



I am interested in marks made by those who would not consider their original marks as 'art'. For me, my process is one of homage and celebration.

JD was here '12

By Carrie Kibbler Curator and Collection Manager

For the past decade James Dodd has been travelling across Australia, documenting graffiti in public spaces. Not the New York-style, ultra-hip, aerosol tags and stencils, but the scrawled and scratched initials, insults, doodles and banal comments from the mostly teenage residents of particular cities and regions that are found on everything from bus shelters, public toilets and playground equipment, to brick walls, park benches and tree trunks. These are then incorporated into his own works that sit somewhere between street art, anthropology, installation and painting.

Dodd grew up in Adelaide and after completing his Bachelor of Visual Arts, moved to Melbourne in 2000. It was here that he became involved in Melbourne's street art scene working mainly with stencilling. As a result he has been featured in major street art publications and was included in the National Gallery of Australia's touring exhibition *Space Invaders*. He returned to Adelaide in 2007 and has focussed more on gallery-based art, including the major work *Sunset Dreaming*, an exaggerated facsimile of a Darwin bus shelter that was featured in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* at the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane in 2008.

Robin Falls was acquired for the Artbank collection in late 2011. I recently spoke with Dodd about his practice, and why we should take a closer look at the seemingly mindless doodles that invade public spaces.



Above:
James Dodd
Robin Falls, 2011
Acrylic on canvas, 199 x
138 cm

CK: How did you become interested in working with found graffiti?

JD: I have been interested in creative public interventions for a long time and graffiti is one of the most obvious of these. I find the unmediated nature of handwritten messages fascinating. Handwritten messages are often unique to a place and can offer refreshing opposition to stylised markings that may be very similar, and predictable, across regions.

CK: How does your work develop?

JD: Travel and discovery are essential components of my practice. As I travel I am always on the look-out for marks and residues that people leave behind. I collect them, primarily via digital photography, for use later. When developing my work I search through the material I have collected, looking for recurring themes, like a cataloguing process. These might be aesthetic or content based. Then I usually combine these with imagery that I have collected from areas relevant to the material. I am interested in what happens when combining these elements and whether the outcome can propose particular understandings of a zone. I use the collected text to add physical and metaphorical texture to an image.

CK: How important is it to retain the style of the original artist?

JD: In most cases this is one of the elements that determines the graffiti as being different from another, making it interesting. Mostly though, I am interested in marks made by those who would not consider their original marks as 'art'.

Graffiti can have a large range of meanings, and readings. I like to experiment with different forms of this and remix [the graffiti] into the works that I present. I enjoy the process of speculating upon the individuals or groups who may have made the marks that I collect.

CK: Many of your works featured tropical palms and sunsets in the background, overlaid with the found graffiti text. The work in the Artbank collection, *Robin Falls*, located in Litchfield National Park, south of Darwin, has a stronger focus on the central image – a landscape with waterfall – with smaller amounts of text that is much less prominent than in some of your other work. How did this specific work develop?

JD: My use of sunsets and palms comes from time that I have spent in Darwin and the Top End. Generally speaking, these visual elements allude to a sense of paradise. The addition of text, the content of which is often in opposition to the idea of paradise, fills out a snapshot of the social reality of Darwin and surrounds. It is a contradictory and complex zone, which is often simplified from a distance.

Robin Falls is in Litchfield National Park, south of Darwin; similarly, this is where the text is from that I have used.

CK: You use a limited palette of predominantly oranges and yellows or purples and pinks. Is this intentional?

JD: There are a couple of reasons for this choice. Obviously the colours are appropriate in making works about sunsets and heightened awareness. I began to use these colours when I was experimenting with the use of found materials from public space such as bill posters. I have hijacked the fluorescent and black of this form of advertising and applied it to a lot of my work. In this most recent body of work I have begun to broaden my palette a little more.

CK: Blogging, posting, tweeting and liking on social media, could perhaps be considered the new graffiti in that they are another way of leaving our marks in public (cyber)spaces, albeit in a much more ephemeral manner. Why did you choose to write a blog?

JD: It was a very practical choice for me. I had a website for a number of years but it quickly became dated and I didn't have the skills to edit and update it. The simplicity and democratic nature of a blog has meant that I can easily maintain and update the content. It is vital to my practice that I am able to broadcast my outcomes. In today's context more people see an artist's work via media and reproduction than in reality so it is absolutely vital to be active online. The only drawback with a blog is its linear presentation of information, making it harder for first time viewers to get an overall picture of the content. I am currently developing a new website, incorporating the blog, which should be up by the time you are reading this.