THE AGE

Gordon Hookey
May 18, 2005

Nellie Castan Gallery, 12 River Street, South Yarra, until May 28
Fun in art is an elusive magic. It can be capricious and indulgent, but it can also be one of the most serious ingredients. A sense of fun is just as hard to identify as the sublime or the beautiful or the touching. There's also something non-negotiable about it. Like love, you can't tell someone to have more of it. It has to be a part of the artist's disposition; and if it isn't there, it can't be fudged.

Gordon Hookey has fun with his medium, his ideas and his background. His medium is painting (and sometimes sculpture), his ideas are political and his background is indigenous. The paintings are quite large, which is necessary to contain their effusive language of images, signs, arrows, diagrammatic explanations and often copious text, all painted in a naive manner. The text, while neat and legible, is in a vernacular seldom associated with high aesthetic sentiment.

In *A painting for the underdawg*, a pooch is seen driving a racing car at high speed. A text says, "I used to chase cars. They said if I caught one, I wouldn't know what to do with it. F--- 'em. I juss wanna prove 'em wrong." Behind this ludicrous scene, the reflections on alienation are poignant. The sports car is inherently destructive and vain; and the dog's enthusiasm is artificial: it just wants to get back at us for our preconceptions.

So the underdog is a sad character whose aspirations are reactive and frivolous, unhappily defined by the materialist exhibitionism of the upper dog. The melancholy of the dispossessed is also expressed with a car in the picture *grog gott'im*, which bears the text, "if ya gonna drink'n'drive, make sure ya gotta car". A man is seen imprisoned inside a cardboard wine cask, thinking of hordes of homeless people.

The pictures deal with indigenous issues in a humorous spirit that is more fun than vengeance but still quite haunting. In a picture of a classroom where an Aboriginal boy sits in front of Bart Simpson, a text - presumably the voice of the artist - says that he always thought that "pay attention" was "pay a pension". This bitter reflection on typecast dependence is delicately poised between the perception of the inferior and mind-set of the authority.

Many of the pictures and a large sculptural installation reflect on world politics, especially lampooning Australia's compliance with an American colonial agenda that is served by prolific fibs. These have a lot to do with conflating the threat of terrorism, which seems hypocritical in any culture terrorised and oppressed by colonisation. Hookey is up-to-the-minute in his

appreciation of media, advertising and commerce as the organs of colonisation in the contemporary world. Arms are necessary at the margin; but globalisation continues its march on all cultures by firing marketing strategies - laden with porn, greed and indulgence - to overcome all local traditions and moral resistance.

But Hookey has satirical fun with these realities in a way that isn't pessimistic and disempowering. He uses cheerful colours, sweet transitions and witty sardonic sayings, and thus lightens the burden of moral consciousness. His subject matter is grave, but his approach is inflected with paradox.

An example is *pelvis deadly: the murri elvis*, showing the legendary musician from Memphis in his star-spangled '70s incarnation with flares and perforated sunglasses. But, for Hookey, Elvis grooves beneath a dark skin, with the Aboriginal flag in his lenses. A strange ambivalence arises from this picture because you don't know if it's celebratory or satirical.
Hookey observes a local world that takes its wisdom from American culture rather than Aboriginal culture. This is sad because cultures aren't born equal and aren't transferable. Besides, the consumerism of the contemporary world is tragically empty for people without superabundant credit.

So where does Elvis stand in this economy? An icon that can be appropriated by black culture or a symbol of death to indigenous wisdom?

Unlike other pictorial spokesmen of Aboriginal cultural justice, such as Richard Bell and Gordon Bennett, Hookey is amazingly playful. And you don't experience his work - however pungent - as a downer. Hookey's access to fun stems not just from a playful nature, but from an inner security, a confident knowledge of where he's coming from.