



Boer Weapons 1652 - , 1990  
mixed media 2250 X 1800 mm

## V I B G Y O R

The Sydney art scene in the early 1990s was no place for anyone with a low tolerance for bullshit. As an art student during that time, I quickly discovered many things about the Sydney contemporary art scene that I had not expected to learn. I learned that art itself was one the very *minor* concerns of this scene. I learned that many of its players made up in rapaciousness what they lacked in talent and critical capacity. It seemed that the best way for 'emerging artists' to get ahead was to join the fawning acolytes of moderately successful 'mid-career' artists; maybe after a few years, the most sycophantic might be rewarded with a place in a commercial gallery's stable. Behind a flimsy façade of intellectualism, real criticality was well and truly "garrotted by political power cables" of a system of cliques and cronyism.<sup>1</sup> The names of philosophers and theorists became like fashion labels,<sup>2</sup> and words like 'rigour' had a sadly ironic rhetoric about them. In the midst of this scene, Victor Gordon was producing serious political statements in his art: comment-aries about the violence of Apartheid, about the trivialising and commodification of art and about the politics of sex and sexuality. His work, complex and serious, was entirely off the wall at a time when it was untenably uncool to be cut too deep by anything.

I met Gordon around that time, while I was a student in the painting department of Sydney College of the Arts. Gordon worked as a casual life-drawing teacher and a part-time taxi driver to support his artistic practice. As both an artist and a teacher, he was an idiosyncratic traditionalist. Other teachers sought to prepare students for the big bad Sydney art scene by stressing the importance of social networking and building up a CV. Meanwhile, Gordon emphasised what seemed like quaintly eccentric ideas, such as technical competence. He taught about the nuances of line, tone and colour. At the beginning of one lesson about complementary colours, he scrawled the letters 'VIBGYOR' on the studio wall, which is the mnemonic for the colours of the spectrum, from V for 'violet' through to R for 'red.' I arrived late for the class on that particular morning and consequently, for years after, I thought that 'VIBGYOR' was actually Afrikaans for 'Victor'. Along with emphasising technical skills, Gordon attempted to instil in us a sense of sincerity towards our own art practice. He believed that it was better to say nothing than to say something we do not mean wholeheartedly. This is very much Gordon's *modus operandi* throughout his own art production; his work is political and his politics are earnest.

<sup>1</sup> Messham-Muir, Kit, 'Critical Dys-course', *Critical Spaces*, Artspace, Sydney, 1995, p. 18

<sup>2</sup> This was the case except perhaps for Jean Baudrillard, who was exalted as a deity. He was, after all, most famous for his assertion that there's no essential difference between the real and the fake.

The depth of Gordon's political beliefs is anchored to a central principle: at all levels, the political inevitably resonates with the personal, and vice versa. As an émigré South African, Gordon was closely involved with the struggle against Apartheid. The works mostly engaged with capital-'P' politics are his anti-Apartheid paintings and installations, yet these are richly suffused with personal meaning. For example, the zebra-skin side panels of his painting, *Boer Weapons*, 1988 - 1990, carry four objects: a sword and handcuffs on the left panel and a whip and bible on the right. As well as iconic symbols of control, these objects have personal significance for Gordon; the bible, for example, is actually his strict-Methodist mother's bible. So, he contends with the theme of control and coercion on both personal and societal levels. Similarly, the rubber bullet inset at the apex of the frame in *Mr Genuine Article*, 1986 - 1990, was actually fired at Gordon during a demonstration in South Africa in the mid-1980s. When one of my fellow classmates at Sydney College made a similar anti-Apartheid work, Gordon was surprisingly disapproving. If there was nothing *personal* at stake for *that* particular student, asked Gordon, then what was the point of that student making such a political statement?

Gordon's work at that time also takes on the politics of the Sydney art scene - more trivial in the grand scheme of things, but no less relevant to Gordon's life and art practice. Between his more overtly political works of the early- to mid-1990s, Gordon produced a series of semi-abstract paintings of African animals. If we see these paintings in reproductions they seem his least political works. Exhibited at the *Cultural Iconographies* group show at Sydney's Tin Sheds Gallery, however, absurdly-big price tags hung from these paintings. This comment on the commodification of art was pretty straightforward. His sculpture, *The Essential Arch Bull*, exhibited at CBD Gallery in 1994, is similarly obvious and more vitriolic. This bull-horned filing cabinet contains six drawers labelled with generic and specific art theoretical sources, like 'French Philosophy' and 'Art & Text.' In each is a copy of a book about self-promotion for artists.

The personal and political are most intimately entwined, in far more complex ways, where Gordon's work deals with sex and sexuality. This strand of his work begins to emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s in his 'Taxi' series. During this time, he was moonlighting as a taxi driver, an occupation that clearly informs these paintings. Each painting in the Taxi series is a narrative vignette, set amongst the city nightlife. 'T599' shows a blonde woman stepping from a taxi wearing red high-heels and black stockings, which tells us that she is about to hit the town. Meanwhile another



*The Essential Arch Bull*, 1994  
sculpture, w 500 X h 650 h X d 580 mm

woman appears to point angrily at the male driver through the passenger window. A sliver of the neon sign of 'Love Machine', a Kings Cross strip joint, establishes this scene for us, but the full narrative remains a mystery. Gordon gives us the scene without the context. Like a taxi driver, we get only the fragments of other people's stories that spill-over indiscreetly in the backseat of a taxi. In this regard, there is a certain voyeurism about these images, which is perhaps most patent in *'Engaged'*, where the male driver adjusts his rear view mirror for a better look at his female passenger.

As with much of Gordon's work, these paintings also function at a less literal level. The taxi operates throughout this series as an allegory of venality; not only of the obvious saleable sexuality of a city's red-light district but also of the libidinal economy of the *meet market*. In *TAXI* the 'not for hire' sign acts as an unequivocal retort from the sabre-toothed red-clawed woman to the leering advances of the fag-smoking man on the left edge of the scene. In *'\$4.50'*, more gawking male faces fix their gaze on a less threatening figure of a woman, who seems to wear the taxi's meter as a price tag. These themes are present in *'XXXX'*, the work from this series that is included in this exhibition. In this scene, a beer-gutted man wearing a t-shirt that reads 'I can feel a XXXX

coming on' leers at a woman in a little black dress. Sexuality, capitalism and Australian class mores resonate through that iconic XXXX.

In the late 1990s, Gordon's work negotiates issues surrounding sexual politics of contemporary visual culture with the personal politics of his own sexuality. In painted medium, Gordon mimics the age old photographic conventions of cropping that isolate and eroticise particular zones of the female body.<sup>3</sup> Like much of Gordon's work, the meaning is layered. At one level, body parts are disembodied in fetishist fascination, and yet Gordon's own comments on these works betray a certain moralism about the vicariousness inherent in their voyeurism. We might get the impression that there is none of the ideological resolution in his works on sexuality that usually attends his treatment of other subject matter. The intermingled of an undeniable erotic charge with certain undertone of self-reproach makes these paintings his most equivocal.

Perhaps Gordon's most obscure, complex and potentially confronting work dealing with sexuality is *Pretext*. *Pretext* is a tableau of objects and images, installed at Window Gallery, Sydney, from September 17 to 29, 1991 (a photograph of this installation is included in this catalogue *see page 17*). *Pretext* is under-written by arcane personal and theoretical subtexts, which percolate and manifest in the work's iconography. The work is an elaborate construction, looking like a kind of secular altar installed within the gallery space. It is layered with many enigmatic symbols, images and objects, many of which have personal significance for Gordon. Most notably, a drawer on the table at the centre of the installation contains what appears to be a dried placenta. It is, in fact, a 'caul' - the membranous hood that can occasionally cover a newborn baby's head. The caul has occultist meaning as a talisman for personal protection. Gordon's essay, which accompanied the installation in 1991, notes that the caul in this work actually comes from his own mother's head. Another enigmatic object is a cruciform inset in the apex of the central frame, above the painting of the rear of a reclining woman. This symbol is a hammer fused with a key; a motif that actually appears in other of Gordon's works.<sup>4</sup> Also, a brass flap in the table of the installation reads 'KAIROS', which refers to the Greek for an 'opportune time'.<sup>5</sup>

During *Pretext's* exhibition at Window Gallery, Gordon's essay gave the audience some clues for decoding its dense and esoteric symbolism. The combined essay and installation makes an important declaration that underscores and unites his larger body of work - Gordon recognises the profound significance of his mother's influence on the values manifest in



T599, 1990  
oil on canvas, 910 X 1370 mm



\$4.50, 1989  
oil on canvas, 1000 X 1300 mm



TAXI, 1989  
oil on canvas, 1000 X 750 mm

<sup>3</sup> Solomon-Godeau, Abigail, 'Reconsidering Erotic Photography: Notes for a Project of Historical Salvage', *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices*, Media and Society Series, Vol 4, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 233

<sup>4</sup> This 'hammer and key' symbol is incorporated into a Gordon's paintings as early as 1985 and as recently as 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The Use of Pleasure: The history of sexuality volume 2*, Vintage, New York, 1990, p. 57

his art practice. *Pretext*, therefore, is a pivotal work in his oeuvre; it is a quasi-manifesto. For Gordon, the influence of his mother is specifically understood within the meta-narrative of psychoanalysis. His accompanying essay con-textualises her influence in terms of Freudian ideas about "Oedipal guilt."<sup>6</sup> Within this particular theoretical framework, his essay decodes *Pretext's* symbolism, such as that of the caul, the table, the rug and the painting. I am not, however, entirely convinced by what Gordon chooses to tell us. His essay does not so much hand us the theoretical keys through which we can understand his entire body of work; rather, it seems like an intricately contrived subterfuge. I have strong reservations about psychoanalytic theory and particularly its extrapolation into art theory and criticism. Is it *really* possible to psychoanalyse ostensibly sublimated symbolism in a work of art, particularly given that a work of art is the manifestation of deliberate and conscious choices?<sup>7</sup> This is not my primary reason, however, for questioning Gordon's public declaration of his mother's influence. Something else about the influence of Gordon's mother, about which he is less forthcoming, resonates more clearly in his work.

Only recently did I learn that Gordon's mother was a strict Methodist, that she "preached the dictates of 'hellfire and brimstone' of the old testament [sic]"<sup>8</sup> and backed them up with regular thrashings. According to Gordon, her stoicism was counterbalanced by the humour of his father's family, both of which profoundly influence Gordon, as a person and as an artist. Certainly, humour is a particular device in Gordon's work and has a significant place; his body of work is peppered with subtle in-jokes, visual gags, *trompes l'oeil* and word-plays. More notably, *particular* important values of his mother's Methodism pervade his work. It is not Method-ism's specific theology that underwrites Gordon's work, but rather some Methodist attitudes and principles. Most significantly, Gordon's work is embedded in an attitude that theologians call 'eschatological responsibility'. Eschatology is the religious doctrine that the world *will* end with the Last Judgment and, therefore, there is *ultimate* justice. In other words, our actions are ultimately judged

against universal values. This is manifest in Gordon's unassailable belief in irreducible and universal human values, which underlies the enduring sense of social justice. It is not that Gordon rejects relativism and contingencies of value across cultures, but some values for him are incontrovertible. This sense of responsibility is apparent in his sustained and wholehearted commitment to his values. Methodism also emphasises the importance of predicating values on reason, and this also comes through in Gordon's work. The political fire in his belly is always tempered in his work by a measured intellectual interrogation. Furthermore, this also accords with the high value Gordon places on education and knowledge, personally and professionally. Related to this is a kind of secular evangelism that permeates his desire to make these often personal political statements in the public sphere, sometimes in theatrically large-scale works.



*Prototype of the Perfect Australian Artwork, 1992*  
collage on canvas, 264 X 220

In this retrospective exhibition, these values are summed up in the last painting we pass as we exit the gallery. It is a portrait of Edith Stein, philosopher, author and humanist, canonized by the Catholic Church in 1998. (see page 2) Stein was a Carmelite nun, born to Jewish parents, who was murder-ed at Auschwitz during the Holocaust. Gordon has a persistent fascination with the Holocaust; it is, of course, the gravest of social injustices. Gordon's painting of Stein stamped with a Nazi eagle is a portrait of a martyr. In the context of this exhibition, it draws together and distills the values fundamental to Gordon's collective body of work. In retrospect, the earnest-ness of Gordon's work still seems idio-syncratic amongst

the declarations of the 'death of painting' and the appropriation art of the 1980s and early-1990s. Gordon's work went against the grain. Into the early twenty first century, however, the durability of his values in turn sustains the longer-term worth of his work. After all, fascism has not died, but neither has painting.

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon, Victor, *Pretext: An Installation by Victor Gordon at W.I.N.D.O.W. Gallery, 62 Erskine st, Sydney, CBD. 17-29 Sept 1991*, unpublished catalogue essay, 1991

<sup>7</sup> Freud's own analyses of art works demonstrate a fundamental problem with this approach. In a 1914 essay, Freud analyses Michelangelo's sculpture that portrays Moses at the moment he realizes that the Israelites have betrayed him. Freud analyses the bodily posture of Moses as being in a state of rage that language cannot contain but which is expressed hysterically. In this analysis, however, what exactly was Freud psychoanalyzing? Moses? Michelangelo? A carved block of marble?

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, Victor, *What about what if is as or is is*, unpublished paper, September, 2003