

## **Matt Ellwood - "Alabama Song"**

Reviewed by Manne Schulze

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Popular culture can be quite a weird beast, depending on one's viewpoint. For example, poker machines have to be considered part of some wider pop culture. They deal with images and symbols, cost money to play (in general one has to pay to consume culture), and are some kind of escapism, not unlike reading a book, watching an opera or a movie, or playing a video game. There are more than 180,000 of them in Australia, so somebody - in general working class people - must see an attraction in them. Or what about going to see violin superstar André Rieu perform in one of his mega-productions? His renditions of classical evergreens attract a significant section of middle class people, and you wouldn't want to rubbish them, or what? After all they form the part of the population that is supposed to be genuinely interested in the arts. One more case scenario is the current Picasso blockbuster show at the Art Gallery of NSW. When the Spaniard and colleagues like Braque and Duchamp came up with Cubism, they were revolutionaries. Apart from that the guy seems to have been an egocentric, moody and almost sadistic prick to his companion women, his work is so mainstream these days that members of the above mentioned proletariat now have framed posters of his work in their lounge rooms. Will that stop you from going to see this major exhibition? My point is that, as has been argued extensively in the past, whatever constitutes low or high culture is based on relative assessments, and what is considered challenging and cutting edge one day, can be part of shallow mass culture the next, or the other way around.

Of course, that was the angle of attack of the pop artists, from Richard Hamilton to Roy Lichtenstein to Andy Warhol. Apart from latter day pop artists like Jeff Koons, who has nailed banality and shallowness with crafty items made by hired artisans, this approach has somewhat dropped out of fashion. Is it the lack of something really new, or the absence of some deeper, contemporary insights? Who knows?

In this context it is interesting to see NZ artist Matt Ellwood in his first Sydney show, "Alabama Song", go all the way back to the 1970s with the help of one of the more schizo of publications, the elephant in the room, Playboy Magazine.

Just as a reminder to everybody including myself - I haven't held a Playboy in my hands for decades - the magazine pushed, and probably still does, an extra weird mix of high-brow essays and "tasteful" images of tits and bums, just what your average gentleman is interested in. That includes the famous centre-fold which launched or reinforced the careers of many a lass. But according to feminist critique, no amount of intellectual varnish could hide the underlying sexist wet dreams of real playboys, like Hugh Hefner, and millions of wannabe ones. However, it established - from a thoroughly male perspective - that a woman taking off her gear for the titillation of ogling men doesn't have to be a bimbo. It also showed that a silk pyjama can be considered appropriate day wear and proved to less liberated societies that a late Roman empire-like decadence had taken hold of western civilisations. To the best of my knowledge, although thus forming one of the pillars of the sexual revolution, Playboy lost significant market share to the more explicit Penthouse and more recently to the all pervasive and free-for-all internet porn. Compared to the rated material that is now easily available at the click of a computer mouse, old Playboys emanate an almost naive innocence.

So, right from the beginning Matt Ellwood is on, literally, fertile ground. For past exhibitions, ever so respectful of the found raw material of old and weathered Playboy magazines, he has appropriated and re-printed the advertisements - not the sexy women! - from within: ads for fags, stereos, champagne and whiskeys. In "Alabama Song" he blows up nine ads embedded in an interview with Aussie ex-pat Germaine Greer discussing her landmark book "The Female Eunuch". Greer, the outspoken feminist turned grumpy old woman on TV was no prude and posed in the nude for an alternative magazine back in her young days. It comes as a surprise that she was also quite fond of using swearwords. While Ellwood has reproduced the ads of this part of his "Germaine Greer Series" in charcoal on paper and has blackened out, i.e. censored, whatever text they originally contained, the actual interview has been reprinted as a limited edition artist's book. In it all the non-expletive smart bits of the interview have been erased. What's left is an oddly clustered rant of "fuck, fuck, cunt, cunt, fucks, fucking etc". That, definitely, is not what one of yesteryear's Playboy connoisseurs would have liked to be associated with.

In this sense Ellwood's treatment of the magazines resembles the systematic analysis of advertising in the ABC's ratings success "The Gruen Transfer", now renamed the "Gruen Planet". In it a group of industry experts discuss the methods, marketing strategies and psychological tricks which are employed to establish brands and "truths". In "Alabama Song" Ellwood lays bare the clichés and stereotypes used in the ads in question by turning them into harmless portraits, still lifes and vistas. He also exposes the underlying weaknesses of the human condition. It works on the level of an anthropological deconstruction of the macho posing and of the surrounding sex, which are employed to sell the products. Considering the fashion of the 1970s, his treatment also elicits the odd giggle. Will some of today's ad spreads look equally ridiculous in 40 years time? Probably! The more things change...

Ellwood drops another hint by naming his show "Alabama Song", a reference to the Brecht/Weill collaboration from the chaotic and destitute Weimar Republic period between the wars in Germany. The song, like its bigger sibling the "Threepenny Opera", is an anti-capitalist ode to the disenfranchised underclass and was immortalised in covers by the Doors and then David Bowie. In the original version the character of a prostitute asks to be shown "the way to the next whisky bar" where she can meet boys. Like the grog in the ads out of Playboy, sex and drugs and rock 'n roll always go hand in hand with glamour, decadence, depravity and despair.

Unfortunately, Ellwood's 3-D work appropriating more of pop culture's icons is not going to be shown here in Sin City in the foreseeable future. My personal favourite, judging by an image on his website, is the large laminated plywood sculpture "Unconditional Love" (2011). It shows two R2D2-type robots joined in a conjugal sort-of kiss.

In its old-school craftiness and cerebral dissection Ellwood's work goes against the grain of decorative art for the sake of art. Can some individual or a funding body please sponsor a somewhat larger showing of his practice here in Aussieland? He certainly deserves it.

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