

THE ART OF SATIRE

Story Elizabeth Fortescue



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The Chippendale laneway is dark. The NG Art Gallery can't be far away now. Ah, a rectangle of yellow light spills across the lane and you hear a reassuring babble of talking and laughter. You step out of the darkness and into one of Sydney's most unexpected salon-style experiences.

This is NG Art Gallery and Mission Restaurant and Bar on one of its Feast for the Senses nights, when business partners Nicky Ginsberg (who runs the NG Art Gallery upstairs) and Piera Potter (who takes care of the cuisine at Mission downstairs) invite the public to experience food, wine and the company of artists, all themed to the gallery's current exhibition.

On a steamy Sydney night in February, artists Garry Shead and Eric Lobbecke were the featured artists and they spoke after dinner about their experiences in the connected but disparate roles of cartoonists and fine artists.

Shead, one of Australia's most revered artists who produced cartoons for the *Bulletin* and *Oz* Magazine back in the 1960s, perched on a bar stool beside Lobbecke. Lobbecke's paintings of fleshy nudes were on display throughout the gallery and restaurant in an exhibition titled *Depouiller* (a French word meaning to strip off one's clothes or strip away a façade). It was Lobbecke's first one-man show.

Shead, on the other hand, has exhibited extensively and to wide critical acclaim. In Sydney in 2007, Australian Galleries exhibited Shead's paintings alongside the sculptures of his wife, Judit, who had died six months before. It was a moving testament to their creative collaboration.

While Lobbecke's paintings had remained a private obsession until his NG Gallery exhibition, his cartoons in *The Australian* and *The Daily Telegraph* have been seen by literally millions of readers across 20 years. Those with a keen eye for detail will also recall seeing Lobbecke's work, *le vol, the flight*, in last year's Dobell Prize for Drawing – the prize which Shead won in 2004.

The two artists met for the first time on the Feast for the Senses evening, but quickly established a friendly rapport and a shared understanding of the symbiosis between cartooning and painting.

"It's interesting, because I always felt that Australia had our peculiar humour and it was exemplified in the cartoons in the *Bulletin* going right back to Norman Lindsay and all those people," Shead said.

"I thought, 'what's so serious about art? There should be some humour in it. It shouldn't be taken so seriously'. People don't want to hear serious stuff, but if you say it in a humorous way they take it in."

Daumier and Goya were cartoonists as well as fine artists, Shead said. Lobbecke added James Gillray to the list.

Lobbecke spoke about his struggle to keep his cartooning out of his painting, as though cartooning were something that sneaked in the back door when he wasn't looking. After 20 years as a cartoonist, Lobbecke said, he's come full circle. "I'm coming up with the same answers to the same questions, and I felt like this [his painting practice] is going to take me into another realm where I can start delving into the subconscious and looking at the figure in a different way. Even though they are satirical in some respects, I'm trying to put a lot more poetry in them."

Apart from the one-hit nature of cartooning as opposed to the more sustained gaze which painting invited, Shead said cartooning and painting differed at the basic level of honesty.

"I don't want to judge things when I'm painting," he said. "I try to get into it like I'm those characters. Whereas when I did cartoons I remember I did one of Bob Menzies and I really relished making him grotesque. He was retiring and I did the cartoon for the *Bulletin*. He was strutting off the field with his bat and he was telling Harold Holt, 'just remember to keep a straight bat'. But in painting it's not the same. You have to be much more sincere with painting. You can't lie or judge."

Shead was surprised to be asked about "over-exaggeration" of the human figure in his work.

"My daughter says 'these people couldn't exist, Dad'. But I think they're normal," he responded.

What about his depictions of Queen Elizabeth II?



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"Well, I mean I put her in absurd situations with koalas and things, but she still looks like a woman, so I didn't exaggerate her much. I didn't distort her. I tried to make her look nice. I don't consciously try to distort things, not like cartoons where you deliberately do."

How much influence did Shead's cartooning days have on his work now?

"I'm an Australian artist and I really paint for Australians like me," Shead said. "That's probably what I got from cartoons -- that it made me feel I could reach the average person. And the narrative also is like a thing that helps other people make their own interpretations and gives them a bit more for them to get hold of."

Having worked his way through various preoccupations including the Ern Malley literary hoax and the D.H. Lawrence novel, *Kangaroo*, had Shead moved on to a new obsession?

"No, I think I've come to the end of my obsessions," he said. "I've got my pack of cards and I'm just going to use them up. I still have things to say but nothing particularly new I don't think. It's just about people, my relationships. I just want to understand my life a bit. That's what I do."

Shead believes artists are continually mining the impressions they took on board in their childhood.

"Certainly for me, up to about 15 that was my crucial time, then I tried to adapt or sort it out. It's still fascinating me," he said.

"I think you'll find most artists have an obsessive thing. We all have a limited expression. We all have a certain number of things we want to say, and we say them over and over again in different ways."

Lobbecke also revealed that his daily life and his friends supply much of the inspiration for his paintings. One of his paintings depicted a surfer manfully grappling with his board on Maroubra Beach.

"That's another Eric," Lobbecke explained, pointing to the



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painting. "We go surfing every Friday and he struggles with his board, and I love the idea of the man trying really hard. It's a metaphor for a lot of things in life. We try really hard to do our best and Eric does that. He's a really good friend of mine."

Lobbecke listed Fernando Botero, Lucian Freud, Jenny Saville and Asterix creator René Goscinny as being among his influences. And who models for his meaty portrayals of the human figure?

"I use pictures of sumo wrestlers and people like George Foreman and *The Biggest Loser*. It's a conglomeration of different things," Lobbecke said.

Look closely and you'll notice nearly all Lobbecke's figures have their eyes closed. This device helps Lobbecke depersonalize his figures, making them symbolic of universal human behaviours and experiences.

After drawing Australia's leading business figures and politicians for the newspapers for many years, he is no longer interested in creating portraits of individuals.

"I've been depicting egos for far too long," he said.

Feast for the Senses is held regularly at NG Art Gallery, Sydney
www.ngart.com.au

- 01 Eric Lobbecke, *le vol, the flight*, 2008, charcoal on 200gsm paper, 120 x 85cm
02 Garry Shead, *Orpheus and Eurydice II* (detail), 2008, oil on board, 36 x 39cm
03 Garry Shead, *Bourani* (detail), 2008, oil on board, 46 x 58cm

Images courtesy the artists and Australian Galleries