

METRO ARTS // EXHIBITION PROGRAM



THE BURNING /
BENJAMIN CROWLEY

18 NOVEMBER - 5 DECEMBER 2015

NIGHT MOVES

David M Thomas



“Our great war is a spiritual war and our great depression is our lives”.
Tyler Durden, ideologue the movie *Fight Club*, 1999.

Ben Crowley’s work is about death. Not purely for philosophical reason, but because when he was on an art residency in Iceland, after giving a presentation of his work he was accused of sounding robotic. The incident is analogous of certain relationships in his work and marks a shift between the didactic and the humorous, toward a poetic existentialism. I argue that these relational poles, in fact, overlap. What Crowley was and still is dealing with, in terms of a problematic and yet sometimes-lovable Australian male vernacular, is as poetic, existential and deadly as it gets. Nevertheless it’s always the negative criticism that does you the most good... and bad.

So how has Ben Crowley addressed the somewhat suspect topic of Australian masculine vernaculars? In various recent works he sets fire to the word Hero, he screams in the wilderness, he cradles a woman protecting her from the ice and snow, he stands on the precipice of the cliff face; on the other hand there is a deification of the already deified and yet redundant Charles Bronson. Is he suggesting that men are not all that bad? Or is Crowley recommending that men are in fact bad, but worse still than we are intent on noticing.

I know this sounds weird, especially if you are coming at this with a perspective that any consideration of masculine vernaculars is suspect. Like capitalism however, or any other ideology the ideas are simply a set of tools. If the tools are selected, organised and then used by evil people to initiate and then justify selfish and horrible acts, this is worth stopping. In Crowley’s case, however, the ideas are examined, disassembled, modified and often laughed at, as they are reassembled and presented to us as visual philosophical work.

So my question to myself when considering Crowley’s work was; how much of being a man is about fear and anxiety and can anyone really fear death in Kmart? I had this experience recently going to Kmart in Wynnnum West. I had to leave very quickly as I was confronted by an Australian man who was reminding me, and everyone else there, what country I was in. He did this in a loud caricatured accent that freaked me

out. There was something deliberately menacing about his behaviour. It was strangely out of place in this context. It was a bit too loud for 4.30pm on a Monday afternoon. Still, I don't think the man was completely aware of his aggressive affront or its effect on others. It was almost like a self-defence mechanism against the alienation of the shopping mall experience.

What Crowley does that is endearing is he plays with the language of masculine heroics, that are not particular to Australian art history, but the phenomenological spaces of the shopping mall, the bowling club and the pub. I understand this because I have personally felt anxious for my own life in all these places and it was not just an anxiety about losing my sense of self. It was not just that I felt disgusted at the visceral often confronting reality of maleness but because these public spaces are imbued with a real physical threat emanating from other men. It has something to do with large, often scared mammals on drugs.

So how can philosophy help in this situation and what's up with Søren Kierkegaard? What did he have to say about death and anxiety? What was his conclusion about how to deal with the existential desire, as Crowley demonstrates, to simultaneously throw oneself from the cliff and to cling to its edge? One might describe Kierkegaard as a radicalised Christian, so his answer in this light is obvious...the leap for him was one of faith that directly confronts the ideas of spirit and freedom. An important note here is that in his world the word and concept of mind and spirit are closely linked, much more closely than they are now.

So Kierkegaard's leap is one of belief before reason, knowing before the need for justification or as my computer just told me "a complete trust or confidence in someone or something". In Crowley's words;

After I got home and started reading, I came across Kierkegaard's dizziness of freedom theory, in which he uses the act of approaching a cliff face as a metaphor. The theory talks about the dual sensations of the fear of falling while wanting to throw oneself from the cliff, and this experience is parallel to the 'dizziness of freedom'. I think I was mostly taken by this idea because it matched the kind of experience I had while making the video from Iceland.

The anxiety also comes from the fact that we have the freedom to believe in things or not, but not always the ability to trust in them at all, as Louis CK, says;

I have a lot of beliefs, and I live by none of them, they're just my beliefs, I just like believing them, I like that part, they're my little believies, they make me feel good about who I am, but if they get in the way of a thing I want, I can F@#\$%G without them.

CK's humour describes the duplicity of being, and in this case being a middle aged, middle class, white man living in a time and a country dismantling its own masculine archetypes. Imagine Charles Bronson, either one, in the same physical or conceptual space as Chandler Bing. The possibility and personal responsibility that this duplicity even multiplicity engenders is exactly what I trust. Without this responsibility for philosophical work, like Jim Morrison, another iconoclastic archetype says, "We're all a bunch of F@#\$%G idiots".

"I am in a world of shit, yes, but I am alive, and I am not afraid."
Private Joker, *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987.

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CREDITS

Cover / Benjamin Crowley, *Untitled* 2015. Installed at Metro Arts.

Inside / Benjamin Crowley, *Walking to the Edge of a small Cliff* 2014. Video still.

VOTE OF THANKS

The artist wishes to thank David M Thomas, Amy-Clare McCarthy and the team from Metro Arts.



**Queensland
Government**

Metro Arts acknowledges the assistance of the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.