

Cameron Hayes

By Robert Nelson
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**Dwyer & Co Solicitors,
Level 20, 2 Lonsdale St, Melbourne
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Cameron Hayes is a satirical painter with two remarkable gifts. One is a topical appreciation of contemporary folly. The other is an instinct for pictorial construction. These two gifts complement one another and work in concert to create paintings of lasting poetic expression.

Hayes' pictures have a striking visual complexity. The paintings aren't small, but profuse detail is crammed into the field. Scores of figures, objects, vehicles, pathways, signs, machines, advertising images, logos, buildings and so on vie for a place in your retina. But they're drawn together by careful spatial organisation; with multiple figures co-ordinated on different horizons and zones of intensity.

Visual chaos would easily result with such ambitious compositions; but Hayes' pictures don't fall apart in formal terms. They're unified by chromatic liaisons. Each painting possesses a "key", a colour range, by which most of the elements reinforce one another.

This key gives each work compositional coherence but also a mood, a sway, a certain energy, which seems to relate to the content. A painting dealing with the Tampa is mainly yellow, red and green; another dealing with the commercialisation of girlhood is predominantly magenta.

From the manic concentration of figures and props, you could imagine that the world is parodied as simply mad. The topsy-turvy environment of the pictures suggests that everyone is a bit silly, possessed by a crazy energy for batty projects. The scale seems to make people seem inconsequential, a bit like insects; and you could easily walk away from the maddening scenes thinking nothing more of them.

But do not underestimate the moral havoc of the pictures. The world is presented as irrational but the characterisation is not merely bizarre, as if a world falling apart with lunacy makes a jolly spectacle. A concerted political critique runs through the works, which goes beyond the blithe exercise of a maverick spirit.

The paintings are inflected with anti-globalisation discourse and also art historical knowledge, as their style recalls the multiplicity and high horizons of Northern European masters like Brueghel. But Brueghel's sanguine world of earthy yokels is far from Hayes' vision. He shows how people are manipulated by media to crave unnecessary commodities. Behind the mania, the devil is at work in the form of corporate marketing, yielding unhappy consequences for the contemporary mind.

Girls, for example, are shown missing out on their childhood. They are fed on a diet of teeny exemplars in which narcissistic sexuality is already assumed. Like the wardrobe of any seven-year-old, Hayes' painting is filled with branded products - from Bratz to Saddle Club - which are successfully marketed on the basis of deferred erotic fantasy. The result, Hayes suggests, is that the stars after whom children model themselves can no longer read or make things or even go to the toilet without programmatic assistance. The natural fruits of childhood are no longer available.

When the refugees seek food and clothing on a ship bound for Australia, the only things on board are pet food and fake Italian fashion. This slice of Australian life, seen through our imports, shows the artificial national priorities in sharp contrast to the natural needs of refugees. Our consumption is based on marketing and vanity, while theirs is based on hunger and hope for the welfare of children. With due malice, Hayes strings out the famous Italian brand-names on improvised

washing lines, airing the globalised vanity to which the western world is committed with terrible pride.

Hayes' paintings allegorise western vanity from the ground up, in the very compositions. Through the density of actions and objects, Hayes captures not only the impenetrable rituals of human folly, but the most obdurate themes of contemporary life. Everyone is busy and no one has time. The basis of striving is competitive zeal for greater wealth and status, facilitated by industries which ply the passive population with sexualised images. All products come with images. And because the community is now understood as nothing but a huge market, the work of corporations is now virtually synonymous with culture. This promotion of marketing at the expense of difference gains special intensity through what is known as globalisation. It's the part of culture that is championed by capital.

Hayes is one of very few artists who addresses these urgent concerns. Here is a unique moral painter with an aesthetic sense who gives the most relevant ideas the monumentality that they deserve.