

TERROR AUSTRALIS

ONE OFTEN SEES STRANGE THINGS IN THE OUTBACK, WRITES **ASHLEY CRAWFORD**. FOR JUAN FORD, THEY BECOME AUSTRALIA'S HOME GROWN SURREALISM. PORTRAIT BY **KIRSTIN GOLLINGS**.







"There's always a polarity in the examination of life," he says.
 "It's a tug of war against death."



This page top: Juan Ford, *The Stoic*, 2007. Oil on linen, 122 x 107cm. Private collection. COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

Bottom: Juan Ford, *Presence, Absence*, 2007. Oil on linen, 66 x 51cm. Private collection. COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

Opposite page: Juan Ford, *Teaser*, 2007. Oil on linen, 66 x 51cm. COURTESY: JAN MANTON ART, BRISBANE.

There is a distinct sensuality to the searing heat in Juan Ford's *The Stoic*. His female subjects sometimes grimace in pain, but exude an almost erotic sensuality.

Elsewhere, in *The Last Enemy*, a vigorous eucalypt sprouts strange fruit, a skull hanging from a branch perhaps placed there as a marker, a warning, or a symbol of ritual. One often sees strange things in the outback, and this registers powerfully on the scale of natural, home grown surrealism that Australia can brag as uniquely its own.

For Ford these are images: "Not of the life lived, it's the life after the life lived."

But in some of his titles one wonders how the current life will be maintained. He titles one exhibition 100,000 lux – the strongest degree of sunlight known, and another skull image is titled *Terror Australis* – Ford's world is one of unrelenting hostility balanced with a delicate beauty.

In a time of environmental catastrophe it seems that Ford is trying to paint the world into sense.

"There's always a polarity in the examination of life," he says. "It's a tug of war against death. What is it that actually matters? In a way it's visual philosophy. What is important is that it is a constant preoccupation."

With that rigorous position set in place, Ford sets out to reclaim a degree of sanity in a chaotic world. While the morass of ideas boiling through his work is so eclectic as to border on the anarchic, he brings his obsessions to light via an exacting, almost torturous, rigor. Each stroke and each mark is enacted with a borderline anal obsessiveness. But for all of its tightness, there is a throbbing morass of both intellectual and emotional baggage being sifted through here, there is abrasion imbued with melancholia, self-reflection crossing over with a searing socio-political awareness.

Ford's preoccupations are varied indeed. He loves both the bush and Death Metal music. He managed to find a way to meld the two in his recent works where the shadows of a gum tree fall across the visage of his subjects. The results are reminiscent of tattoos, a favourite topic among Death Metal fans.

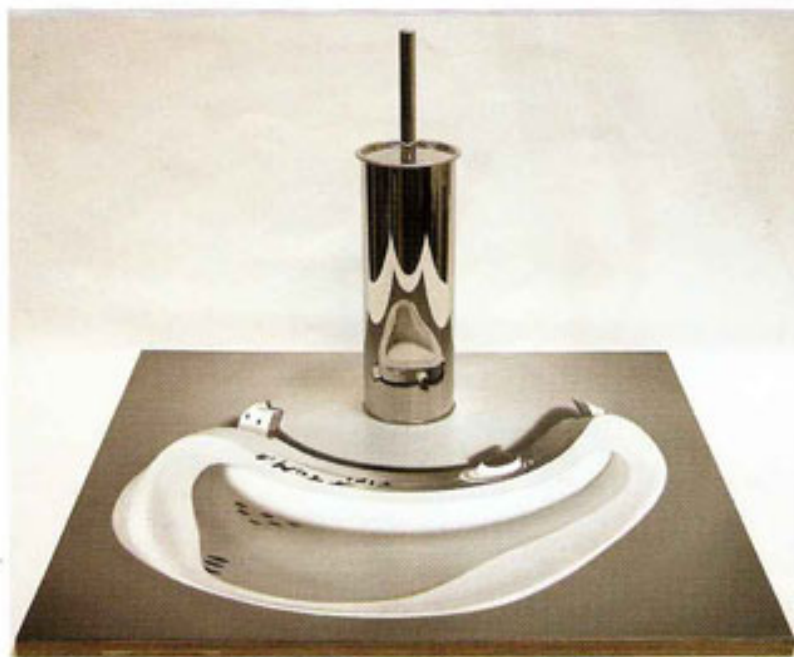
The works were also painted while the nightly news was flooded with apocalyptic talk of drought. Ford is intrigued by the notion of how humanity persists in imposing itself over the environment and, inevitably, the environment is imposing itself upon humanity.

"There is a duality in the work that is like a taut string," he says of the way his work portrays the struggle between life and death, beauty and grotesquerie.

For Ford, the medium itself plays a role. "I believe the paint should speak, and the wrong choice of subject can prevent this." Thus he avoids the all too common problem with photo-realism. "Those paintings can often be very boring and quite lifeless," he notes.

These images are fraught with the suggestion of drought, sun, light and heat. "Therefore they are also about fear," Ford says. The eyes of his subjects are squinting hard or shut, suggestive of a forced introspection or the kind of wilful





"I just got sick of the seriousness of the whole painting/art practice thing," he says.

This page top: Juan Ford, *In the Mind of the Painter*, 2006. Oil on wood, paint gun, 45 x 60 x 60cm. Artbank Collection. COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

Bottom: Juan Ford, *Cleanliness, Godliness*, 2006. Oil on wood, toilet brush, 40 x 60 x 60cm. Private collection. COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

Opposite page top: Juan Ford, *Terror Australis*, 2007. Oil on linen, 102 x 87cm. Private collection. COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

Bottom: Juan Ford, *The Last Enemy*, 2007. Oil on linen, 122 x 107cm. COURTESY: SULLIVAN & STRUMPF FINE ART, SYDNEY.

avoidance of acknowledging the environmental Armageddon Australians were creating on their own shores.

The shadows on the faces could also be read as tribal tattoos which crosses over with Fords' fascination with Death and Black Metal, an interest shared by a number of his contemporaries such as Nick Mangan, Tony Garifalakis and Stieg Persson. Such facial rendering is known in Metal circles as "Corpse paint."

"The shadows on the faces can be read in many ways," he says. "The sub-genre of Black Metal moves the anger, aggression and fighting quality of metal generally into misanthropy. It is about disillusion, mistrust and surrenders the impulse to fight back – this is why weedy types are often into it. I've tried to get into it without success so far, but I love other types of metal; stoner, doom, thrash, speed, grind, death metals, to name a few. They often paint their faces up in a manner reminiscent of the shadows on my faces. I wanted the Black Metal reference there to inflect the reading with a suggestion of misanthropy; a mistrust of humanity to want to and be able to fix the huge environmental problems we've spawned through overpopulation and idiotic greed."

In 2006 Ford unveiled a new series of works at the Dianne Tanzer Gallery in Melbourne titled *Revelation*. These sculptural works used found or readymade reflective cylindrical objects, manipulating the reflections to extraordinary ends. In *Cleanliness Godliness*, using oil on plywood to paint the image that was to be reflected, Ford utilised a stainless steel toilet brush to recreate Duchamp's urinal. In *In the Mind of the Painter*, a spray-paint utensil reflected a skull. The works were like magic tricks, reflecting images that weren't there. Powerful and unnerving, they proved that Ford was as adept at manipulating space in sculptural forms as he was in painting them.

In the Mind of the Painter was the most powerful of these works, both because of the subject and its title. "It's simultaneously about thinking about mortality, and it is an x-ray depiction of the inside of the skull," says Ford. "You can't see the thought in question, so therein lies the neuropsychological joke. It's saying that all the thinking about big questions adds up to nothing quantifiable, and yet this is often a precondition for the creation of art. So this is what is in the mind of the painter. Then it plays off the object itself in a punny way – the paint gun – having a bit of a laugh at the seriousness of the whole practice of painting. It also refers to my use of the heads in profile, another pun."

For all its haunting intensity, *Revelation* maintained a playful aspect, a wry humour. "I just got sick of the seriousness of the whole painting/art practice thing," he says. "I often can't stand art that takes itself too seriously for this reason. After all, humour is one of the highest forms of language. The inclusion of humour can set up tensions within a work, opposing, conflicting and best of all, contradicting more serious intentions."

Juan Ford's next exhibition is at Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne from 3 to 31 May 2008.



The works were painted while the nightly news was flooded with apocalyptic talk of drought.

