

LOVE DEATH COWHIDE

TIM OLSEN GALLERY, APRIL 2010

CATALOGUE ESSAY BY ROSEMARY SORENSON

The first time I met Angus McDonald, I was late, miscalculating the couple of hours drive in grey rain between Brisbane and Lismore.

In the Lismore Gallery, surrounded by his elegant images of penguins and Antarctic skies, the artist evidenced no sign of impatience, settling in to talk with what I later came to think of as his characteristic blend of intensity and modesty, passion and open-mindedness, courage and generosity. All good attributes in a human being. No doubt Angus has plenty of other sides to his personality less accessible to a journalist, but it was his warmth and curiosity that drizzly day a few years ago that made me receptive to his work.

Then came the bulls.

The drawings he does of patient but melancholy bovines are beguiling because McDonald is not only an excellent draughtsman but also a thoughtful observer. He happily admits to a beefy obsession, which breaks out in various ways. The drawings are immediately and doubly appealing – aesthetically pleasing, they also place you in sympathy with the big creatures often shown tethered, ringed through the nose.

Angus's bulls started us talking about masculinity. His cowhide furniture started us talking about the feminine. It's impossible not to see a challenge in the provocative ideas behind turning a black and white hide into a couch, or using it to upholster a seat the shoulder-backs of which turn upwards like horns.

Even while he was painting sublimely poised still-lives composed of jugs and cloth, he was playing around with masculinity metaphors in various bull-inspired sculptural works. They are interesting because they appear to ask, "what's do you think about this?", rather than saying, "here's what you ought to think". Only under-done and ignorant art sends out a message, and even Angus's reasonably straight-forward bull drawings are ambiguous, with plenty of space for a viewer to fossick for responses and for meanings.

Now, it's not just hides, but skulls. The big box, covered in hide, with a skull embedded in a window at its centre is like a shrine, while the skull painted as though reflecting the sky and mounted on a black panel is like an icon. It's all a little unnerving.

Then you turn from the real skulls and cowhide, to their representation, so life-like, in these new paintings Angus is calling his nudes. In the big work which gives the show its title – Love, Death and Cowhide – you get the lot: a sleeping, sex-satiated women, a couch with hornlike back-boards, steer skulls, and, new in the McDonald catalogue of quasi-symbols, a prominent, round, green watermelon – the seedless type.

A busy scene, but at rest. A scene full of potency, but sublimated. A painting with such surface tension it almost quivers.

Others of his nudes seem homage to lust, and I find these less unnerving, although there is, even here, a tension between smoothly rendered surface, and what lies beneath, as though the painting's stasis is always about to be magically, perhaps dangerously, disturbed.

If life is not unnerving, then chances are you have lost your nerve - there's that idea of courage again, which pulses along within Angus's work. It's not a brash or immature courage, but worked at, and with.

Beauty, the idea of perfection, which Angus McDonald's skill makes him capable of rendering, is depressing if it isn't challenged. But challenging it requires more than an easy, glib reference to ugliness and vulgarity. When you start mucking around with the sensuality of beauty, you can end up with treacherously insincerity, or you can end up with an honesty that prickles a little like heat-induced skin rash.

That's the kind of honesty you can experience in a lusciously meticulous oil painting of a cow against a storm-beautiful sky. Slightly wild, a little dreamy, absurdly lovely: Angus's art enjoys its sensual power but doesn't take it easy.

I saw much of this new work when he was rushing to complete it, the big busy couch-nude still awaiting a final workover to get that surface tension happening, and his madly provocative skull-enframed work needing some adjustment, he said, so the dead head did not look so "contrite". Angus crouched behind his cowhide-covered box, holding up the steer's skull, willing me not just to see but also to feel the totemic mystery of this construction. His sleepy nude loomed behind, the eroticized shimmer of a still-life beckoned to one side, and an odd nest of horns, arranged around an egg-shape like a kind of bovine diadem sat a little further off.

It's easy to be charmed by the world as created by Angus McDonald: but it's the frisson of uncertainty that really gives it its appeal.

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