



Looking now anyone here?



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**Benjamin Bannan
Brent Harrison
Wade Taylor**

Paper Mountain
10 - 31 April 2019

Beat Boys

essay by Drew Pettifer

In December 2018 it was widely reported that the Western Australian Museum had 'controversially' acquired a door from a Gosnells toilet for the museum collection.¹ The door is from an historically significant beat – a public place where men meet to have sex with other men – and features queer-themed graffiti and a glory hole. The Museum was forced to defend the acquisition in the face of criticism from conservative members of parliament and reactionary media commentators. The response to the acquisition is a timely reminder that queerness in general (and queer sex in particular) still occupies a heavily contested space in Australian contemporary culture.

Public toilets are arguably the most private of public sites, offering temporary moments of seclusion in otherwise communal spaces. Given this unique status, it's unsurprising that toilets have historically played a role as sites for public sexual encounters. Of course queer sexual encounters are not the only kinds of sex that happens in these spaces; straight couples also regularly engage in sex in public.² Indeed, public sex is such a common element of Australia's sexual landscape that the word 'public' featured in the top 10 searches on Pornhub.com in Australia in 2018.³ A particular moral panic surrounds queer sex and sexualities, however, which is amplified when it spills into spaces that might be considered public.

Ironically, this conservative moral climate no doubt contributed to the need for beats in the first place. While people of all sexualities might pursue sex in public out of convenience or necessity or kink, for men who have sex with men, beats offered a space to have anonymous sex at a time when "homosexual acts" were criminalised. Homosexuality was decriminalised in Western Australia in 1990,⁴ but significant legal discriminations persisted until the *Lesbian and Gay Law Reform Act* of 2002. It was only in 2018 that laws were passed to allow individuals to apply to have historic convictions for sodomy expunged from their criminal records.⁵ All the while beats have enjoyed a long and complex history.



Wade Taylor, *Lagoon*
Oil on canvas. 76 x 102cm

Although their significance may have faded with increasing social acceptance and legal recognition, public toilets and beats remain an important part of queer culture. Even in the age of dating and hook up apps, men still have sex with men in public toilets, sometimes even using apps like Grindr to facilitate the meeting. In the digital age a distinction remains between Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) who might identify as straight and queer men. As such beats are not exclusively occupied by men who identify as queer, again rendering them ambiguous and contested spaces. Beats oscillate between being sites of liberation and sites of oppression, sites that are dangerous and sites that are welcoming to anyone. It is perhaps these tensions that make the spectre of the beat such a ripe site for artistic investigation.

Wade Taylor's paintings capture this ambiguity through a series of tableaux of toilet block beats. Taylor's careful compositions in intimate, fleshy tones focus on the figure of the beat itself rather than the participants, revealing subtle traces of former and imminent activity. There is an eerie and anticipatory tone to these images. They exist as evidence of an event, almost like a crime scene photo, but of what they are evidence remains unanchored. In one telling image we see a white van stationed behind a toilet block in a public park. The work is equal parts longing and foreboding. The vibrant, inky, pink and purple sunset is archetypal of Perth, but there is also an ominousness to the dark and angular brush strokes in parts of the sky that hangs over the scene. Taylor captures all of the tension and ambiguity of the beat, without overstating its emancipatory or oppressive potential.

Brent Harrison has created an installation work that reproduces the interior space of the public toilet, but removes the site's purpose and functionality. All of the discrete elements of the space are replicated here as individual sculptures, except for perhaps the most central part for most users – the toilet itself. The resultant configuration is both clinical and uncanny. There is no pretence here that bodies occupy this space to use the bathroom. This installation was influenced by a homophobic cartoon that was installed in the toilet at Harrison's place of work. The cartoon implied that interacting with others after failing to wash your hands was like touching each other's genitals. The illustration of two



Brent Harrison, *With Absolution* (detail)

Ink on 80gsm A4 paper, snap frame, wet floor A frame sign, single compartment soap dispenser, pink pearlescent soap, paper hand towel dispenser, paper hand towel, plastic bag, waste paper bin, automatic electric hand dryer and power point. Dimensions vary.

men with their hands down each other's pants was created to elicit a response of disgust and to regulate behaviour, using heteronormativity to enforce another social norm. Similar to Taylor's work, Harrison's installation evokes a trace of activity. It is as if someone has left in a hurry, leaving a series of clues for us to piece together.

Ben Bannan's work, *Another Side of Glory*, is also an artistic reconstruction of the space of the beat, but in this instance the artist has produced a toilet space within the exhibition space featuring a prominently positioned glory hole. By looking through the glory hole the viewer is able to watch Neil Buckley's 1998 film *Other Side of Glory*. This is the first public screening of the video since it was produced. Buckley is a chronicler of Western Australia's queer history and was the person responsible for saving the Gosnells toilet door when the building was demolished. The video was filmed at the site prior to its demolition. Bannan has installed this found work of queer erotica in such a way that the viewer is required to replicate and reflect on processes of looking associated with beats. In doing so the artist is positioning the viewer in the role of participant in the exchange. The very loaded nature of the subject matter heightens our awareness of the effects of the gaze and the relationship between looking and authority.

Processes of looking and visibility are central to this exhibition. Many theorists of the gaze, like Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Laura Mulvey, have argued that looking is inextricably linked with processes of desire. Lacan, for example, argues that the first act of desire associated with looking is the desire for recognition of subjecthood.⁶ We desire to be seen as subjects. Those gazing and those being gazed at bring different desires. Moreover, vision and the gaze are themselves socially and historically constructed. What we see and how we interpret it will be determined by dominant codes of seeing (both visually and conceptually) in any given context. This very Foucauldian way of thinking reveals that looking is more than just a purely mechanical relationship, but rather tied up with epistemological concerns around how the structured gaze constructs meaning and knowledge, the ways in which things become seeable.⁷



Benjamin Bannan, *Another Side of Glory* (detail) 2019,
single channel video installation. 90 x 200 x 170cm.

looking now anyone here? is an exhibition of works that generously offer the audience access points to a culture that is otherwise ordinarily hidden, showing things that are perhaps otherwise unseeable. These works carve out space for the audience to encounter them, spatially and metaphorically, through absence and lack. Like artefacts, these works reveal traces of bodies that have hitherto occupied these spaces, but now that space has been handed over to you. This lack should not be seen as a deficiency, but rather as a productive space for the generation of an assembling force that synthesises and puts together. The artists are handing over to you the weighty responsibility of recalling and recording this history, as it is manifested and made real in the present moment.

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RMIT University, Melbourne/Narrm**

- 1 Peter de Kruijff, "WA Museum's 'glory hole' acquisition sparks controversy", *The West Australian*, 12 December 2018, p.1; Samuel Leighton-Dore, "This Western Australian museum just acquired a very old glory hole", *SBS*, 14 December 2018, <https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/sexuality/fast-lane/article/2018/12/14/western-australian-museum-just-acquired-very-old-glory-hole>, accessed 22 April 2019; Author unknown, "WA Museum's glory hole acquisition criticised", *Out in Perth*, 11 December 2018, <https://www.outinperth.com/wa-museums-glory-hole-acquisition-criticised>, accessed 23 April 2019.
- 2 While not an accurate statistical cross section, the Great Australian Sex Survey of 2014 showed that 47.8% of Western Australian respondents enjoyed sex in public, the highest state in the nation. Given less than 5% of respondents identified as queer, the vast majority of these encounters were presumably straight: *The Great Australian Sex Census*, 2014, www.sexensus.com.au, accessed 23 April.
- 3 "2018: Year in Review", *Pornhub.com*, 11 December 2018, <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2018-year-in-review>, accessed 23 April 2019.
- 4 *Law Reform (Decriminalisation of Sodomy) Act 1989 (WA)*.
- 5 *Historical Homosexual Convictions Expungement Act 2018 (WA)*.
- 6 Jacques Lacan, "Some reflections on the ego", *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 34, 1953, 11-17.
- 7 See John Rajchman, "Foucault's Art of Seeing", *October*, vol.44 (Spring, 1988), 88-117.

Wade Taylor is an early career artist from Perth, completing a Bachelor in Fine Arts at the University of Western Australia. Working primarily with paint his practice explores issues surrounding Western Australian identity and landscape. These issues feed common themes including notions of suburbia, nostalgia, the everyday, and cultural artefacts.

Brent Harrison is an early career artist who graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Art (Honours) from Curtin University in 2016. Harrison's multidisciplinary practice attempts to disrupt assimilationist narratives of heteronormativity by employing appropriation, reproduction, humour and intervention as methods of cultural resistance.

Benjamin Bannan is a recent graduate of Curtin University's Fine Arts program. His multidisciplinary practice combines sculpture, installation and photography to examine queer lineage and personal narratives. Documenting and appropriating found materials, oral histories and coded behaviour, Bannan attempts to tackle greater narratives of public and private.

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