



Blind (Ned) Leading

the Blind

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An early photograph by Derek Kreckler sees the artist fully clothed in a suit wading in the surf, one leg aloft, his torso bent back as if to fall. *Wet Dream* (1978) won its small share of fame at the time it was shown, as has *Blind Ned* since it was first exhibited in 1998. Though separated by a couple of decades, they are roughly the same image. They describe humble inadequacy and are laced with the humour of emasculated ineptitude. What wins us over in works like these is that they rise from a sensibility that is neither too heavy in its accusation, nor too bleak in its expression of helplessness. We are made neither guilty nor culpable—but all the better to bring us into its ambit. You aren't sure whether 'Ned' is the artist or whether he is us all and if so then the joke is on us. The reason that so many have identified with Kreckler's *Blind Ned* is because he satisfies the Australian suspicion of itself as fundamentally incapable and somehow insignificant.



Blind Ned has coloured Kreckler's practice in a way that brings to mind the disproportionate recognition that *The Swann* achieved for Saint-Saens or *Bolero* for Ravel, such that they regretted even having written them. It is as if you can't talk about his work without mentioning that short video. I will begin by doing the same but only to state that *Blind Ned* does not represent an effort on the part of Kreckler to speak on behalf of his country. Rather it is just the artist acting out a certain essential pointlessness, without which the making of art would not be possible.

When Flaubert made the gnomic statement, 'Emma Bovary, c'est moi!', he well knew that this equivalence is not as rational or as simple as it sounds. Every perceptive artist knows that to put oneself at the centre of your work is immediately to lose oneself—it is important that the viewer doesn't see this selfishness of self-emphasis, as it is that the artist deludes himself that he *will* find himself at that centre. When we scratch beneath the surface of what may seem to be a tendentious message of national critique in Kreckler's work, one can detect a certain void. Among other things, this void is an expression of an uncertainty about how possibly to speak on behalf of others and the effectiveness of artistic persuasiveness. But, I would argue, it is this very tentativeness that imbues Kreckler's work with a sophisticated air of authority that is appropriate to its context, because of its reluctance to overstep and overcompensate.

Paradoxically enough, to make too much of *Blind Ned*, to make him too visible, is to be blind to a much more nuanced set of strategies alive in Kreckler's work. The politic that people have seen written high and bold in works from *Blind Ned* to *White Goods* (2003–04) is only a natural consequence of the times in which they have found themselves in, when Australian art has until recently been slow to act with regard to the possibility of a political voice and when now, in an

abrupt and frenetic turn-around, almost everything is construed as having some form of political face. But what a work such as *Wet Dream* reveals about Kreckler's oeuvre is that he as an artist plays the outsider. This is not the outsider in the sense of one heroically and objectively external to the flow of events (which is one of the avant-garde's most pervasive and we might say dissatisfying myths), but the outsider as one who cannot believe that he is capable of commenting on anything, because he knows that to place art works in the world is to lose control of their trajectory.

I want to look at some of the dominant interpretations of *Blind Ned* and *White Goods*, after which I will essay some alternative readings. *Blind Ned* is a short video loop that has been worked upon so as to look like a remnant of pre-sound cinema footage, reminiscent of Charles Tait's *Ned Kelly and His Gang* (1906) complete with jitters, scratches and dust particles. A figure, dressed in the unmistakable Ned Kelly style of frock coat and barrel helmet with eye-slit, brandishes a bind-man's cane and makes his way in an ambling zigzag down the screen. The art work is a simple one-liner which makes it an easy choice for curators who deal in artistic quantities over ideas. The work has understandably been seen as an allegory of Australia's postcolonial isolation and its need of national symbols; it is also an effective way of satirising our lack of heroes. Ned Kelly is the heroic-symbol who, like all national mythical values, has all been divested of any truth or 'reality'. From Sidney Nolan to, more recently, Peter Carey, Ned Kelly is the embodiment of a vernacular culture. In a deeper sense, and this was what Nolan was strongly aware of in an irony that is generally far too wily for people to see, Ned Kelly is a sorry stand-in for a culture whose only sense of empire was to be subjugated to it, to a culture who had no world reformers or conquerors, only lowly criminals. (And ironically enough the recent film that was to launch him into international notoriety was a flop.)

But to take this as the point of the work is to miss the dreamlike atmosphere that pervades it. Aside from its obvious suggestions of national impoverishment, the work is a personal statement on the directionlessness of art, on the incompleteness of the artistic process and the imperfections of transparent artistic expression—curious when you consider that the work has been interpreted with such confidence. Kreckler, like any good artist, knows the difference between a clear message and a simplistic one. *Blind Ned*, c'est moi! Blindness here is key. Kreckler's *Ned* is at one and the same time part of the world and pathetically disjunct. He is, for the artist, an emblem of an ongoing indecipherability of any place. He is, if you wish, against the Australian landscape and hostile to the very idea of a national art, since a national art lays final claim to place, ideology and representation in which all three become as one. For we know that while the Heidelberg School is hailed as the first group of artists to depict Australia accurately, the Australia that they depict is highly selective and to be made deserving of the title of truth-sayers, they indulged in endless typologising and mythologising. Kreckler's work and not just this one, reminds us that any representation is selective and especially when it is uncritical, thus blind, to its patterns of selectiveness.

Similarly, *White Goods*, which I believed was one of the few outstanding works in Isabel Carlos' woefully lame *2004 Biennale of Sydney*, came in for a drubbing at what was perceived to be its unobvious attack of racism. It was criticised for the way it oversimplified a long history of black persecution. It was seen by some as merely perpetuating the ineffective imperialist tendency for white commentators to pronounce upon past transgressions in a manner that still let the white voice predominate. What if these works could be seen as an exercise in artistic semiotics? It seems to me that a more far-reaching interpretation of these works would be the extent to which the white voice is always yoked to an inherited linguistic system; that the artist must take a share in culpability whether he likes it or not. There are certain signs, Kreckler seems to be saying, which are so broad in their symbolism that they lose any possibility for sensible interpretation, yet one is chained to certain stock meanings by the very weight of association and through a sense of cultural duty which the artist is unable to escape. The artist is deprived of the blindness of innocence which he strives for in a cleansed, objective vision, just as he is never spared a culture's loss of innocence. The tendency to any reading whatever reveals a fundamental lack of innocence that inscribes the very act of reading, deciphering, interpreting. To decipher is to send something into a particular direction and it is never sure who rules the interpretative trajectory. To interpret is to keep an uneven ground.

This interpretation seems even more tenable when considering one of the newer works that was in the exhibition of recent photographic and video work at Performance Space at the end of last year.¹ *Untitled (Future)* was two medium-sized colour prints of surf, beach, a horizon. The images were somehow so obvious they appeared to be masking something. (Analogously, *Blind Ned* has its obvious side which, however most respondents have taken to be its principal goal and meaning.) In the catalogue flyer, the artist remarks that the work is a "meditation on perception". He goes on: "Diametric opposition is easy to grasp and most favoured. Shift the angle and ideology becomes confused or reorganised and we don't want that do we?" This work, then, is an argument against pat readings. The manner of juxtaposing images immediately supposes an opposition, or a logical sequence. If it is not either, than it is an aporia, a cognitive dead-end. Kreckler is saying that we are presented with two choices in perceiving a work of art. The first can dispatch it straight away according to habitual rules of logic; the second, which dispenses with such habits, is to do with sensory disarray, a rulelessness that enables a parallax vision. The parallax viewpoint is seldom normative and because of this, it can either be stupid or, on other occasions, dangerous.

So if there is a politic that seeps in here it is in Kreckler's use of the word 'ideology'. A recurring element in Kreckler's work is his ideology of nature, the zone or idea that is ostensibly free of ideology. From the Red Terror of the French Revolution to the numerous horrors of the twentieth-century to today's Australia with its veiled, grim caricature of 'blood and soil' politics, the aggressive and divisive orders of human discourse invoke nature as the unimpeachable alibi for ideology. It is the myth of purity that masks its own arbitrariness, for when nature is too zealously invoked to safeguard a status quo, it more often uses some kind of violence to justify it. It was Sade who repeatedly sought to justify violence, since violence is always to be found in 'nature'.

Antidote (2005), the large six-channel video installation that formed the main component of the exhibition, consisted entirely of footage of Quinninup Falls in Western Australia. There was something about the obsessive, expansive quality of the installation that made one suspect that something more was going on than just water falling. The screens were of different sizes and the footage was of various perspectives of the falls; some close, some more distant. The sound in the

Page 51: Derek Kreckler, *Blind Ned* (video still), 1998
Opposite page: Derek Kreckler, *Antidote* (installation detail), 2005
Photos courtesy the artist

spaces was a luscious, soaring and roaring. Yet the multiple perspectives and screens made one sure that there was more to this pantheism and the rest of the work in the exhibition made this certain, as if preparing the viewer to extend beyond the sensuous qualities of the work, which were rich enough.

In the catalogue notes, Kreckler advises that the work presents us with the anticipation of a failure to represent nature. The more ardent the effort, the more evident the failure. The need to represent nature accurately is one of the fundamental perversities of humanity and once again, when striven for too strenuously then the result is a certain violence. And it is therefore with good reason, whether by instinct or by deduction, that I found violence lurking within the beauty of this work. The natural phenomenon of the beauty of nature is, at least in the first instance of experience prior to reflection and deduction (and then to the need to reproduce that experience), simple and substantive. But the phenomenal experience is not easily duplicable and it is this realisation that separates the good artist from the bad one. *Antidote* was a work about the impossibility of the natural within art, and that any flat and simple statement is always suspect, for when simplicity is forced upon us, there is always ideology waiting in the wings.

I was fortunate enough to view the installation alone, ambling up and down the room just in case something might happen, but it never did. The looping of the footage had a relentless and sinister effect, as if one had the impossible possibility of standing in the same stream more than once. And the spectacle of nature soon gave over to a feeling of complete artificiality, as one became conscious of the unchangingness of this change, the blurriness of the film, even the disintegration of the footage into glistening pixels. And still there was something else going on.

I began to think of the paintings of Albert Namatjira and the way that his work had recently enjoyed a reappraisal once it had been revealed that all of his watercolours were more than prosaic imitations of the picturesque—they were sacred sites related to his people and those close to him. With this in mind, his works become very different pictures that not only identify something as enduring and beyond words, but also carry a deep sense of loss, not least because the form of representation is no longer germane to the places it describes. The loss implied within Namatjira's works—and it is unclear whether he wanted to suggest this—is the loss of people, loss of tradition, a vast emptiness while the artist stammers out words of ritual dedication in a language that is not his own. This is the only thing left to an artist whose people have been drastically eclipsed by another.

Something similar, I felt, was going on in Kreckler's work, except that as non-indigenous he is of course a different kind of bystander. To all cultures, in particular those indigenous, waterfalls fulfill some sacred function, announcing the space of dynamic collision between water, air and earth, an elemental combustion that is to be celebrated. I thought of Werner Herzog's masterpiece *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, which climaxes on one of the splendid falls in South America, ultimately overcoming the missionaries and Conquistadors and sending the last survivor into a monomaniacal frenzy of conquering the world. I also began to think of Quamby Bluff, south of Launceston in Tasmania, known as such because 'quamby' was the word that the Aborigines uttered, when tossed off the cliff, that allowed them entry into the next world. Falls and bluffs are typically sites of dramatic transition and often death of some kind. Beauty coupled with foreboding can conjure its opposite. What had happened here? What was this sound drowning out? Was some violence perpetrated here?

Maybe. Maybe not. It didn't matter. One thing was certain—from this sensory plenitude of movement and sound came an ever-rising feeling of loss, or of blindness. Australia, land of the young and free, land of the lucky and of vast open spaces. How many times have we heard this? The sounds of the waterfall gathered and rose into a roar. Was the volume there to conceal some inner murmur, a complaint beneath that refuses to go away, or was that roar already the complaint itself to which so much of Australia remains deaf and blind?

Note

¹ Derek Kreckler: *Downstairs, Recent and New Work in Photography and Video*, Performance Space, Sydney, 3 November—3 December, 2005