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MIKE PARR Mirror/Arse

BY RACHEL KENT

In 1937, Australian prime minister Sir Robert Menzies declared, “The more you see of contemporary art in other parts of the world, the more proud of Australian work you become . . . None of our leading artists produce freak pictures . . . Our landscapes show the sunshine and the sweep of the true Australian scene.”

This infamous quote became a starting point for Australian artist Mike Parr’s compelling, visceral project in the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, entitled *Mirror/Arse*. Perhaps the most memorable and confrontational body of work staged by the Biennale in recent years, *Mirror/Arse* surveyed Parr’s performance video works from the early 1970s to the present within a derelict naval accommodation building on Sydney’s Cockatoo Island.

Parr is an artist who has steered an unswerving, solitary course for more than four decades. Entirely undeterred by passing art-world fashions, he has mined the self and its outer limits through multiple performance and video works, as well as his drawing and printmaking practices. Confronting aspects of identity that others might shy away from, the performances that Parr has done since 1971 are physically tough and psychologically draining. To encounter them can also be challenging: their viewers bear witness to the artist in situations of extremity, testing the limits of his physical endurance, sometimes over a period of hours or even days. Curiosity, dismay, anger and empathy are just some of the responses the performances elicit. Born with a congenitally malformed left arm, Parr has incorporated the stump into some works as a symbol of difference or incompleteness, a kind of physical and psychological wound through which trauma is replayed over and over. Childhood and family memories haunt other works while recent pieces comment witheringly on politics and public culture in Australia.

Encountering *Mirror/Arse* was an extraordinary experience for visitors to Cockatoo Island. Viewers entered a dark and derelict naval barrack that had been untouched since its last habitation by Australian sailors decades before. Parr had viewed a range of potential sites on the island with the Biennale’s curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev when planning his project; he settled on this one because of its unaltered condition and because, he says, one of his first jobs on arrival in Sydney in 1966 from Brisbane, at age 21, was working as a cleaner of the Seamen’s Hut in the Rocks neighborhood. According to Parr, the Seamen’s Hut was redolent of naval discipline and “miasmatic”—he frequently cleaned up the sailors’ vomit. The Cockatoo Island building resonated with his memories, and Parr left it largely as he found it, placing television monitors and overhead projectors within some rooms and leaving others undisturbed.

On entering the building, visitors encountered Menzies’ 1937 quote scrawled on a corridor wall; nine buckets containing the artist’s urine were situated in a nearby shower room, permeating the building with their stench. The ensuing rooms offered a powerful response to sanitized notions of Australian art history as “clean and healthy” in comparison to the presumed freakishness of Western modernism. Speaking about his project, Parr has pointed out that

in the same year Menzies made his claim, Nazis on the other side of the world were busy amassing examples of “degenerate art” by European artists for public ridicule and destruction. Ideas of distortion and illness hovered at the edge of *Mirror/Arse*, its impact mounting as visitors passed through room after room of footage.

Parr presented over 18 individual works there, including his *First Body Program* of video-recorded performances, which he assembled in 1973, as well as his *Second* and *Third Body Programs* from 1975 and 1978, respectively. These compilations contain some of the artist’s most confrontational early works, from instruction pieces such as *Push Tacks into Your Leg until a Line of Tacks is Made up Your Leg (Wound by Measurement 1)* (1973), to *Integration 2 (Push a Fish up Your Nose)* (1975) and *Cathartic Action: Social Gestus No.5 (The “Armchop”)* (1977). Each involved performing an action or task; in the case of *Cathartic Action*, Parr stuffed the empty left sleeve of his shirt with offal and a prosthetic arm, and chopped it violently with a cleaver as horrified audience members looked on, many of whom were unaware of his truncated limb.

Also shown at Cockatoo Island was another particularly controversial video performance, *Totem Murder 2* (1977), which depicted the artist and his father slaughtering chickens at a Sydney gallery. This work drew on Parr’s traumatic memory of growing up on a chicken farm and once, after a hurricane, having to help kill the birds that had halted their laying, since the family could no longer afford their feed. Speaking now about his early works, Parr says the performance medium unleashed “a tremendous upsurge of the unforeseen, the unexpected . . . it challenged everything.” Existing outside the normal structures of co-optation, his pieces resisted the structures of the art world while being a part of it, and likewise denied processes of translation while offering insights on the body, psychology and the human condition.

Parr’s more recent performances, screened elsewhere in the barracks, such as *Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi (Democratic Torture)* (2003) and *White* (2004–08), played on themes of nationalism and the “white Australia” policy that influenced federal politics as recently as the early 1970s. *Close the Concentration Camps* (2002) concerned a Australian intergovernmental report on the mandatory detention of asylum seekers, and, like the following year’s performance *UnAustralian* (2003), featured Parr having his lips and face surgically stitched, a gesture toward those asylum seekers who protested their inhumane treatment by stitching their lips together in silent vigil.

Mirror/Arse represented an extraordinary insight into Parr’s video performances over 40 years. Distributed throughout the building, they “contaminated” the space with the artist’s presence and left many viewers feeling exhilarated and profoundly disturbed. Somewhat ironically, Parr’s project was set against the dazzling, pristine backdrop of Sydney Harbour. Staggering out from the building, viewers would lie across the grass outside, shaken but somehow transformed.



(top) **MIKE PARR**, *Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi (Democratic Torture)*, 2003, documentation of performance at ARTSPACE, Woolloomooloo, Australia, 2003. Photo by Paul Green, Felitizas Parr, Dobrila Stamenovic. Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne/Sydney.

(bottom) **MIKE PARR**, *Close the Concentration Camps*, 2002, documentation of performance at Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2002. Photo by Paul Green, Felitizas Parr, Dobrila Stamenovic. Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne/Sydney.