RYAN PRESLEY
TERROR ISLAND (WISH YOU WERE HERE)
Boxcopy Contemporary Art Space
7 October - 4 November 2017

RyanPresley's recent paintings and prints in TERRORISLAND (WishYouWereHere) continue his ongoing exploration of canonical Christian iconographic traditions. Powered by a sophisticated and critical visual language, these works also draw from diverse avenues: cymatic patterning, botanical symbolism, classical painting techniques and Presley's personal history. Presley was raised in a Christian household in Alice Springs by his mother; her family Scandinavian immigrants to Australia. His father's family originate from the Marri Ngarr language group from the Moyle River region (Papimmarni/Port Keats) of the Northern Territory. At Presley's baptism, his maternal great-grandmother gifted him an icon painting of Jesus Christ's crucifixion: a small devotional painting utilising symbolism to denote Catholic moral lessons or messages. At a later age he sat in church on a Sunday and stared up at larger icons. The history of icon painting began in Byzantine art in the 6th and 7th centuries and continues to this day. Though they exist in various materials, generally they utilise egg tempera as paint, gold leaf for detail and background, and a pine panel as support. The thought of the bloated traditions of the Roman Catholic church perched in the red heart of this vast continent is at first curious. But, of course, it is much more evident of the invasive reach of colonialism. Presley's art and this exhibition are a synthesis of these diverse threads. And his revival of these techniques is a vehicle for his layered, iconographic analysis of colonialism's persistent impact within Australia.

The works of TERROR ISLAND feature icons of contemporary and modern colonial power: Indue and BasicsCard cashless welfare cards, offshore processing centres, refugee ships, sleek corporate skyscrapers, mining equipment, CCTV systems, and the distinctive mushroom cloud from British mid-century nuclear testing in Maralinga, South Australia. The background pattern of these works take inspiration from Presley's background in music. The pattern is cymatic: sound translated into a visual when its vibrations and changes in pitch shift a sensitive, physical material (like sand) into patterns. In Fair Coin (Sum Zero), Australian silver coins fall from the top of the painting, through a line of fresh figs, and out the other side as welfare cards. In the Bible, figs and fig trees represent prosperity. Here the figs function as a filter – exchanging freely usable currency into a government-controlled, socially restricting means of payment. Originally a product of the Northern Territory Intervention, these cards are born of a violent John Howard era policy based on fraudulent evidence. Nested amongst these elements are a scorpion and frog, the stars of the eponymous allegory that teaches us that one should never trust another entity whose nature is inherently cruel or unwilling to change.

In Golden Soil, a series of four panels of oil and gold leaf, Presley continues these iconographic investigations. In the first panel, two native red-tailed black cockatoos fly above a stone bird bath that rests atop a Corinthian column. Each bird has had one wing clipped. They circle their only source of sustenance, which balances on a literal foundation of 'Western' classical thought. In the final panel, the Sturt Desert Pea, state floral emblem for South Australia, hovers beneath the Maralinga nuclear mushroom cloud. The Desert Pea was renowned by explorer Captain Charles Sturt for its ability to sustain life in the desert. Here it is scanned by a bloated tradition of the Roman Catholic church, perched in the red heart of this vast continent. The history of icon painting began in Byzantine art in the 6th and 7th centuries and continues to this day. Though Presley's dad gifted him a cymatic icon, Presley here employs a technique of misdirection. By utilising a colour palette of yellow ochres and rusty oxides, he draws us into a dialogue in our minds about traditional Indigenous painterly aesthetics and a ghettoizing from White Australia that still persists around Indigenous Australia's visual expression. Rather, we are looking again at Presley's cymatic patterns. They are generated here by the musical notes of the second line of the first verse of 'Advance Australia Fair': from left to right: for, we, are, young, and, free. In the context of Levinas, Presley recasts the national anthem with pathos and bleak irony, the 'free' instead channelling a feeling of incarceration.

Such brutalities – those ongoing, fresh in the mind, and others more than half a century past – barely scratch the surface from 229 years of colonial occupation of this country. The Government continues to ignore self-determination and focuses instead on restricting civil liberties. These are justified by brandishing evidence of the results of this oppression as proof to perpetuate it, even strengthen it. In World Without Exit (2017), a series of six paintings in egg tempera, Presley takes inspiration from the writings of Emmanuel Levinas in La Souffrance inutile to consider themes of entrapment and suffering. In the text, Levinas considers the characteristics of "pure suffering" as "intrinsically meaningless" and a state "condemned to itself without exit". Presley here employs a technique of misdirection. By utilising a colour palette of yellow ochres and rusty oxides, he draws us into a dialogue in our minds about traditional Indigenous painterly aesthetics and a ghettoizing from White Australia that still persists around Indigenous Australia's visual expression. Rather, we are looking again at Presley's cymatic patterns. They are generated here by the musical notes of the second line of the first verse of 'Advance Australia Fair': from left to right: for, we, are, young, and, free. In the context of Levinas, Presley recasts the national anthem with pathos and bleak irony, the 'free' instead channelling a feeling of incarceration.

The title work Terror Island (Wish you were here) (2017) depicts a final battle amongst ocean waters. An Aboriginal warrior warrior denoted by his flaming gold leaf halo is poised to throw a spear from the back of his water buffalo steed at a group of camo-printed Great White sharks; Presley's ongoing icon for White Australia and the police force. The scene is surrounded by dual headlands crested by watchtowers in the form of Sydney's Centre Point, Melbourne's Eureka Tower, and Brisbane's Meriton Infinity. In the background we see a fenced refugee processing island, and the silhouettes of a looming oil platform and a junk boat on fire. Though dystopic, Presley's saint battles on. Resistance is not futile. Amongst the rising waves, the fight for Terra Australis continues.

Tim Walsh

1 For these works, Presley uses an Australian Hoop pine panel
2 As Presley notes in his PhD thesis, the British Empire and the church functioned in unison
3 The Australian Government has contracted the Towong-based finance company Indue Limited to provide and manage these systems. They have been paid close to $11 million for their services for the initial trial. Source: Bielefeld, Shelley. 'Casheless welfare cards: Controlling spending patterns to what end?' Indigenous Law Bulletin, Vol. 8, No. 29, April/June 2017: pp. 28-32.
4 Bielefeld notes that trials currently being conducted of Indue cards in Ceduna and the East Kimberley are applied disproportionately to Indigenous Australians "who make up 565 of 752 people subject to the card in Ceduna and 984 of 1,119 people...in Kununurra and Wyndham." These “income management programmes” emerged as part of the Northern Territory Intervention and are utilised to address the risk of welfare recipients using their income “to support substance abuse and gambling”, though in fact are having deeper impacts on access to day-to-day services. Source: Ibid
5 Brilli, Michael. 'A Decade On, The Fraud Of The NT Intervention Is Exposed', New Matilda, Published 28 June 2017. Accessible online: https://newmatilda.com/2017/06/28/a-decade-on-the-fraud-of-the-nt-intervention-is-exposed/
8 Translated as "Useless Suffering", though first published in French in 1982