

Jono Rotman – Controversy and Contradiction

By Paul Judge

Narelle Henson has a right to her opinions but should she so blithely discredit the moral integrity or certitude of an artist on the basis of her emotional response to the artist's work?

The artist is Jono Rotman, a recipient of the Marti Friedlander Award and currently exhibiting in an Auckland gallery a selection of eight photographic portraits of Mongrel Mob members, the result of seven year's work.

Controversy surrounds these portraits because one of the subjects is an alleged murderer. The offending photograph was taken four years before the allegation was made but it does pose problems for the dissemination of the image in the media and, therefore, in the eyes of the victim's family. The gallery's stance and the artist's, has been to resist any censorship, but they are prepared to remove this one image from promotion of the show in consideration of the family's sensitivity. That the image is of an alleged killer, however, is irrelevant to its meaning and power as a work of art.

What is striking about these portraits is the humanity of the subjects. The photographs seem to demystify their monstrous aspects and show them as disturbingly real human beings. The character appearing in an ill-fitting WW2 style German helmet, staring straight at the viewer, incredibly proud and defiant, nevertheless reveals the constructs of his reality. This is an image of the armoured body, the body as a display and threat, complete with crypto-fascist labelling and imprinted identification with aggression. This is the body as a destructive weapon yet miraculously the photograph exposes a vulnerability that even threatens the subject himself.

The heavily tattooed faces, the combination of Maori design and Latin characters, declaring Mobster or Mongrel Mob affiliation across forehead or central facial area, the outlaw bandannas, the imposing insignia, all point to an exploration of identity that is a serious topic for the artist. In one of the portraits the subject looks like the 19th century rebels of colonised Aotearoa. Another shows a man with a deeply pained expression, as though in desperate battle with his own inner demons.

These images have much in common with the early photographs of North American Indians but they also invite comparison with the work of celebrated painter C.F. Goldie. In these cases we are witness to a culture reeling from colonisation and it is universally accepted that we recognise the nobility, dignity

and endurance of the subjects. By way of contrast, this is precisely why Rotman's portraits of the Mongrel Mob are attracting such vehement response.

What Rotman's portraits do is place the humanity of these subjects in the context of a society that condemns them. These people are alive and among us now, not safely tucked away in history. These are the survivors of a colonised people, however flawed they may be in their constructed identities. In them we confront the 'other', the 'primitive', the violent and dark horror that we continually and persistently suppress. These immensely powerful photographs insist on their subject's existence and they demand that we as the viewer take note of the contradictions they expose. If these are images of masculinity in distress, it is because they are the disenfranchised children of the rural-urban drift. If these images shock us then we must question why we tolerate the institutionalised violence around us, against cultures, against the poor and the dispossessed, against the environment and against entire species.

The men in the portraits do not fit comfortably with either the meanings or the mechanisms of society. They seem to mock the very notion we have of self, the self that is gloriously autonomous but subsumed into the bourgeois project of progress. The portrait of the alleged killer shows an ominous hooded figure, an apocalyptic dark angel of society's unconscious. Here the photographer courts danger. He walks a tightrope for all of us, for this menacing figure achieves a monumental symbolism as the face of our own threatening destructive selves. I think Jono Rotman is one of the most courageous artists working in this country today.

Paul Judge is a documentary filmmaker and writer. He has a Master of Fine Arts degree.