

ANDREW NICHOLLS discusses the work of an artist showcased by an edgy new commercial outlet.

CASEY AYRES

Housed within a tiny former Laundromat, Perth's youngest commercial space, OK Gallery, has established an impressive reputation over its fifteen-month lifespan, the quality of its programming infinitely higher than its diminutive size and diffident moniker would lead one to expect. OK represents a small stable comprising some of Western Australia's more interesting early career artists, including Jacob Ogden Smith (*aAR* #13), whose memorable recent solo show *Hovea Pottery Ale* comprised home-brewed beer in hand-thrown stoneware bottles.

Equally notable is mixed-media artist Casey Ayres, whose first solo show — *Picnic at Fanging Rock* — was OK's opening exhibition in mid-2011. An assuredly non-ironic paean to the much-maligned 'hoon' subculture, the exhibition comprised a restrained suite of works rendering mythical the testosterone-fuelled world of drag racing and Motorplexes.

The show's title was borrowed from a glib motor magazine headline, but like the Lindsay novel and Weir film that inspired it, Ayres' works evoked both the uncanny (an unsettling suggestion of dissolution in aerial shots of empty roads showing the marks of burnouts but not the people or vehicles responsible, or photographs of cars disappearing into clouds of smoke), and adolescent eroticism (as in a photographic print of a youth seemingly about to pleasure himself to *Street Machine* magazine, or a *pieta*-like video of the artist, shirtless and grease-stained, carrying an engine part through an abandoned car park to a Chopin étude). Deadpan and poignant, the exhibition cleverly lent its seemingly banal subject matter a genuine poetic gravitas.

Ayres recently participated in Melbourne's Next Wave Festival with fellow Eurasian Perth artists Nathan Beard and Abdul Abdullah, as part of the equally ingenious *Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere* collective. Hosting a Pan-Asian embassy, the trio cast themselves as distant and glamorous cultural ambassadors, 'inscrutably oriental' in gold silk suits and elaborate crowns. Their perfectly pitched critique (incorporating research trips to ride elephants and have knock-off Prada suits made in South-East Asia, and 'yellowing up' for promotional photo shoots) could fail horribly in the hands of lesser artists. As it stands, the project allows them to re-empower their own Asian-Australian subjectivity (one largely absent from Australia's aesthetic depictions of itself), while more broadly referencing Western culture's historical 'othering' of Asian culture for economic gain, from the aesthetic legacies of Orientalism and Chinoiserie, through to the current cynical courting of the buoyant Asian market by designer brands which had previously focused their attentions on a Caucasian demographic.

Ayres' second solo exhibition, *Tunc*, continues his interests in leisure, domination and masculine aggression. Drawing inspiration from Byron's notion of the Roman Holiday (entertainment or pleasure taken in the misfortune of others) in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the works include a gun cabinet with toy automatic assault rifles and stacks of hand-turned wooden baseball bats. In counterbalance to the suggested violence is a painting by the artist at age four, providing a disquietening narrative allusion to a two-decade journey from innocence to aggression. □

Ayres Rocks

OK Gallery

Perth

Until 18 November 2012



Top: Casey Ayres, *Untitled (Motorplex)*, 2010.

Above: Casey Ayres, *Charming Men*, 2012, digital print, 36 x 54cm.