

## **Organised Dissent: “Mao, Mengele and Martina Navratilova”**

Cameron Hayes found his voice at a young age. In his early twenties he was already creating the kind of broad, highly detailed narratives we see in this exhibition. References to Bruegel and Bosch were and are commonplace. Some of the smaller paintings in this exhibition focus in tighter on a single scene, but the paintings that Hayes is best recognised for such as “And Mao Said...” have a truly epic scale. Each painting contains dozens of active scenes, spread out across the canvas, that speak to different aspects of the painting’s primary themes. Upon first approaching a painting there is a suggestion of chaos, but if you step back and consider the image as a single integrated system, the broad arrangement of scenes within each painting reveal a Renaissance sense of perspective and form: the balance of light and shade, the choice of colour schemes, the strong lines of the various forms linking together and drawing our attention to specific areas of the canvas. In terms of craft and execution they are like the painstaking ordering of a dream where humanity, industry and nature are composed into a single wild and magical physical organism on the canvas. The worlds depicted are not realistic, the landscapes are almost Escher-like in their fabulations, the laws of physics in relation to space are subverted and adhered to at once: the landscape expands like an impossible reality but nothing jars the eye or feels incomplete.

Hayes has always created a kind of stylistic *tromp l’oeil* with his work. When approaching a painting for the first time they seem to be cute, children’s picture-book style narrative paintings. The kind of painting that little Tommy would love to have hanging on his bedroom wall – a whimsical *Where’s Wally* filled with curious humanlike characters performing enigmatic scenes. Children do love Hayes’s work, but these paintings are not songs of innocence; they are not cute celebrations of the good will within human nature. They are darkly satirical works that hold a mirror up to the curious weaknesses and foibles that qualify human experience. The stories are witty, but the wit is painful and disturbing.

One might say that in a Hayes painting the question is not whether the glass is half full or half empty; the question is what is in the glass, and the chances are that in these paintings the glass is not filled with a tasty beverage but with something toxic, deposited there by a powerful rascal to trick the naïve or the innocent. Hayes work hurls us down into the darker corners of human experience, always within a broader social context, while using the cushion of wit to make the fall less painful. This has always been the role of the satirist: to give us a laugh while making us feel uncomfortable about the society in which we live. Juvenal and Moliere were not celebrating human good will or compassion, they were exposing the hypocrisies and foibles of Roman and Parisian citizens respectively. But more than this, they were exposing the foibles of human beings in general.

In the process of creating some of these paintings Hayes did a lot of research on subjects like modern art forgery, the women’s professional tennis tour and the Cultural Revolution in Communist China in the mid-20th Century. Much of what happened in those years of the Cultural Revolution reads stranger than fiction, though no less strange than the stories about political leaders in the West over the past seven or eight years. Hayes is always looking for this connection when he draws inspiration from specific historical events: the context is always much broader than past history. But why take Chinese history as a starting point? Why does a contemporary Australian artist focus on stories about mid-20th century

China? In the same way Hollywood studios rely on celebrity biopics and historical dramas, Hayes chooses to explore famous people and popular history in his work because it gives his audience a simple entry point: a point of familiarity. They may not know exactly what is going on in a painting, but they are more likely to know the main subjects and may even have an opinion about them based on some popular narrative or another. History paintings have the flavour of public gossip about them.

While history offers an entry point, the scenes in these paintings are not literal references to historical events, they are the products of Hayes's imagination, applied to historical incidence (such as the war against the four pests, Struggle Sessions, and Mao's obsession with trying to bend the natural world to his own will) with a kind of mythological speculation. What Hayes find interesting as an artist is the space that can be created when extrapolating the logic behind a historical incident, teasing out the absurdities of it with images that speak to the primary themes (power, fear, greed, obsession). The realities of Mengele's vision of a world populated by a single gene pool, for example, or Pavlov's vision of a world run by involuntary biological impulses, or De Hory's doubt-created world of fake images of fake images.

Ultimately, apart from offering an entry point for audiences, Hayes's interest in history is what it can say about the world we live in today. How have we turned on Nietzsche's circle, how are contemporary events a reflection of our past? What mistakes do we continually fail to learn from? For example, in "And Mao Said..." Hayes highlights an activity in revolutionary China called "Struggle Sessions", where members of the public would gather to demonise and abuse the powerful landowners whom they wanted to take down. The frenzied, public naming and shaming depicted in these scenes have counterpoints in contemporary society such as the cancelling of particular celebrities or companies by a large groups of people online (so-called "cancel culture"). Colin Kaepernick was cancelled by the political right for taking a knee during the national anthem. J. K. Rowling was cancelled by the political left for speaking up, as she believes, for women's rights. And what is cancel culture, exactly? Is it when unaffiliated groups with no accountability feel offended by the opinions of others and create a campaign, most often utilising online media platforms, to punish that person? New York Times columnist Charles Blow denies that cancel culture even exists: "There is no such thing as cancel culture [...] The rich and powerful are just upset that the masses can now organise their dissent."

Organised dissent is a great phrase to describe Hayes's paintings. The paintings offer a dissenting view against some popular systems of belief or ways of being or seeing the world. Hayes often reaches out to post-modern philosophers such as Foucault and Baudrillard to contextualise his dissenting views on popular culture. We may think we know what great art is, for example, we may think we know what Hollywood or the ATP represents, but more often than not our views (like the views of many of the characters in Hayes's paintings) are blinkered by some form of social conditioning that we are unable to perceive or unwilling to acknowledge.

The characters in Hayes's paintings are generally divided into two camps: the powerful and the weak. This dichotomy of forces plays out in many scenes: on the one side you have powerful entities enacting some ideology; on the other side you have the innocent and the naïve people swept up into the vortex of the powerful entity. Sometimes power manifests as political power, sometimes it is cultural power,

sometimes it is the idiosyncratic power of special individual, or simply the power of an arbitrary value applied to a particular concept, such as art, but there is one thing that generally unifies the forms of power depicted in Hayes's paintings: the ideology behind them is misguided in some way and rarely in the best interests of the people.

The paintings also speak to the mystical nature of power. While a single power might drive most of the action we see in each painting like "And Mao Said...", we only see Mao the Great Leader as a statue covered in a rice sack. We only see Mengele asleep in his caravan, while Pavlov and De Hory we don't see at all. The powerful subjects are hidden from view: their misguided ideology is manifest everywhere, their beings nowhere.

The theme of misguided ideology is common in Hayes's work and he often highlights the frailty of human reasoning that underpins the choices people make. The stories he tells are often perverted logical syllogisms. He takes two historical facts as propositions and invites you to draw your own conclusion in a way that might reveal the flaws in the original propositions. If proposition one is great modern artists are uniquely talented, and proposition two is the work great modern artist is quite easily and regularly forged, what is the conclusion we can draw? Have we been pressured by a popular way of thinking to respect some arbitrary attribution of power?

Absolute power, they say, corrupts absolutely, and the forces at play in Hayes's painting are often in mad pursuit of absolute power. We see the strong drive of powerful people to bend the natural world to their will. The comedy/tragedy of characters trying in vain to solve existential problems with narcissistic solutions (like trying to address one's mortality by buying a bigger house). But it is not enough to have power over people. Any autocrat can tell a group of people to act in a certain way but changing the course of nature itself is real power. It is the hubris of the powerful that leads them to try and attain such absolutes, but like every hero in every Greek tragedy, hubris is that particular human weakness that leads to ruin. A great leader might imagine being able to move mountains and rivers, to eradicate an entire species, like a God, but their effort will invariably make them look small and weak. After declaring the War on Sparrows and upsetting the natural ecosystem, the Chinese government was forced to import 250,000 sparrows from Russia to try and rectify the ecological damage they had done.

The one thing that unites the powerful and the weak in a Hayes painting is the fact that they are all somewhat foolish. And if you look closely at the human faces in these paintings they are never flattering portraits: they are caricatures with large, moon faces, beady eyes, and narrow mouths. They are often depicted with expressions of horror, shock, disdain or boredom. They are rarely benign or affectionate and rarely depicted in moments of solitude or reflection. They are often shown in groups, often working together in some superfluous bureaucratic or practical tasks: like digging holes and filling them up again, consumed by some small obsession. They are shown as the instruments of the powerful, the victims of populism, doing someone else's bidding, rarely showing authentic agency. Even powerful heroes like Navratilova and Evert Lloyd are shown to be lacking real freedom. They too have been enslaved by a system of values mapped out for them by others and as they grow older and wiser they start to question the system that enraptured their younger selves. The anonymous minions in these paintings have often

been commandeered into some form of industrial or political action on behalf of a powerful entity: they are pursuing some goal because they admire a powerful entity, or they are the victims of the mercenary will of a powerful entity.

And this gets into the deeper considerations of Hayes's work: what motivates people to act in certain ways? To what extent are human beings free to choose their own paths in life? To what extent are they enslaved their own base emotions or the desire of others? More often than not, the motivations behind the actions of the masses in these paintings lack anything like clear compassion or astute reasoning. The actions are driven by emotional drivers such as fear, greed, jealousy, and resentment. And that is the great tragedy of humanity, perhaps, as it is depicted in these paintings. Behind each work, behind the dry wit and the accomplished composition, is a sad cry from the artist that this is the best we can do as a community of people: that cultural and political forces can so easily control and enslave us via our basest emotions and desires when, as individuals, we have the chance to live a fuller, freer, and more authentic lives.

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