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## Mike Parr on Returning to Paint and Post Exhibition Blues



ARNDT Berlin

Mike Parr, *Fresh Skin like a Baby*, 2010-2013, 34minute 16mm film, colour, sound rendered to DVD

### Language

English, Australia

by Nicholas Forrest

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Mention the name [Mike Parr](#) to anyone who is familiar with the work of the world-renowned Australian artist and chances are that his extreme physical performances such as the seminal “Cathartic Action: Social Gestus No. 5 (Armchop)” (1977) will be the first of his works that come to mind, the second being his autobiographical print works.

Since he stormed onto the Australian art scene in 1970 with his first solo commercial show, “Light Pieces and Painted Constructions,” at **David Reid Gallery** in Brisbane and signaled his ambitious intentions with the launch of the Sydney-based alternative artist-run initiative Inhibodress, which he co-founded with **Peter Kennedy** that same year, performance and print have been his two primary mediums of expression.

Parr's paintings on canvas are a lesser known component of his extensive oeuvre – perhaps because painting ceased to be a focus of his practice after his first exhibition of paintings in 1970. Fifteen years after he last worked with paint on canvas, Parr has returned to the medium for his latest body of work, "Blind Self Portraits," which was recently exhibited at [ARNDT Contemporary Art](#) in Berlin – his first commercial exhibition in Europe.

To find out more about his return to painting and his exhibition at ARNDT Contemporary Art in Berlin, **BLOUIN ARTINFO Australia** spoke to Parr and asked him a few questions about the current direction of his practice.

**The Blind Self Portraits are your first paintings on canvas in 15 years. What prompted your return to this medium?**

I wanted to loosen up the impact of the big print works. The paintings were done very loose, fast... they're really painted drawings. Not at all confident about their worth as paintings, but I thought being unsure might be a good thing. In the upshot some of them seem to work exactly as I'd hoped. I stopped painting shortly after my first exhibition of paintings in 1970. I had the feeling that painting was covering up, making inaccessible, something inside me that had to come out, but in the 43 years since, I've sometimes returned to painting in order to re-experience that original crisis. I've given up trying to resolve my deepest contradictions. All I know is that I my performances and drawings have a lot to do with continuing thoughts about the formal and conceptual problems of painting "an sich."

**Your latest video work, "Fresh Skin like a Baby," premiered at the current exhibition of your work in Berlin. Could you explain the background of the work and its significance in the context of the extensive film-based component of your practice?**

In the late 90's my performance work became more overtly political and I began using self aggression to mimic the distortion and human suffering induced by the Australian government's policy of mandatory detention of refugees. The face sewings, the grindingly long durations and the deprivations that I inflicted on myself were a direct response to the behavior of these people in extremis, but at the same time I realized that there was something privileged, even obscene about my attempt to re-represent the incoherence of choice-less suffering. Fresh Skin like a Baby then is my attempt to come to grips with the process of repetitive self harm... the fact that one becomes a kind of performer in relation to oneself and the de-sensitization that inevitably occurs.

This layering of alienated self on self is very close to my original crisis as a painter and Fresh Skin like a Baby is contemptuously ironical in its fusion of the Ur moments of Modernist painting with the deliberate self distortions of the face sewings. In the final stages of the film this alienation effect surges into an unreal space as the reality of the performance crisis is displaced via my mother's glassware, colored filters, variable exposures and the continuous twisting reciprocities of the camera work. The sound is also very important. I worked with a very competent technician to amplify and process the latent sounds of the recording, so that those sounds that are almost inaudible within any sound perspective are pulled up and given inordinate presence. It is though the background is becoming the foreground.

Additionally the final scenes are dominated by my backwards reading from the Australian National Dictionary, which is really a dictionary of Australian xenophobia, racist abuse, misogyny, homophobia, Imperialist slander and Cockney English. The film bizarrely attempts to fuse these incommensurate layers and an incandescent intensity begins to emerge as I endure these repetitions as a performer. I'm interested finally in the disease of the Detention Centers. How the solution contaminates the body politic... and democratic complicity... a state that Greg Wilding, a writer on my work, has referred to as the "Fascist minimum."



**You describe your Blind Self Portraits as "odd looking because the painting has been done 'blind.'" Could you explain the unique circumstances under which these paintings were created and your perception of the resulting works?**

Quite simply I paint with my eyes shut and in very low light... it's performative painting. However in this exhibition only Blind Self Portrait X can be described as blind in that way. One of the deep attractions of printmaking for me is the unexpected difference of the image as it emerges from the press. The image that gets established in one's mind as one draws and builds up as a feeling of solidity on the plate is invariably contradicted by the printed result.

Drypoint drawing into copper where the burr carries the ink is particularly unpredictable. This difference together with the fact that the image is reversed always stimulates me. The feeling is of an image appearing before me like some sort of hallucination because I can never quite corroborate my role in its production. It's a kind of alienation effect because the difference is unintended. Blind Self Portraits as the title for the exhibition is really about these unintended protrusions. They're pronounced blockages, interruptions that I've not foreseen but which seem to give the image a life of its own.

**The large-scale rice paper and rag paper works in your Berlin show are a fascinating extension of your performance-based practice. What do you intend to convey to the viewer with these wonderfully gestural works?**

The first thing to say is that these big works encompass two different ways of working. Snazer for example is unpremeditated drawing straight onto copper. I should say more about the word "unpremeditated" because in a way it's strongly related to the concept of blind painting. I begin drawing without preparation and I like to think the best drawings occur because there's no real picture in my mind. The "picture" emerges with the drawing and I often have to wait to see the result because I'm disoriented by the process. John installs the copper sheets as a field on the wall and I am raised and lowered and moved across the field of copper on a forklift and the drawing emerges as I traverse the surface. Nothing is corrected or altered and the drawing is over and done within a matter of minutes.

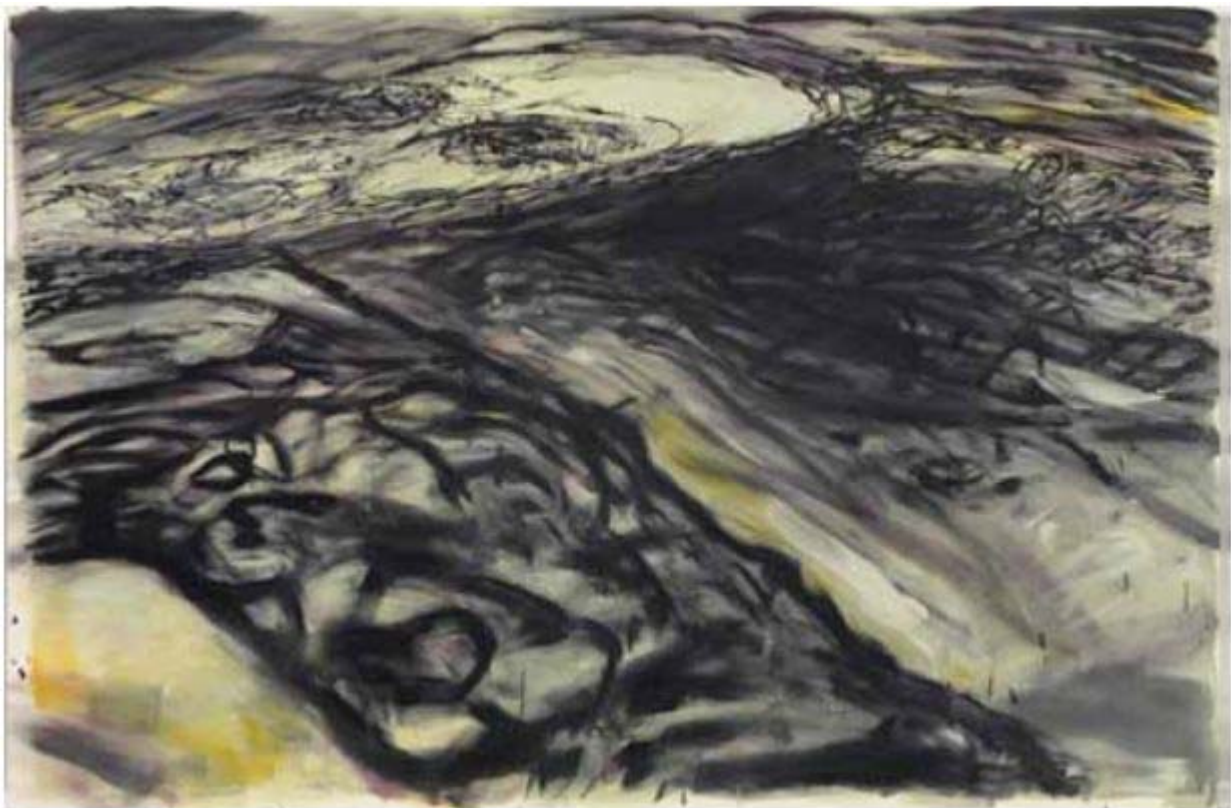
Once the acrylic paint has dried we paint Bondcrete onto the drawing and douse the whole thing with



Carborundum powder or alternatively I mix acrylic and Bondcrete and then apply the Carborundum. I like the first method best because the application of Bondcrete after the acrylic has dried means that the spontaneity of the drawing is slightly contained. Loose edges are slightly trimmed and delicate splatter is lost. John invariably applies the Bondcrete and I enjoy watching the drawing being disciplined in this way, enjoy watching it being separated from the fever of its production. Big works like *Foreign Looking* are built up by layering. After 25 years of printmaking we have an enormous archive of plates and we draw on this image bank to constitute the “ground” of big works like *Foreign Looking*.

This sort of technical description isn't really answering your question though. Can I refer you to the notes that I wrote for Arndt's website for a better sense of the context that produced these works. The gestural impact of the big print works is really important but in the very large works like *Foreign Looking*, *Nauseania*, *Backblocks* [Body without Organs], *Blind Obedience* [Dead] & *Wooden We* I wanted to contradict the spontaneity of the drawing that surges across these surface and which constitutes if you like their first impulse by another response entirely.

The huge “labyrinth” heads that block out whole sections of the printed drawings on rice paper, are aspects of self portraiture that split and police spontaneity. The reduction of the self portrait to a sign, to an abstract, authoritarian configuration is a way of turning the self portrait back on itself, because the Self Portrait Project [my description for the work of the past 30 years] is my way of thinking about, working with the contents that surge up from the extremities of the performance work. In the recent prints something incommensurable is happening. What was released is again being incarcerated and the weight of the press is being used to create a new kind of surface, at least in the context of printmaking. It's the violent instability of these works that seems most pronounced to me. The self-portrait is splitting and its contradictory tensions have become conspicuous, blaring. The image, the work as a “law unto itself” – the imposition of that extremity is very important to me.



**Your “Backblocks” works incorporate elements of “self” in the process as well as the product, yet you describe them as nagging at the idea of the Self Portrait as likeness. What do these works reveal about your perception of “self” as a medium for visual expression?**

Quite simply that “self” is a deeply contradictory formation and the notion of “likeness” in this context is a trivial sort of resolution. The Blind Self Portraits are about contents that block the process of reciprocity, but which deepen the impact of the image which put appearance and style under pressure.

**A “clogged” and “antithetical and gummed-up” motif recurs throughout the body of work being exhibited in Berlin. What was the influence for this motif and how is it conveyed in the works?**

Backblocks...is a pun.. it refers to blocked memory, what is repressed, what can't be thought about ... it is also argot for “redneck,” for the incoherent stretches of marginal, rough land beyond civilized reach, beyond the amenity of cities & towns and it also conjures the printing process; the layering, the pressure and the admixture of techniques [the glossalalia, the “speaking in tongues”] that I use to produce the print works, so it strongly suggests that “gummed-up / blocked” is a fundamental component of all my work. Component is not a bad word, because it suggests something that while split off is nevertheless also defined, voluble and useful in its own way.

What is distinctive about printmaking for me, what attracted me to printmaking in the first instance is the formalism and extent of its language. By formalism I mean both the technical specificity of its procedures which separate the image and its forms of repetition, because exact repetition is the basis for printmaking. Division and repetition are the ground of the Self Portrait Project and clogging as the literal gumming up of printmaking distinctions. In the early nineties John and I did a series of big prints called X-Amount of Automatism Terminated by Block. Fields of self portraits over printed by red or black aquatint blocks... early forms of the current work. All this management ineluctably causes the antithetical to emerge and it is the force of this emergence that has shaped the works in the Berlin show. It's chemotherapy. That treatment can shrink the disorder to a point... to a point of invisibility but this point of invisibility inevitably compresses forces that can also result in unmanageable expansion. That's the precarious dialectic and balance of all my work.

**What do the works in the Berlin show reveal about the current direction of your practice?**

I'm enduring something like post natal depression at the moment. It's a familiar post exhibition state because the work for Berlin required a tremendous expansion. I'm also having difficulty in thinking clearly at the moment and it unfortunately shows in the writing of these notes. I want to return to the abstraction of the big print works and the burst of painting that I did for Berlin has opened something up... but the sensations are all too contradictory at the moment.

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