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Picnic at Fanging Rock

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Seduction and automotive wanderlust are at the heart of *Picnic at Fanging Rock*, the debut solo exhibition by Perth-based artist Casey Ayres.

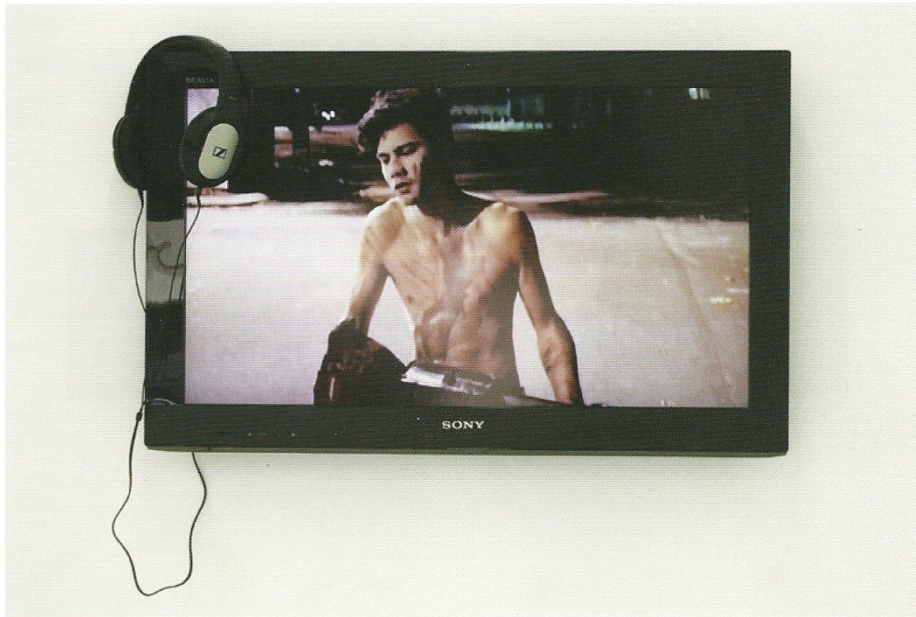
The modern automobile is a markedly humanlike device. It falls apart if you neglect it, and is likewise wrecked if it collides with anything. It is the car's ability to respond to care and personify desire that influences Ayres' immersion in the world of Australian car culture. In 2010, when Ayres had to choose between a new gearbox for his beloved 1980 Ford Escort and funding for his next body of artwork, he combined his artistic and automotive pursuits into a hybrid obsession. The resulting *Picnic at Fanging Rock* powerfully documents the spectacle of auto culture and the potential for romance, mystery and the splendour of the automobile.

In the show the video work *Requiem: Iron Maiden* (2011) shows an exhausted, shirtless Ayres (under grease-monkey pseudonym Chris Ford Walken) lugging his entire four-speed gearbox across a deserted parking lot. Motor oil trickling down his chest, Ayres appears to be in shock, or perhaps rapture, over the object. We can't see the ordeal he's come from and there's no gesture of destination. The soundtrack, Chopin's piano lament *Tristesse*, creates a hymnal atmosphere, immediately evoking Christianity's most idolised artworks. Ayres genuflects to his gearbox as though

recreating *La Pietà* or playing out the cross-carrying ordeal of Christ's Passion.

In Chuck Palahniuk's 2007 novel, *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey*, young hedonists respond to the increased artificiality of the future by 'party crashing', the sport of deliberate car collision. Unbeknownst to its participants, the game's inventor Green Taylor Simms is trying to produce the perfect crash, which will launch him back in time into his own past. While Ayres never crashes, we see signs that he, like Simms, is some kind of time traveller always driving, always dedicated to his transitory vehicle. In his photograph *Untitled (Blow Me)* (2011), a half-naked youth lies amid Super Lube and oil rags, lost in a hedonistic reverie with head firmly planted under an auto mag and hand sliding under unbelted jeans. The youth is lost, daydreaming of future vehicles, future drag races and futures spent driving to anywhere but back to the carport. The title *Blow Me* is borrowed from a pun on the magazine's cover.

There's a palpable link between the show *Picnic at Fanging Rock* and the well-loved Australian book and film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. They're both about instantaneity, about interruptions to time. The film follows six innocent schoolgirls whose picnic nudges the edge of a mysterious vacuum, a kind of non-place where it's perpetually noon. Three of these girls are drawn into



the void, never to return. Ayres' drivers approach a similar schism. *Picnic at Fanging Rock* (2011) is a triptych showing aerial views of deserted rural roads, winding and covered with scribbled tyre marks, as though the motorists have disappeared into thin air, transported into the future or past (or both) just before the photos were taken. Such is the force of this absence that having just missed the action seems tantamount to recovering its trace in an archaeological dig thousands of years later.

In inert photographs and always-looping video, Ayres suspends both youth and desire, but also turns in dazed circles; nonstop burnouts, spinning fan belts, roundabouts and circular puns that tick over again, and again. The work pulls us like moths toward the car. After all, the faster you drive, the more time you save and yet after a drive it will always be 'later'. In photo *Untitled (VK)* (2011), we see a car emerge from a wall of smoke (who knows where), a contraption mounted on its bonnet with angry red lights and wires. I'm unsure what it's for but it looks like a cavalier home-customization and is probably super-powered. It's no surprise Ayres is a fan of *Back to the Future's* DeLorean DMC-12 time machine and has spoken elatedly of his lust for a Flux Capacitor going cheap online.

Ayres' tone of retrospection isn't simply stylistic; it's a genuine reflection of the modern car industry. Take Detroit, the former car manufacturing capital of the world. Several crises including the diabolic US recession and the collapse of General Motors caused

the city to 'doughnut': a morbid pun describing the exodus of Detroit's citizens. Now its CBD is a crumbling mess of toppled skyscrapers, looters and litter, a ghost town full of actual ruins. Alongside Ayres' work, the story of Detroit is yet another example of how the motorcar has prematurely transported a thriving community into their dystopian future, where the apocalypse has come and gone already. Though if *Mad Max* is anything to go by, Australians will keep drag racing after civilisation implodes.

The vehicle in the photograph *Untitled* (2011) disappears into a dense cloud of smoke, devil horns thrust out the window in a hell-for-leather gesture that indicates the car might never return from the fog. Like in the 1971 film *Vanishing Point* Barry Newman's car is a means of disappearance, a device for avoiding worldly troubles and consequences by simply obliterating oneself in the smoke, the noise, the speed so there is no room for anything else.

Strikingly absent is any discussion of mortality. This is unexpected because as a thing of sensuality, the show might attract a vanitas reading, but more urgently, because cars are just so very dangerous. What's absent is the un-erotic commentary of government seatbelt campaigns, roadside death tolls and rising fuel prices. Ayres is not ignorant of these worries but has denied them voice in his work. And why not? Ayres is youthful, handsome and a skilled machinist. His work speaks only of the now, when there is no crash, no fine, just the glory of the ride.

Above: Casey Ayres 'Requiem (Iron Maiden)' (installation view) (2011), single channel video (2:03mins), dimensions variable. Photo: Sheridan Coleman



That Glory (2011) is a wall-mounted sculpture slicked with black automotive paint. Its anthropomorphic form is ambiguous: at first it's phallic, a codpiece. Front-on it's a Daft Punk-style motorcycle helmet. Actually, it's a bonnet scoop, headlight socket pointed modestly downward, a reprieve from the bygone era of the FJ Holden and classic Morris, when women, cola bottles and cars were all curvier.

The show marked the opening of Perth's newest commercial space, OK Gallery, a venture that brings Western Australia's finest early career artists to the public. The mediocre timbre of the word 'OK' is certainly a misnomer—its selection is a fascinating story. In 1993 Coca Cola™ launched a fruity soda, named 'OK' after market researchers discovered Coke was the second most understood word in the world after 'OK'. Deadpan slogans, like 'There is no real secret to being OK', targeted Gen-X. The soda was a total flop, but its obscure, tragi-comedic myth fascinated Gemma Weston, Jamie Macchiusi and Andrew Varano. Perhaps the directors have written their names on a bullet, so to speak: the 'OK' soda story resembles rumours of so many cult-status ARIs that have faded away, whispered about only around state gallery water coolers. But 'OK' is also emblematic of the directors' goal of simultaneous originality and ubiquity. The expression

thrives despite constant shifts in meaning according to context, intonation and local etymology. It is this rare combination of conceptual clarity, universality and optimism that characterises the great significance of its launch.

OK is located in a yellow five-shop building resembling a 10-stud Lego™ brick, deep in Perth's densest hub of art galleries and Asian restaurants. White door-beads screen a modest storeroom and cauliflower blossoms top a tasteful custom-built pine desk. Good lighting and a glass wall ensured the entire show is discernable from outside (lucky, as its opening attracted over 300 patrons). OK practically defenestrates itself onto the bustling pavement to let you know 'we are open': to the city's talent-boom, to ideas, to business, to discussion, to newcomers, and especially to being part of Perth's gallery history.

Fanging Rock was a canny selection for OK Gallery's launch. The show transcends exclusivity: no alienating in-jokes, no jargon. Instead, the work expressed universal themes of time, desire and beauty with global relevance, despite its quintessential Australian aspects. The use of unique local culture to communicate grandiose themes is something OK's directors hold dear.



Picnic at Fanging Rock was held at OK gallery, Perth, from 26 August - 25 September 2011

Facing page: Casey Ayres '*Picnic at Fanging Rock*' (2011), inkjet print on found paper, aluminium mount, triptych of 58.5 x 42cm. Photo- Sheridan Coleman
Above L-R: Casey Ayres '*Untitled*' (2011), inkjet print on archival paper, aluminium mount, 78 x 118cm; '*Untitled (VK)*' (2011), inkjet print on archival paper, aluminium mount, 78 x 118cm. Photo- Sheridan Coleman