

You are the Light

Drew Pettifer

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Counihan Gallery In Brunswick
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www.drewpettifer.com
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The artist would like to thank: Edwina Bartlem, Chris Bond, Lauren Simmonds, Benjamin Creek, Tony Garifalakis, John Meade, Nadine Christensen, Tessa Hildebrand, Daine Singer, Chantal Faust, Sarah Bunting, Meyers Place, his friends and family.

Images

Cover: Detail from *Untitled (Conal stigmata)*, 66 x 99cm, 2008. Inside (L-R): *Untitled (Dom smoking in bed)*, 50.8 x 76.2cm, 2008, *Untitled (Conal after swimming)*, 50.8 x 76.2cm, 2009, *Untitled (Bass in the Bathroom)*, 25.4 x 38.1cm, 2009, *Untitled (Dan and Jonathon smoking)*, 50.8 x 76.2cm, 2009.

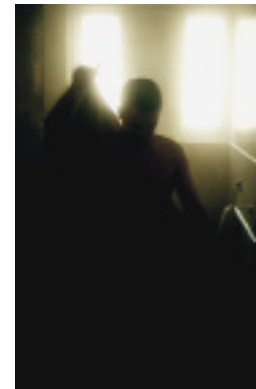
Counihan Gallery In Brunswick
233 Sydney Road, Brunswick VIC 3056

Wednesday to Saturday 11am to 5pm
Sunday 1pm to 5pm



Moreland City Council





Drew Pettifer's photographs of blithe young men raise questions that have been central to feminist and more recently queer art history. Specifically they have us question the nature of the gaze in photography and the difference between a female, male and queer gaze. The gaze in photography has been theorised as an unequal power relationship between viewer and objectified subject. Though there are vacillating differences in the power dynamic of different sexual and gender identities on either side of the lens, by its nature photography objectifies and will remain a medium that is inherently oppressive and possessive, forever entwined with its seedy cousins, porn and fashion and its problematic forebear, ethnographic photography.

The portraits in *You Are the Light* are the photographer's friends and lovers. In them Drew is consciously employing a sexualised queer gaze and enjoying the tension created within a photographer/subject scenario. However, the subjects here seem somewhat resistant to the effects of the gaze. The project is one of documentary from within, where the subjects are complicit in their representation and the unequal power balance between viewer and viewed is disrupted, or at least muddled. These boys appear to revel in their objectification, they look like they are well used to being looked at and are aware of their youthful beauty. As well as being (mostly) queer boy-men, they are of a generation of youth used to living their lives through representation. As such, they are wilfully conforming to the hegemonic power of the gaze at the same time as flaunting the power of their sexuality.

This is not the heterosexual male gaze on a female subject; a queer gaze produces different effects. It is a gross generalisation, but as young boys and men, they do not have the same history of objectification as young girls and women and may have greater resistance to it. Within homosexual culture the objectification of boys is as rampant as that of young girls in heterosexual culture but it is also one in which those young exhibitionists have great power. Looking at his work and placing the artist's involvement, it is hard to imagine Drew transposed as the subject of these works. One gets the sense that there is an element of living vicariously through the photographs and that those boys might be the ones calling the shots, so to speak.

The politics of Drew's project is not to eroticise queer sexuality, but to normalise it. The nudity in these works is often sexual but it is also domestic and mundane. The naked and semi-clad youths appear less to be idealised, eroticised muses than friends that he might incidentally have had sex with. It's an alluring vision of sexual liberation where sexuality is less a performance than a natural part of their lives. Occasionally Drew shoots his subjects semi-clad. The device does not act as it usually might, to make them look more naked, to draw attention to the sex of the subject or to essentialise them. Instead it makes their nakedness ordinary: the half-dressed woman in her bedroom, the naked man smoking, leaving the shower, or pissing.

Here there is joy in youth, sexuality and beauty. The boys play for the camera, if they care for it at all. *Untitled (Jacob and Ben Jokulsarlon #2)*, an image of friends running into a sea of icebergs, is spontaneous and exhilarating. It is young men as an image of freedom from responsibility. Joyous, silly, in action, carefree. As a woman with more responsibilities than I care to enumerate it makes me envious for the reckless and carefree world of young men.

But the other, destructive side of young men is also rendered in Drew's work. His gentle touch is apparent in his photographs of Dom (*Untitled (Dom with foot in paint tin)*, *Untitled (Bleeding Dom)*), the works that are the most painful to view. They are photographs of his friend drunk and left covered in rubbish; unconscious; a broken, vulnerable young man. There is tenderness in these photographs, and I imagine the back-story to be less a cruel joke than a playful one. I wouldn't be surprised if post-shoot Drew was the one cleaning up his friend. Perhaps I imbue the photographer here with an excess of my own morals, but this is the effect of Drew's work, to reveal the vulnerability of his subjects and in the process create a gentle, ordinary connection with them. Likewise, *Untitled (Conal gin and tonic)* doesn't titillate or objectify, it is an image that is deeply intimate.

Drew's work sits within the fine art documentary photography tradition of Nan Goldin and Larry Clark, amongst others. A generation later, Drew's photographs are foremost affectionate, lacking the gritty brutality of Goldin or Clark. Though they might be shot in ordinary interiors, share-houses and the like, that's because that just happens to be where Drew's friends live, and they aren't fetishised, decaying or debauched. There is a strong contemporary lineage of male nude photography in art and fashion, established by the likes of Robert Mapplethorpe, Andy Warhol, Bruce Weber, Wolfgang Tillmans, Bruce LaBruce and Terry Richardson. Within the genre, Pettifer's work sits closest to his contemporary Ryan McGinley, though perhaps without quite the fashionable hipsterism of New Yorker McGinley. Where McGinley's photographs of cool kids might give the illusion of access to a subculture, his subjects are beautiful hipster kids of New York, playing up, refusing responsibility – and a world a way from most of his audience. Drew's subjects are more attainable and closer to home, and not just because most are shot locally in Melbourne. They are ordinary people, beautiful in their faults, sometimes cool, but not too cool. The photographic aesthetic remains steadfastly amateur, immediate and banal. Documenting a passing moment, fleeting beauty and a transient point in these boys' lives, the images are imbued with a sense of nostalgia even as they are taken.

Like McGinley, Drew's works represent the greatest change from that of his predecessors in the moral approach to sexuality and nudity. Namely, he doesn't have one. The sexuality in these photographs is normalised and without moral ramification. So, please enjoy Drew's photographs of beautiful boys, and don't feel guilty doing so.

Daine Singer