introduction by R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 203. On the point of having something important and personal to say, Dr Kit Messham-Muir, a former student of Gordon at the Sydney College of the Arts, and the author of an introductory essay in *Victor Gordon: Retrospective* (Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, pp. 7–10), relates the story of how Gordon once rebuked a student for producing an anti-apartheid work without a personal context for it. Gordon still tells his students—and this is my polite translation—that if they have nothing to say, they should perhaps be silent.
- Ibid.*, p. 197.
- Ibid.*, p. 63. (See Hollingdale's introduction, pp. 20–23.) Interestingly, with respect to pessimism, Schopenhauer (*ibid.*, p. 190) argued that the "basic character of Judaism is realism and optimism", while the "basic character of Brahmanism and Buddhism, on the contrary, is idealism and pessimism". On art, Schopenhauer (*ibid.*, p. 160) bases his thinking on the Platonic theory of idealised form: The true work of art leads us from that which exists only once and never again, i.e. the individual, to that which exists perpetually and time and time again in innumerable manifestations, the pure form or Idea.
- Victor Gordon, op. cit., p. 3. Gordon's pessimism is reflected in a couple of his favourite lines from Edgar Allan Poe's poem, *Conqueror Worm* (1843):  
And much of Madness, and more of Sin,  
And Horror the soul of the plot.
- See Johan Huizinga, Foreword (1938) to *Homo ludens: a study of the play-element in culture*, which was originally published in 1938; this English translation from the 1944 German edition, published in Switzerland, utilised Huizinga's own late English translation (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955; see p. 173 for the second part of the quotation). On the significance of Huizinga's work, see Jacques Ehrmann, 'Homo Ludens revisited', in J. Ehrmann (ed.) *Game, play, literature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, pp. 31–57), who states that Huizinga's book "inaugurates an anthropology of play expressing views of remarkable scope and insight".
- Johan Huizinga, *ibid.*, pp. 170–171. On the classification of systems and ideologies, Huizinga (*ibid.*, p. 203) states: "Wherever there is a catch-word ending in *-ism* we are hot on the tracks of a play-community".
- The Conditions of Entry, reissued each year, are accessible through the Art Gallery of NSW. The 1998 Conditions were also published in Peter Ross's *Let's face it: the history of the Archibald Prize* (Sydney: The Art Gallery of NSW, 1999, p. 143), which is an entertaining, almost nostalgic trip through what Ross called "the Archibald story". The Foreword, by the Director, Edmund Capon, is also a good read. For this book, Ross interviewed extant recipients of the prize, including Nora Heysen, the first woman to be awarded the prize. As her friend, personal assistant and cataloguer in her later years, I was fortunate enough to be present when Ross visited her in 1997 to discuss the Archibald Prize. Nora Heysen won the prize in 1938, at the age of 27, with a portrait of Mme. Elink Schuurman, the wife of the Dutch consul and a nondescript Adelaide socialite. High drama followed. Disgruntled artists met privately, forming objections that the subject of the portrait did not meet the standards of eminence required by the Conditions of Entry and Mary Edwards—the artist who coveted the prize herself, not to mention an appointment as Australia's first woman official war artist (and would later take the Trustees to court over Dobell's winning portrait of Joshua Smith in 1943)—told Nora to her face that she didn't deserve the prize and if she had any honour she should give it back, while the *Daily Telegraph* played the woman not the brush, pillorying her for not using make-up, "not even lipstick". The sad thing about all of this is that Nora, who was terribly shy and introspective, and always took any criticism to heart, came to believe that she only won the Archibald Prize because of the influence of men, such as Sir James McGregor, who was her father's friend, the art publisher Sydney Ure Smith and other luminaries in the powerful Society of Artists. However, the forces aligned against her perceived conservatism grew stronger and may well have been a factor in the "drift of her career from this point towards obscurity", as Barry Pearce put it in his obituary (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January, 2004, p. 13). I have laboured this point because I see in Victor Gordon, as I did in Nora Heysen, the same determination to forge an artistic identity, to be thoroughly true to a personal set of philosophical and artistic values—in spite of intense anguish about the art politics that seemingly control an artist's destiny.
- Victor Gordon, unpublished artist's notes. In another painting with deep personal significance, *The Rape and Suicide of Lucretia* (2010; see plate 1 opposite Table of Contents), Gordon presents Lucretia on the edge of a stool, as if "at the edge of the abyss" (as he puts it in his notes), not gazing heavenward and holding the point of a dagger against her chest (as in many traditional representations, including those by Titian and Ludovico Mazzanti), but head bowed and shaved, the knife lying in her hands. Naked and dishevelled, and wearing only one red shoe, Lucretia is caught contemplating suicide. For his props, Gordon used an ancient bronze short sword, while the shoe was borrowed from his partner, Kira. The deep significance for Victor of the story of Lucretia, however, is that his own mother committed suicide. Apart from the act itself, the stories of the two women have something in common: just as Lucretia told immediate male family members about her rape and planned suicide, Victor's mother had said over the years that she would remain alive only until Victor, her youngest child, turned 21. He had believed that she was merely affirming her responsibilities to her children and following her Christian faith, as she had inscribed on the flyleaf of her Bible—"Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life", from *Revelations* 2:10—but the portent of her words was not fully realised until she phoned him a few hours before her death, to tell him that she had overdosed. The Lucretia painting, capturing as it does *Lucretia's* unfolding and intense psychological crisis, thus reflects Gordon's life experience and demonstrates just how traumatic and impactful such events can be for the victim's family and friends.
- In his unpublished artist's notes, Gordon reflects on the placement of an image of Whiteread's solid concrete *House* within his composition (2008), stating that for him it is "prefiguring the spaceship hovering over Johannesburg in the film, *District 9*", co-written and directed by Neill Blomkamp, released in 2009 and telling the mock-documentary story of alien immigrant prawns (yes, prawns) who try to eke out a life in the slums of Johannesburg, only to become pawns in a bigger game.
- Gordon often references Duchamp; sometimes the reference is overt, but on other occasions it is subtle. See, for example *Glory be to God for dappled things* (2010; see plate 31), a work that plays with artistic genres and gestures as well as the complex, changeable presentations of reality. The reclining nude (her pose reminiscent of one of Titian's *Danaë*) and the Stuka dive bomber are both camouflaged, but the chameleon is not disturbed by anything in the composition and has made no attempt to blend in. Erotic suggestions abound in this work, including the book on the bed, which is an edition of George Bataille's *Story of the Eye* that features on its cover an image of Duchamp's final major work, the installation *Etant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (which he had worked on in New York from 1946 to 1966, as he states in the work's pseudo-subtitle: *Approximation démontable, exécutée entre 1946 et 1966 à N.Y. Par approximation j'entends une marge d'ad libitum dans le démontage et remontage*). On *Etant donnés*, see Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, David Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999, pp. 190–205).
- Paul Johnson, *Art: a new history* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003, p. 669). Johnson also dismisses Surrealism as "a mere publicity stunt" (*ibid.*, p. 670). Edmund Capon, in his essay, 'I Blame Duchamp', published in his book, *I blame Duchamp: my life's adventures in Art* (London: Penguin Books, 2009, p. 165), does indeed blame Duchamp for introducing a thoughtless brand of "lazy spontaneity" that seems to be the condition and "the pale horizons of so much conceptual art". For Capon, "an object of function or happenstance, the readymade or the 'found' object, is not art".
- Bernard Smith, *Modernism's history: a study in twentieth-century art and ideas* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998, pp. 120–121).
- George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde, 'Art Is in Danger', originally published as 'Die Kunst ist in Gefahr: ein Orientierungsversuch' (Berlin: Malik Verlag, 1925), and translated by Gabriele Bennet in: Lucy Lippard (ed.), *Dadas on Art* (New Jersey, 1971). For extracts from this translation, see Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in theory 1900–1990: an anthology of changing ideas* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993, pp. 450–454; quote on p. 451).
- James Gleeson, 'The necessity for Surrealism', a paper read to the Contemporary Art Society, reprinted in *A comment*, May 1941, no. 5, and in: Lou Klepac (ed.), *James Gleeson: beyond the screen of sight* (Roseville: The Beagle Press, 2004, pp. 95–96; quote on p. 96). See also Gleeson's 'What is Surrealism?', *Art in Australia*, 25 November 1940, pp. 27–30, also reprinted in Klepac's catalogue (p. 77). The late James Gleeson was revered by other Australian artists; indeed, Nora Heysen once told me that as far as she was concerned, as an Australian painter, Gleeson was "our master".
- See, for example, André Breton's *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (originally published in Paris in 1924 and translated by R. Seaver and H.R. Lane in: André Breton,

- Manifestos of Surrealism*, Michigan, 1969, with extracts reproduced in Harrison and Wood, op. cit., pp. 432–439; see p. 438 for definitions), who defined Surrealism in part as the expression of “the actual functioning of thought . . . in the absence of any control exercised by reason”. On the latter point, see Gleeson (above). In his *Second Manifesto* (see Seaver and Lane, op. cit., and Harrison and Wood, op. cit., p. 446–450), Breton acknowledges the fundamental influence of Freudian criticism in Surrealism. It is interesting to note that Schopenhauer (op. cit., p. 175) earlier stated: “Everything primary, and consequently everything genuine, in man works as the forces of nature do, unconsciously”.
20. Some of Gordon’s titles are puns on games: for example, *The Knave of Clubs* (1987; see plate 179) and *The Fall of the Cards* (1992; see plate 67).
  21. See, for example, Gordon’s own extensive commentary on his installation, *Pretext* (1991; see plate 161), a complex work dealing with sensitive sexual politics, in *Victor Gordon: Retrospective* (op. cit., pp. 16–17).
  22. For an accessible summary of the debate, see ‘Paragone: painting or sculpture?’, published online by the University of the Arts, London, 2012, at [www.universalleonardo.org/essays](http://www.universalleonardo.org/essays). For the story of Giorgione’s intervention in the debate, see Giorgio Vasari, ‘Giorgione da Castelfranco’ in *Lives of the artists: Volume I* (A selection translated by George Bull, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987, pp. 272–277).
  23. Images of many of Moore’s maquettes and working models are reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, *Henry Moore*, compiled by David Mitchinson and Nick Waterlow and edited by Angela Dyer, with essays by Nick Waterlow and Susan Compton (Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW, 1992, and distributed in 2000).
  24. In his *Ninth thesis on the philosophy of history*, Walter Benjamin discusses Klee’s etching/watercolour, *Angelus Novus* (1920), which he treasured. This “angel of history”, as Benjamin called it, is powerless to intervene in the human catastrophe that blasts the debris of progress into his wings, propelling him into the future. For a discussion of Benjamin’s interest in Klee’s work, see Raymond Barglow, ‘The angel of history: Walter Benjamin’s vision of hope and despair’, originally published in *Tikkun*, but reproduced online at [www.barglow.com/angel\\_of\\_history](http://www.barglow.com/angel_of_history). What is Simon Schama’s role in all this? In an edited version of his BBC history lecture, ‘Television and the trouble with history’, published in *The Guardian*, 18 June, 2002, Schama states: “It was Walter Benjamin who agonised (right up to his death) about the ‘Angel of History’ blown backwards into the future, stunned by the mounting wreckage of the past, incapable of making them whole again. It was also Benjamin who accepted that the future, for better or worse, would be experienced in fragments”.
  25. Schopenhauer, op. cit., p. 205.
  26. Linda Nochlin, *The body in pieces: the fragment as a metaphor of modernity* (Paperback ed., New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), based on the 1994 Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture.
  27. In his series, *Verisimilitude* (2000; see plates 84, 85, 86 and 87), Gordon positions a variety of targeting devices in the centre of the compositions to focus our attention on the meaning of the *land* and, as Gordon himself notes, to encourage the viewer “to interpret and contribute their own individual meaning to the *idea* of landscape”.
  28. Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, translated by John Bostock (London: H.T. Riley and Taylor and Francis, 1855, Chapter 36). According to Bostock’s notes to this translation: “Cicero and Dionysius of Halicarnassus say that this picture was executed at Crotona, and not at Agrigentum. It is generally supposed to have been a picture of Helena, afterwards mentioned by Pliny”.
  29. Victor Gordon, unpublished artist’s notes.
  30. For a discussion of Edith Stein, the Carmelite nun and philosopher with Jewish parentage, who was murdered at Auschwitz, and the significance of Gordon’s portrait, see Kit Messham-Muir (op. cit., p. 10).
  31. Simon Schama, *Landscape and memory* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995).
  32. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (ed.), *Gerhard Richter* (October files 8, Cambridge, Ma: MIT, 2009).
  33. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, ‘An interview with Gerhard Richter (1986)’, in Buchloh (ibid., pp. 1–34); Richter’s *Ema* (*Nude on a staircase*), 1966, is reproduced on p. 6.
  34. ‘Molly Nesbit in conversation with Hans Haacke’ in Walter Grasskamp, Molly Nesbit and Jon Bird (eds.) *Hans Haacke* (London: Phaidon Press, 2004, pp. 6–24; quote on p. 18). For Grasskamp’s quote and Haacke’s mock travel advertisement for South Africa, see Walter Grasskamp, ‘Real time: the work of Hans Haacke’ (ibid., p. 65). For documentation of the 1993 installation, *Germania*, see Walter Grasskamp (ibid., pp. 76–78).
  35. Bronwyn Law-Viljoen (ed.), *Art and Justice: The Art of the Constitutional Court of South Africa* (with an Introduction by Janina Makin, Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2008).



24. **Untitled** (anatomical specimen) 2007  
Pencil drawing on paper  
61 x 46.2 cm