

TEXT HEAVY

JAMES DODD'S INTEREST IN STREET ART GOES BEYOND MERE CULTURAL APPROPRIATION. INSTEAD, HE USES GRAFFITI TO SHOW US A VERSION OF AUSTRALIA THAT HAS BEEN TAGGED, SCRIBBLED AND SCRAWLED ON THE SURFACES OF OUR PUBLIC SPACES WRITES **EDWARD COLLESS**. PORTRAIT BY **DENYS FINNEY**.

We sometimes fail to notice it, but graffiti messages continuously appear around us – stencilled onto alley walls or sprayed in calligraphic glyphs on urban underpasses and warehouse walls, of course, but also etched into school desks, scribbled on toilet doors, doodled into the margins of diaries and boardroom agendas.

It's as much the commotion of the unconscious, released through idleness or boredom or distraction as it is of consciously articulate political passion, or of anarchistic comedy and abreactive rage. And – don't forget – it's also the idiom of narcissistic posturing and sexual or racial insult.

In reality, graffiti is hardly an activity specific to, or even exemplified by, the street, just as it's simplistic to reduce it to the outlaw eruptions, guerrilla pace and urgent emotionalism of youth culture. But it is as an art of the street – at least of the breaches and lulls in urban consumer signage – that graffiti has gained its current cultural accreditation. And it is as the expression of marginalised, disenfranchised but disobedient youth that it has gained prestige value as a contestation of the streetscape of commodity capitalism.

There's no disputing that **James Dodd's** art owes it credentials and its enthusiasm to this genre of street-level situationism that celebrates the idiosyncratic signatures of subjectivities roaming the less domesticated zones of the public sphere. As an artistic native of these places, he animatedly exercises both the stylistics (witty, pugnacious) and the earnest political intonations (self-congratulatory as well as rebellious) of street art. **Osama bin Laden** flips the finger in a silvery stencilled portrait while **John Howard** wags his like an accusing parent. An anonymous desert soldier in camouflage flourishes his fingers in an exuberant salute.

Dodd evidently relishes the popist glare of blunt, defamatory, in-your-face jibes. But also, from his earlier work showcased for instance in the 2002 *Primavera* at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art and at GRANTPIRRIE in 2003, he has been fascinated by both the physical transience and weathering of street art as well as its equally lingering obscurity and esoteric edge. Photographing tags, text murals, stickers, slogans, emblems, emoticons with an ethnological interest in regional juvenilia and graphic dialect that matches his



Portrait shot on location at the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide.



aesthetic passion, Dodd collages these scraps into intricately verbose palimpsests that seem to channel a hysterical multitude of voices from desolate public transit zones.

Graffiti artists these days – those with felt-tip pen and aerosol can, at any rate – prefer calling their work “writing”. When Dodd transposes this often cryptic script of renegade social networking onto his gallery walls, onto his canvases or reconstructed hutches (such as his lushly defaced replica of a Darwin bus shelter, shown in the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art’s *Optimism* exhibition last year) he reforms the writing (the off-hand slogans, the invective) into flamboyant drawing. Dodd’s graffiti is a facsimile of these arcane if vulgar texts, but a bustling and exaggerated one, like a disorderly sort of décor, an ornamentation that carries the sentimentality of a tattoo gone past its prime (a gesture to a love long lost or to a momentary urge).

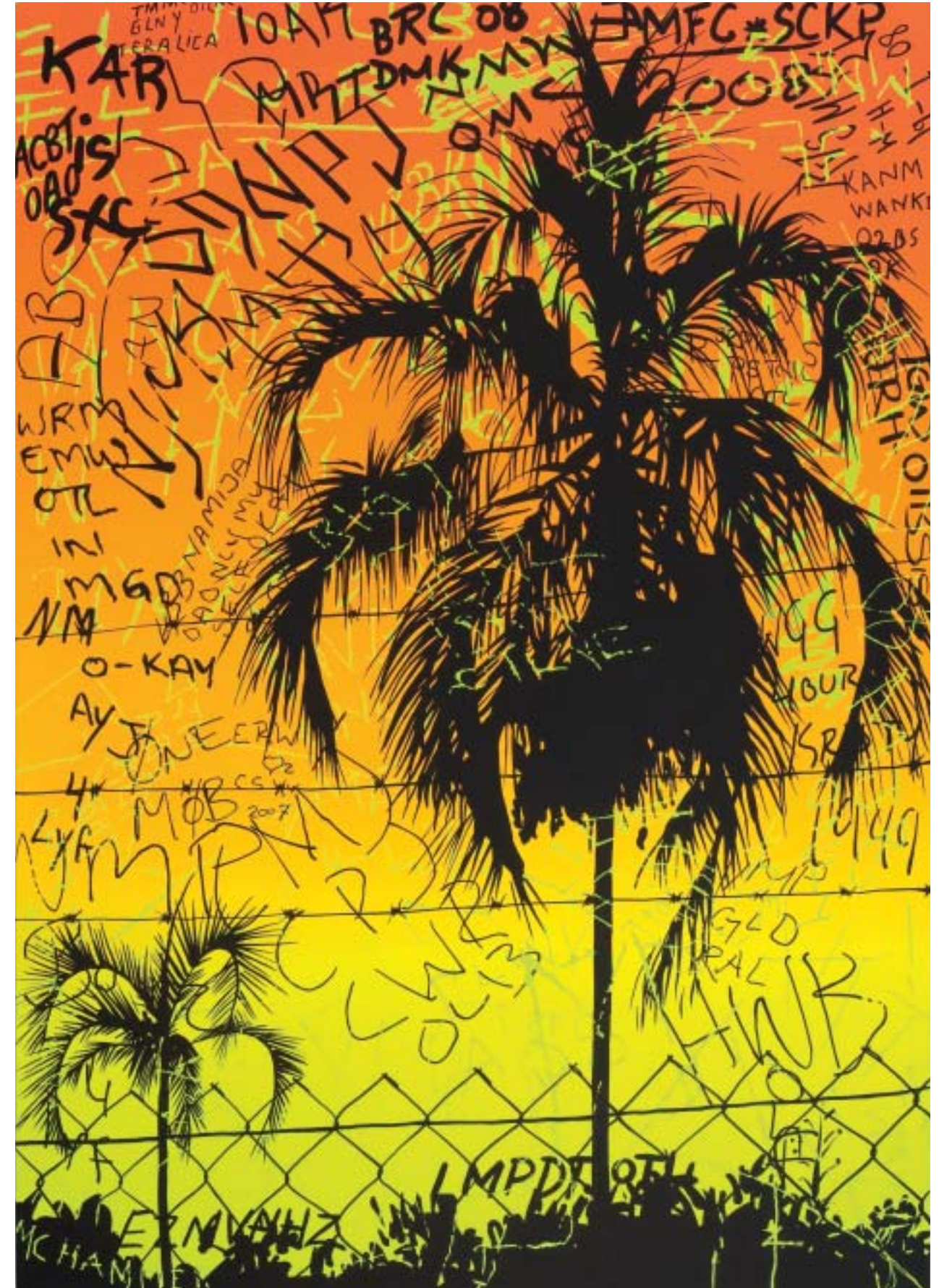
In a way too, Dodd’s art is starting to even resemble the cave walls of Lascaux; not the actual prehistoric caves whose graffiti is now sealed off from public gaze, but the brilliant duplicate that signals the inaccessibility and invisibility, even the magical obscenity, of the original. ■

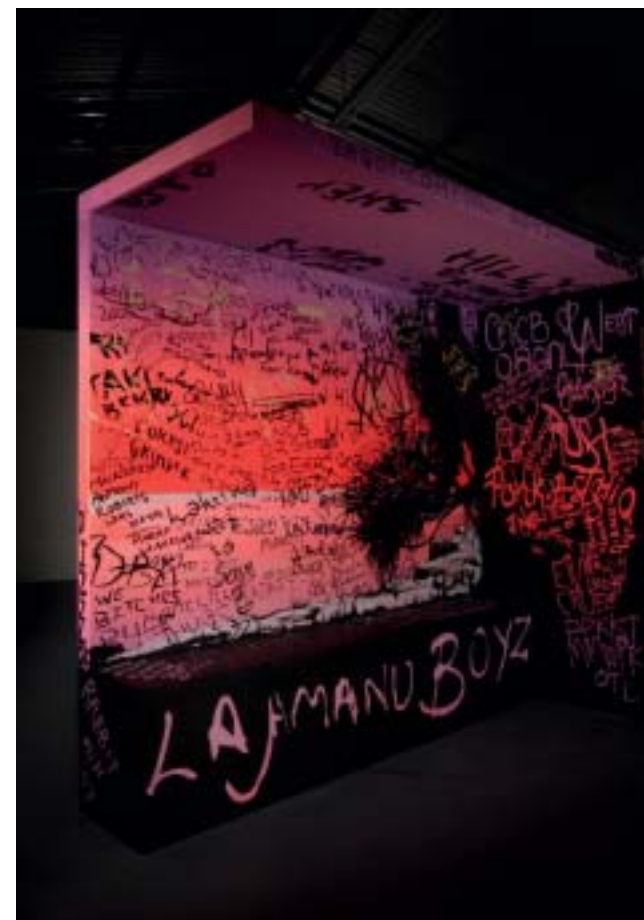
This quarter James Dodd will be showing with Ryan Renshaw Gallery in Brisbane from 7 to 25 April 2009 and Lindberg Contemporary in Melbourne from 23 May to 17 June 2009. His work also appears in the group exhibition *Cryptophilistinism*, touring to Hobart’s CAST Gallery from 12 June to 5 July 2009, and 24HR Art in Darwin will present the work *Sunset Dreaming* from 8 May to 13 June 2009.

Above: James Dodd, *Fuck tha Police*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 153 x 107cm.

Opposite: James Dodd, *Barbed wire palms*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 107 x 153cm.

PHOTOS: SAM ROBERTS. COURTESY: THE ARTIST





DAVID MOULDAY DIRECTOR, LINDBERG CONTEMPORARY

David Moulday will be exhibiting James Dodd for the first time this quarter and a little more than half of the works will be for sale. "Dodd is very attuned to current political events and his art reflects that," says Moulday. "He works quickly and responds immediately to issues happening at the time. I'd say Dodd is one of only two street artists that have broken through and got critical acclaim at the high end of the art industry."

For the show, the works range in size from small 30cm by 30cm pieces to huge panels and will be priced from \$300 to \$8000.

Although none of Dodd's works have appeared at auction recently, Moulday says these prices have remained pretty constant during the last few years. "James is an artist who's more interested in the art for art's sake than in us making him money. There's more of a critical audience than a collecting audience for his work, which doesn't mean to say he's not in demand. He's ticking all the boxes to becoming a major art figure, featuring in collections at the National Gallery of Australia, University of Queensland Art Museum, the National Maritime Museum and the Centre for the Study of Political Graphics in Los Angeles."

The recent group show at Melbourne's Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces – considered a right of passage for big names in Australian art – has also helped to raise Dodd's profile as well as the inclusion of his work in *Optimism* at the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane.

Amanda Woodard

From left:

James Dodd, *Palmageddon*, 2008, detail, acrylic on MDF, timber frame, 220 x 330cm.

James Dodd, *Sunset Dreaming*, 2008, installation view, acrylic on MDF, timber frame, 230 x 230 x 120cm.

James Dodd, *Skull*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 102 x 102cm.

PHOTOS: SAM ROBERTS. COURTESY: THE ARTIST

FRANCIS PARKER CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ART, QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY

James Dodd's work, such as the recent *Sunset Dreaming* (the 2008 sculptural reinvention of a Darwin bus shelter decorated in local flora and fauna and embellished with tags from the city's youth), has the raw and gutsy character of street art but the practice of it is quite sophisticated and very engaging, says Queensland Art Gallery contemporary art curator Francis Parker, who is contributing a catalogue essay for Dodd's forthcoming solo show.

"James's work continues that interest in tagging by gangs of indigenous youths that he saw in Darwin." But Parker insists that this isn't cultural appropriation. "He's recognising in the graffiti something raw and those youthful responses are something that he possesses himself. What makes James's work different is that it's more investigative. It's about what it means to do graffiti and is more intellectual than a lot of street art."

Heavy metal music plays a big role in the group identification of some gangs, says Parker, something that Dodd, now in his thirties, also grew up with. "Heavy metal still exists on the periphery," Parker says, and that is its appeal both to the gangs and to Dodd. "It hasn't been gentrified like rap."

Parker believes Dodd's work is and will continue to be hugely influential on younger artists "who will evolve it in new ways". Street art can't sustain people throughout their careers, says Parker. It's a phase that some artists tend to explore. He cites Tim Johnson, who previously did a lot of punk-inspired work in his youth and has since produced paintings of great power and spirituality.

Amanda Woodard