

Bon Scott Project

LIA MCKNIGHT

Love him or loathe him, if you were born of a certain generation, chances are you can reminisce about Bon Scott, AC/DC's charismatic front man from 1974 to 1980. Personally, I'll never forget watching the clip for *It's a Long Way to the Top* for the first time as a young child (admittedly a few years after its original release in 1976). Rocking down Melbourne's Swanston Street on the back of a ute, Bon was all hairy midriff and cheeky grin. Finding myself both drawn to, and repulsed by Bon's animal magnetism, I was utterly compelled to keep watching, despite the feeling that I probably shouldn't. Bon's aura of masculinity and sexuality, his worship as a rebel among his loyal legion of fans, and the tragic circumstances of his death were—as one would expect—all points of interest in Fremantle Arts Centre's *Bon Scott Project*. This wide-ranging initiative included a group show of 17 artists, an exhibition of Bon's personal letters, an online blog, public art, a forum and even a tribute band. More surprisingly, as I walked through Fremantle Arts Centre's galleries I found that this conversation about Bon drew out personal stories and intimate moments, revealing something of Bon but far more of the artists involved.

On a tiny screen mounted just inside the main entrance, in her video phone performance *Oh Bon!* (2008) Tanja Visosevic pouts and postures, seeming to shift between the identities of Bon and his sexed-up groupie. Advertising her services as 'Madam TV', Visosevic received calls on opening night as she 'channelled' Bon. Post-performance, viewers can only speculate about what transpired but by all accounts, the conversations ran the full gamut of emotions: humorous, sexy, poignant, sad. Visosevic was not alone in her imaginative merger of identities; Adam Cullen also appeared to lose himself in the persona of Bon. Dissolving in and out of endless black space, the figure of Cullen's sombre portrait/self-portrait captures the void of loneliness that for many seems to accompany fame, particularly life on the road. Close to Cullen's work, a collection of Bon's letters gave an insight into this experience. Between the lines of jovial banter, it is not difficult to see the emerging trajectory of his life that would end alone in a car while on tour, as the result of alcohol poisoning. Many would argue, however, that Bon was anything but a tragic figure. Part of his charisma and appeal emerges from his being comfortable with himself, along with his irrepressible spirit, and it was with this in mind that I viewed Adam Cullen's work. Reflecting on these aspects of Bon, and indeed, Cullen's impressive back catalogue of strikingly dark and frenetic paintings, I was left looking for the slightly dangerous energy of both his subject and his previous works.

Close by, the cleverly constructed dialogue between the works of Nat Paton, Cecilia Fogelberg and Scott Redford really hit the mark. Inside her luscious boudoir, Paton as 'Rosie' (made infamous by AC/DC's 1977 release, *Whole Lotta Rosie*), both beckons and repels as she only has eyes for Bon. In contrast to Paton's *Forty-two, thirty-nine, fifty-six Rosie* (2008), a highly staged, saturated photographic image, Fogelberg's dreamy and childlike drawings read like a private journal, making the sexually graphic elements slightly unnerving. Two views of Bon's crotch which contrast in scale and media, made me feel simultaneously empowered and consumed: Fogelberg's tiny fabric doll *Bon Scott* (2008) looks up from its low stage as it sings into a microphone/phallus; while Redford's black and white, pixelated wallpaper of Bon's bulging groin, *A Piece of the World* (2008), looms over and around the space like a hungry screen of *Countdown*.

Facing page: Cecilia Fogelberg, *Bon Scott*, 2008, recycled fabric, wire, cotton thread, beads, texta. Photo: Andrew Curtis.



Downstairs in the main gallery, the works of seven artists covered a broad spectrum of approaches. I enjoyed the makeshift installation and hand-made aesthetic of Stuart Bailey's bootleg merchandise stall, however I had to wonder what distinguishes these 'goods' from those already commonly made by AC/DC fans. On the whole, I was less intrigued to sit and contemplate works here, though the longer I spent with Martin Smith's photographic works, the more was revealed. Smith's dreamy landscapes have a quiet tension—laboriously hand-cut text discloses anecdotes from his early life that are full of awkward moments and personal loss in *I then when up and told my ridiculous stories* (2008) and *Fixing my endless array of crappy cars* (2007). Smith also represents the lyrics to *Hells Bells* from AC/DC's *Back in Black* album, their unofficial tribute to Bon, released soon after his death. As Smith's restrained self-deprecating voice jumps to AC/DC's crude, menacing lyrics, I wondered if behind the humour, there remained a teenager's raw emotion.

Filling up the end of a spacious hallway, Richard Lewer's expansive charcoal drawing *30 Maerora Road* (2008) spreads around corners, across walls and up 4.5 metre ceilings to form a mesmerising and compelling image of that often hermetic space of conflicting pressures and desires: the teenager's bedroom. Black dots raid the surface of the walls like silent bullets, while the Lewer family in demure portrait-pose hang suspended in space beside various religious items, along with the members of AC/DC looking down from their *Highway to Hell* poster. Nearby, Matthew Hunt's photograph presents a Swiss underpass, stark and empty apart from a huge bale of hay and a roughly graffitied 'AC/DC' with the lightning bolt ending in an arrow. Full of presence and absence, humour and rebellion, this image encapsulates in breathtaking simplicity everything that this show is about. It left me wanting more.

Clearly, curator Jasmin Stephens took an ambitious approach to the project, covering vast ground in imaginative and lateral ways. Testament to this are the public works of Bevan Honey and Lucas Ihlein, which act as a kind of reply to the bronze statue of Bon recently commissioned

Above left: Nat Paton, *Forty-two, thirty-nine, fifty-six Rosie*, 2008, digital print. Photographic assistant: Gia Mitchell.

Below left: Matthew Hunt, *Untitled landscape (Underpass)*, 2004, digital print.

Above right: Richard Lewer, *30 Maerora Road*, 2008, charcoal on wall; Matthew Hunt, *Untitled landscape (Underpass)* (visible through archway). Photo: Lia McKnight.



by his fans. Ihlein's blog (www.bonscottblog.com) and Honey's four metre high image of Bon's grinning face beneath Fremantle's Stirling Bridge are entertaining, accessible and appropriate to their subject.

So, does all this really bring us closer to the man, Bon Scott? Not really, but I get the feeling that was never the intention. It does succeed in allowing us to reflect on a certain kind of masculinity in all its strength and frailty, as well as common experiences of desire, loss and the avaricious urges of the sub-conscious. Most impressively perhaps, in this age of cynicism and self-enforced isolation, it has succeeded in bringing together a sense of community, and where better than in Bon's home town? The collection of artworks, letters and online chatter leaves the impression of many, varied voices humming along to their own tune, somehow coming together for the chorus. Happily, it's given me an excuse to embrace my inner bogan and remember what it's like to live with childlike enthusiasm and abandon. I'm off to buy some Acca Dacca.

Bon Scott Project curated by Jasmin Stevens was held at Fremantle Arts Centre from 17 May to 19 June 2008. The artists involved were Stuart Bailey, Guy Benfield, Adam Cullen, Rebecca Dagnall, Cecilia Fogelberg, Alex Gawronski, Ian Haig, Bevan Honey, Matthew Hunt, Lucas Ihlein, Richard Lewer, Michael Moran, Ryan Nazzari, Vanilla Netto, Nat Paton, Scott Redford, Eli Smith, Martin Smith, Tanja Visosevic. Other major components of the Bon Scott Project were the Bon Scott Letters exhibition curated by Katie Dyer, and Bon Scott Blog (bonscottblog.com) created by Lucas Ihlein.

Above: *Welcome Sign*, (component of Bon Scott Blog project by Lucas Ihlein bonscottblog.com) Fremantle, 2008. Photo: Consuelo Cavaniglia.