

AGES

A survey of works from Stephen Hall
23 June to 22 July 2022

The concepts Hall explores contain the deeply personal and the universal, expanding on facts and fantasies relating to Australia, the world, man and the mind.

Stephen Hall lives and works on Dharug land (Hornsby). Hall chooses from drawing, printmaking, sculpture, ceramics, painting, or artists' books to best express his ideas. He delves into issues such as the environment, political power, violence, terrorism, humanity's past and future, and its impact; as well as art, his own personal experience, satire, and the absurdity in trying to understand "us" and our place in the universe.



Hawkesbury Minotaur, 2022, mixed media

The Artist as Don Quixote in Post-Colonial Australia

I first encountered a work by Stephen Hall downstairs at Coventry Gallery in Paddington in the early 1980s, 1983, I think.

The apprehension of the work, a nude full body self-portrait, induced a nervous response in me as if bolts of electricity were racing through my nerves in a kind of mirror image of the portrait, with its limbs twisted like the subject's face in a contusion, extrusion of existential self-realisation in a hostile world.

I was shocked and delighted by the work in much the same way as I was when I first encountered a self-portrait by the German expressionist Egon Schiele in 1977 at the AGNSW. It seemed obvious to me that Hall's self-portrait was influenced by Schiele.

The work had a heroic intensity and intention but, I was puzzled, hadn't the artist as hero been proclaimed dead in the 1970s? Perhaps this was a statement of defiance, a kind of self-immolation under the critical gaze of feminism's critique of male ambitions to conquer and reign supreme.

20 years later in the final third of the first decade of the 2000s, I once again encountered artwork by Hall. This time in one of the Depot galleries at Dank Street Waterloo.



A Prophecy, 1986, etching

A crazed rider on the back of a horse had broken through the polished cement floor of the warehouse gallery, the rider's arm, with a paint brush gripped in its fist, was raised in triumph as if leading the charge into a battle for survival against unwinnable odds. Was it a resurrection? Was it the appearance of a supernatural embodiment of the spirit of The Man From Snowy River? Or perhaps it was a bush ranger, Ned Kelly without the mask? The heroic intention was clear, but now it was infused with an awareness of absurdity – a modern day Don Quixote, who having vanished from 17th century Spain, was here in Australia reappearing from under the ground in a repurposed brick and corrugated iron industrial age warehouse.

The keys to understanding this apparition were the paint brush gripped in one hand and the artist's pallet pegged to the other. This was a three-dimensional metaphor for the authentic artist's struggle to create meaning and find relevance in a period of post-modern cynicism in the art world, a cynicism that also infused economics, politics, education and culture across the developed countries in the western world.

Who was this artist who seemed able to connect with and conjure mythic characters from a past that was both collective culture and intimate revelation?

which the planes of the face seemed to move before my eyes – breaking apart and coalescing into a recognisable head glued together by the intensity of the subject's gaze. I had a strange realisation that this was the same artist I had encountered in Coventry Gallery all those years earlier.

The experience was further crystalised as a living embodiment of the crazed rider and tormented existentialist stepped out from behind an alcove, greeted me with a gentle and welcoming smile and introduced himself as Stephen Hall.



Eisenstein Theory, ink (lower panel)



Love in the time of Covid 1, 2020, mixed media

This was both a delight and a puzzle – how could the war-ravaged soul revealed in those artworks be embodied in the form of this quietly spoken gentleman? Some minutes into a pleasant conversation in which I felt like I was talking with someone I had known for years, an attractive and poised woman came into the gallery. She moved comfortably passed the dramatic figure erupting through the cement floor completely unsurprised and came towards us. Stephen introduced this elegant woman as his wife, and I felt the stack of cards in my head that I'd been sorting into a pattern of understanding about this artist get tossed yet again. I scrambled to pick them up and reassemble them into an adjusted and refined understanding of the work and the man.

In 2009, 2010 and 2011, three of Hall's large drawings were exhibited in the Dobell prize at the AGNSW. *The Limner and his Steed Rest* 2010 was later purchased by the AGNSW. I focus on this work here because standing in front of this work, once again I experienced a shock of realisation and confusion. The mythical Merry Andrew and his horse Starlight were joined by a third figure, a woman – and they were all dead and buried six feet underground. Stephen told me later that his wife had died of cancer.

recently at ARO in William Street Darlinghurst. From self-portraits to classical Greek mythological characters to contemporary political figures, Hall has no shortage of material. His choice of subjects is eclectic and is driven by a need to face urgent and salient themes in contemporary life. His is a courageous and sometimes foolhardy venture.

Hall has made effective use of opportunities offered by Facebook and Instagram as vehicles for reaching a wider audience, including publishing stop-motion videos that display his virtuosity as a draftsman, and performance pieces that make fun of his intensity and self-regard. A Shakespearian fairy rescues a failed watercolour attempt by candlelight and the blindfolded artist faces a firing squad holding brushes in his mouth ready to paint whatever comes in the afterworld.

From the realism of existential angst to the surrealism of science fiction, from lyrical landscapes done en plein air to studio landscapes that reference modern Australian masters, to pseudo documentaries which delve into the history of European art and ideas and finally to contemporary politics and the multiple perils faced by democracy under attack by corrupt media moguls and narcissistic autocrats and the survival of the planet itself held to ransom by mega-wealthy oil barons both national and international, there seems to be no subject that Hall does not explore in his drive to create meaningful, relevant and timely art.

The invention of a Don Quixote protagonist painted in post-colonial Australian vernacular allowed Hall to explore and express the struggles and triumphs of his own psyche and journey, at the same time avoiding the risks of autobiography and heroic self-portraiture that would appear to proselytise the very same disease that Hall seeks to expunge and examine in others.

Rod Holdaway

April 2022



Death of Starlight, 2019, ceramic



Messiah 21-C (aka: The Trump Drawings), 2020, pencil
Liberty's Revenge (left) Liberty Trumped (right)



Stephen Hall

Stephen Hall's first solo exhibition was in 1986, this 2022 survey solo exhibition, *Ages* will be his 23rd. His work has also been exhibited in group and art competition exhibitions in Asia, Europe and nationally.

Hall won the Kedumba Drawing Award in 2011, the North Sydney Award for Drawing in 2013 and the Grace Cossington Smith local artist award in 2018. He has been selected as a finalist in the Dobell Drawing Prize, Sculpture by the Sea, The Willoughby Sculpture Prize, NSW Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize and the Blake Prize. His first solo exhibition was held at the Coventry Gallery in 1986 and has continued to exhibit regularly.

Hall was awarded the UNSW Paris Residency 2003, MFA (COFA) 2004 and the UNSW Alumni Art Prize 2007. Hall is included in collections such as the AGNSW, Kedumba Contemporary Drawing Collection, Willoughby, Nth Sydney and Cumberland Councils and the Museo Iconografico Del Quijote, Mexico.



Kedumba Musing 3, 2011, ink



The Starlight Rebellion: Against Enforced Utilisation, 2019, ink and gouache

Gallery hours Tuesday to Saturday 10 am-5 pm | FREE ENTRY | Gate 7, 1666 Pacific Highway, Wahroonga | 02 9473 7878
gcsgallery@abbotsleigh.nsw.edu.au | www.gscgallery.com.au | An Anglican Pre K-12 Day and Boarding School for girls

*The Grace Cossington Smith Gallery acknowledges the Dharug people as the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which the gallery rests.
We acknowledge the Elders, past, present and emerging.*