

FOREWARD

Drew Pettifer's work is closely aligned with international developments in art photography, exploring formal and theoretical concerns shared by both contemporary confessional photographers and historical documentarians. Yet his is necessarily also a unique vision, emphatically personal and autobiographical. The voyeurism in his work belies its gentleness; the eroticism masks a classical aesthete's eye for beauty and grace.

Hold on to your friends represents an elaboration of Pettifer's established style, with an obsessive coaxing of warm skin tones from analogue film shot in natural light. But importantly, this series also embodies a shift from the artist's earlier practice in that these are *staged* works that mimic a familiarly intimate documentary style. The subjects (all friends of the artist, most of them heterosexual) were privately shown source materials downloaded by Pettifer from various amateur pornography sites. The young men were then placed in a location near the artist's childhood family home or a site of childhood significance, free to engage with the scenario as they wished. The series is thus diaristic in at least two ways: in recording the artist's interest in the wide spectrum of erotic imagery, and in its setting in the rural landscape of the artist's youth and adolescence.

With these works, Drew Pettifer is reclaiming both the physical space of rural Victoria and the discursive space of erotic photography. *Hold on to your friends* represents his triumph over the oppressive isolation he experienced as a 'country kid,' but also his insistence on an irresolvable tension in documentary and art photography between portrait and landscape, the staged and the spontaneous, the tender and the titillating.

I am proud to present *Hold on to your friends* as Drew Pettifer's first solo exhibition at NO NO GALLERY.

Roger Nelson
Director, NO NO GALLERY

HOLD ON TO YOUR FRIENDS

Do all images involving naked figures evince a sense of voyeurism? In *Hold on to your friends*, Drew Pettifer creates opportunities for heightened voyeurism, and in doing so becomes as much the subject of his work as the model in front of the camera.

In some of his earlier work, the relationship between the artist and his models is obvious, and many of the scenarios seem incidental: in domestic settings, urinating, smoking, drinking coffee, waking up; or travelling, on trains, in hotels or visiting natural attractions. These images set the scene for social world that the artist inhabits – post-Goldin, urban, liberated, filled with *Sweet and Tender Hooligans*. We assume that within this combined domestic and professional environment, this opportunistic observation of friends and lovers is to some extent reciprocal.

There seems to be a point where Pettifer didn't want to wait for the photograph to happen, and he began to enact more control over his subjects. Executed in simple and playful gestures, control was gained both at the time of photographing and in post-production. In *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the image is locked inside a photocopier, permitting the audience limited control to reproduce and manipulate the head-shot of a young man with his eyes closed. In other work, Pettifer throws paint on his models prior to taking the photo or, once printed, paints a dripping black hole over his subjects' genitals. Tender observation gives way to playful aggression. As the subject matter expands beyond the domestic confines, the project takes pleasure in exciting the precarious balance of professionalism and intimacy between artist and subject.

The more control the artist exerts over his subject, the environment and the rhetorical procedures of the medium, the more the image becomes about

the artist and his desires. *Hold on to your friends* is autobiographical both retrospectively and in the moment. Under the premise of transforming the rural landscape of his youth into sites of queer sexual desire, Pettifer delights in the richness of seduction, control, restraint, awkwardness and trust that the set-up necessarily involves.

The subjects of these photographs and video have been transported from their hedonistic lifestyles and liberated social scenes to perform their beauty, youth and sexuality within the pastoral landscape. In the photographic series, the subjects mostly appear relaxed; they know their role and participate as willing collaborators in the communication and the creation of the cultural identity that Pettifer seeks to infuse into the bucolic scenes. In the video work, however, the naked white bodies, perpendicular to the ground, stick out in a rigid formation against their setting. This humorous disconnection from the land is made more startling by the models' serious countenance as they cross arms in front of each other to hold one another's flaccid penis.

Assuming poses appropriated from amateur pornography, these young men do not belong in the iconic landscapes within which they have been placed. The boys have neither the dignity of Millet's workers in a hayfield, nor the leisurely air of demi-gods bathing in the river, nor the Hallmark quality of lovers strolling along the shore. Manet's casually naked women staring out at the viewer in *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* shocked viewers for setting recognisable, naked women in a present-day picnic scenario with two clothed men. Assuming Pettifer remains clothed in his role as artist, these works manifest a similar incongruity between artist, subject and setting, and in doing so states the artist's individual freedom as much as *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* did at the time.

Gently pushing his models into vulnerable relations with each other, the landscape and the potential onlookers, Pettifer reveals a yearning for intimacy and friendship. It seems, however, that the more Pettifer sets up the fulfilment of these desires, the further away they become.

As a cinematic device, the zoom tells the viewer that the artist is in control, emphatically signalling the author's performance of the narrative. In *Notorious*, Hitchcock sets up an elaborate crane to zoom from a balcony view of a party into the hand holding the cellar door key. Director Peter Bogdanovitch comments: "the fact that the camera is moving, even though the audience perhaps isn't conscious, they're aware that something's happening – they're being taken somewhere, for a purpose." In the documentaries of Ken Burns, the zoom is combined with a pan to slowly reveal subjects of interest. A dolly zoom, popularised by Hitchcock in *Vertigo*, combines a physical camera movement towards or away from the subject with the opposing lens zoom, creating an unsettling reordering of the subject in relation to its background.

Unlike the zooms of Hitchcock or Burns, Pettifer's zoom that brings us closer to the subject is frustratingly direct. From a fixed point, the lens zoom takes us over fields, rivers, bushland and shorelines to where the young men stand, holding on to each other. Despite the technological revelation of impressive detail and depth, the image is essentially approached as a two-dimensional one. In following a strictly linear optical pathway, the zoom establishes a vanishing point within a geometrical perspective that is abruptly obscured with the flat blockade of the figures. Without the movement of the camera, there is no suspense, no reordering of landscape to figure, artist to subject, no shift in point of view. Dismally restrained by the distance that the zoom lens emphasises, the artist, and so the viewer is never permitted to take pleasure in the voyeuristic act.

IN CONVERSATION

Do you think Drew makes work for himself or for his audience?

I think his work is very autobiographical. I think a lot of it is celebrating the stuff that he felt he couldn't when he was young. I think he works with what he loves...he's obsessed by the subject matter: being queer and beautiful, young men around you, straight or gay. And wanting to capture that forever, in a document: the beauty of young men.

The drive is not just the final product – a photograph, or a video. What the viewer doesn't partake in, which is the pleasure of bringing a beautiful young man into an environment and being alone with that person, and in control. I think that private experience is something that appeals to Drew.

Alfred Hitchcock was always in love with his blonde leading ladies, but they'd never go near him. Not that I'm saying that about Drew, but the artist's desire is compelling them forward rather than any high-minded artistic pursuit. I mean it's all very libidinal and it's all very...bound up with what you love and desire, carnally or otherwise. It's not some abstract concept for Drew.

Ryan McGinley also works in a similar fashion: he employs a group of young models, takes them places, lets them play and photographs it. But the artist's role is slightly different, you sense more even though it appears there is a similar premise.

I want it to be really beautiful. And I compare it to Bill Henson.

Hmm. More Bill Henson than Nan Goldin or Wolfgang Tillmans, both of whom Drew identifies with. Maybe he identifies with the way Goldin deals with sexuality, but there's none of the violence or grit. And with Tillmans for his installation. And Nan Goldin, she really lived that work. She was just

taking photos of things that happened around her. But this is very staged. I mean these people are very comfortable: healthy young boys who are very groomed and take good care of themselves and there's not that kind of desperation or you know that sense that in Nan Goldin's work the people are so marginalised, but there's no sense of that in Drew's work. They're very safe and I think that's why you can compare it to fashion in some ways. The boys are pretty, they're well fed, they're not kind of...so it becomes more of an aesthetic. More about the beauty and the stage. I don't know. Beauty matters a lot more, composition. It's all set-up. The colours and the light.

Yeah, you're not interested in what is actually going on socially or personally really, because it's beautiful and so easy to accept. As an audience you want it to look as beautiful as it can look, regardless of the drives behind it I think.

And if it looks like a fashion shoot, what's wrong with that?

I enjoy the pace of the video work.

I like the way those boys...it's actually really funny.

But it looks beautiful too: the structure that the bodies create when they are holding on to each other's penises.

It's a very gentle work. It's not confrontational, it's not graphic...as his painted photographs were. Where he obscures the genitals of his subjects by painting over the photograph. They did have a playfulness about them, but whether or not it was intentional, there was also a certain aggression. He was defacing their genitals. While most of Drew's work involves nude men, I don't recall ever seeing a penis.

They're not sordid or embarrassing or humiliating.

There's no sense of strain or shame to the works. It's relaxed. The models seem very comfortable.

Except one of the photographs, which stands out because of the hint of hostility in the young man's face and his victimised stance. But even then, his manner is one that is very familiar to us through fashion photography – the hunched shoulders – it's almost affected.

I don't think his choice to obscure or hide the genitals is about censorship or protecting his audience. I think it speaks of the privileged experience of the artist with each his subjects. Drew has been with them nakedly and that that was a private experience.

It's interesting it doesn't have any of the shock say of Harmony Korine's photos where people are having sex. These photos are very gentle and very pleasant.

Is that a problem that there isn't a problem?

It depends what the artist wants. I don't think it's a problem. But I think that if you are going to make a beautiful work, it has to be beautiful. Really beautiful and very seamless.

Drew talks about the origin of the work as being about his own upbringing in the country and not being comfortable with his sexuality. I think that's just a departure point, but it's not the point of the work.

People don't need to know that when they look at the work. It's interesting to us. What do you think we'd think if we didn't know him?

I'd feel like I was very familiar with what he's trying to do in the photographs. They're seductive and pleasing. His video work takes it further though. I think it's due to the simplicity of the set-up and the directness of the action.

It's unexpected.

It's funny and I like to extent to which he has gone to carry out the work. Finding the locations, bringing these two people into the country and asking them to undress completely. I assume they know each other.

The technique he uses is just a zoom, but if we didn't know that it would seem like quite an elaborate technological set-up too. And I think the simplicity and domesticity of the action, isolated and transposed into a complicated set-up creates a humourous contrast. It's impressive. It reminds me of land art. You know, like Andy Goldsworthy and how you see the beautiful zoom-ins and the contours of the landscapes. The element of placement within the landscape that's very important to the work.

And there's landscape painting. The landscapes he has chosen to film in are very iconic in the history of landscape painting: the hay bales, the river bank, the beach. It's almost cheesy.

They're like interventions into the landscape. Temporary monuments to his desire and his childhood. Human sculptures. Because they're very still. I think I thought they were static images and then I realised they're not.

Yeah, you see one of their faces flinch or they move slightly.

It's all very friendly isn't it?

It is very friendly. It's a homage to platonic love really. Well I suppose platonic love isn't physical at all in that way.

Eros. It's about Eros. And it's about the friendship between men, I think, which is filmed with love but it's not a sexual love. It's a love that exists in the imagination, but it's still a form of Eros.

Philial love and erotic love.

It makes me think of the crisis of masculinity and how men think of themselves, how they represent themselves. Because there's a lot of confusion.

I don't think Drew is confused.

Oh he's not. I think the vision that Drew presents of people, not just men, is generous and empathic and gentle. It's nurturing. And sensual. Holding the cock which is so vulnerable, and the balls...just gently.

It's vulnerable, but also potentially potent. But it doesn't need to be either in these images. It doesn't need to be the focal point...

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Do you reckon this is boring???

It's all relevant.

Maybe we should do an interior monologue from the point of view of one of the guys holding the penises. Or maybe we should stand in the bush and pretend to hold each other's penises and see what we come up with. It might give us some insight.

A vagina is very different to a penis.

We could wear strap-ons.

I've still got to do Lou's essay too.

Maybe we should smash some toys too.

Yeah. Let's do a Fischli and Weiss or McCarthy and Kelley kind of video in the name of writing these essays.

We'd talk seriously, we'd just be wearing dildos and smashing toys.