***Bad Fathers*, 2018**. Installation view, Buxton Contemporary, Melbourne. Video projection, paint, urethane, polystyrene, wigs, glass eyes, toy guns, toy guitar, painted mdf plinths. Photograph Christian Capurro. Courtesy the artist.

BAD DADS

AN INTERVIEW WITH RONNIE VAN HOUT

MEGAN DUNN

The New Zealand born artist, Ronnie van Hout is a funny guy. Funny-looking, funny-peculiar and funny-ha-ha. In 2018, Buxton Contemporary presented his first Australian survey *No One is Watching You*. Multiple mannequins and mini-me's of Ronnie dead-panned the audience with their squinty-little doll-eyes. The exhibition spanned thirty years and featured over seventy artworks including models of sick apes, a sculpture of a man trapped in a banana suit and three unwise owls titled *Ersatz*.

Van Hout is best known for creating grotesque fibreglass and polystyrene likenesses of himself often arranged in ambiguous tableaux to be interrogated by a live audience. What's real and unreal? Alive and undead? Van Hout plays our neuroses for laughs; his art is frequently likened to 'stand-up' comedy. The gallery is his stage and he's 'dying out there'.

The son of Dutch immigrants, van Hout grew up in Christchurch. He first attended the School of Fine Arts at Canterbury University, majoring in film (1982). In 1999 he completed his Masters at RMIT, and in 2000 moved to Melbourne where he continues to live and work. Van Hout says, 'I've begun to see my work as failed film: auto didactic and amateur relying less on research and more on Google search'.

Megan Dunn: What did curator Melissa Keys add or subtract from *No One is Watching You*? Did you have to kill any darlings?

Ronnie van Hout: I once had my fortune told, and I came away with the impression that the theme of my life was 'You can't always get what you want, but you just might find you get what you need' which at the time seemed a bit

***All Said, All Done,* 2012**. Installed Buxton Contemporary, Melbourne 2018. Polyurethane, fibreglass, clothing, wig, synthetic polymer paint, shoes, colour HD video, sound. Collection of the NGV, Melbourne. Photograph Christian Capurro. Courtesy the artist.

disappointing, but putting together the exhibition I've come to understand it in a different way. In terms of selecting the works, it was often a case of not necessarily getting what you want, realising, and being reminded constantly, that nothing will ever be perfect, so let's learn to love what we have, and what we could afford to loan, make, or dig out in the short time frame we had available to us.

Melissa did a fantastic job of finding themes, conceiving connections, and convincing the sceptical me that it was going to look great.

MD: Melissa said she wanted the survey to provide, 'a cinematic sense of unfolding'. How did that play out in the installation?

RvH: I like to talk about my exhibitions as mise-en-scène, and Melissa's exhibition design created the feeling of a domestic interior at Buxton. We borrowed works from different eras and contexts that then came together to construct new interpretations.

The first room, which I called the minimalist room, had a failed child robot, a monochrome of medication, a punk on a bed, unfurniture, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and the general sense of an absent future.

In the next large room were a wide range of works, beginning with a group of adult children that have been roused from sleep and hypnotically advance toward a beckoning alien masquerading as an owl; floating, forgetting, dreaming. This group of works then looks through to 'teenager Ronnies', atop a platform/raft as though moving from childhood to nowhere, forever examining the moment of becoming (an artist). In a dark corner 'Bad Ronald' has been sealed into the walls of his home by an over-protective mother, while on a nearby screen the two main characters (played by me) from the Australian film *The Boys* (1998) swap threats and obscenities.

Melissa used coloured walls to distinguish one section from another. The colours came from aspects of the work. The exhibition install subtly evoked a series of movie sets where a psychodrama is being acted out. The best example was the glossy white tiled room, which was originally designed for a work we couldn't get in the end, but it worked out wonderfully. The white tiled room was lit by coloured fluorescent furniture with a figure on a toilet smoking, and holding a microphone. Sit down comedy in a disco autopsy mortuary.

MD: You made several new works for the show including *Bad Fathers* (2018), an installation of eight unapologetic men from Jesus to a Nazi on a skateboard, all with your own face. Were you apprehensive about exhibiting it in the #MeToo era when so many men have been called out and unmasked as monsters?

RvH: I'm always apprehensive when I make new work, because you can never tell if it's shit or not.

Bad Fathers are my gang of thugs, or dance troupe. I wanted the messages to be conflicted, and over saturated: a gun, cell phone, pipe, German army helmet, and skateboard. It was my feeling about engagement with the world, like being online. We have subjects, but no content. Or to quote Zardoz 'The gun is good; the penis is evil'.

On reflection, *Bad Fathers* had a few embryonic stages. I had a desire to make something with King Lear, and the scene from *The Empire Strikes Back* where Darth Vader reveals he is Luke's dad (in movies people always seem to fight talk, which is quite strange). I was starting to think about work where I destroyed objects, or property, or household goods. I did an earlier show *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (1996) which also had Darth Vader and Nazis. I had worked through Monsters, Stand Up, and all manner of outsider positions.

Toxic Masculinity is a constant subject in our household, along with the destruction of the nuclear family and restructuring of gender specificity.

MD: Who first likened your work to stand-up comedy? Was it you? I am assuming the reference predated and perhaps influenced your video work *Standup* (2016)? In light of Cosby, Louis CK and also Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* it's a funny time for comedy…

RvH: My quote for my high school year book (which was never printed) was, 'the difference between man and animals is stand-up comedy'. So, stand-up has always been on my mind, and by the time I got around to having a look at it, my thoughts were about the abject position of the stand-up, and the role of empathy that connects and distances us from the routine. It was funny to watch Gadsby's *Nanette*, which came out after my show, as I recognised many of the same ideas in her work, but Gadsby did it so much better.

MD: In your new video work, *King Vader* (2018), you read Darth Vader's dialogue to your own doppelganger, 'Release your anger. Only your hatred can destroy me'. This strategy of playing both—or all—parts in a film is one you keep returning to. How come?

RvH: The answer is not that difficult or meaningful. I play all the parts, because I'm not that comfortable asking people to do things for me, and besides, I don't think of it as film, but as art, and in line with my projected fantasy of the artist, it is myself in the studio working with some text. On another level, I relate my work to the idea of the fan (the amateur and distant lover), or the online personality whose identity is forged through an engagement with the megaverse of social media, youtubers, blockbuster movie franchises, etcetera.

Star Wars has been around for over forty years, and its original success probably contributed to the world we live in now, which is disturbing, as *Star Wars* has themes and narratives that reinforce the American myth/dream of the Wild West, and the self-made and determined individual who has no past, no future, who lives in the present driven by the mantra 'Go West, Go West'. You hit Hollywood and it's the geographic end of the West.

***Punk on a Bed*, 2015**. Painted mdf, resin fibreglass, polystyrene, wig, clothing, glass eyes. Photograph Christian Capurro. Courtesy the artist.

MD: Why is Darth Vader so compelling, is it the helmet? I think he looks a bit like a reverse Virgin Mary.

RvH: I think the helmet is a big part of it, and the voice, plus he seems so self-contained and extremely competent, but he killed all those children, along with thousands of others. His aims in life are unclear. He is driven by revenge and petulance. I loved the teenage Anakin, and I think he was suffering and never transitioned into a fully formed adult. He became Darth Vader (Dutch for Dark Father), grew up in a hippy cult (the Jedi) and then went corporate (the Empire). It's basically George Lucas's life.

Weirdly, in the film's portrayal of Darth Vader's childhood, Anakin's mother is dressed a bit like the Virgin Mary, and he seems to have no father.

MD: You've made a lot of works that use your face. How would you describe your own reflection and your relationship to it?

RvH: When I first started using my face, it was partly because I needed a face, and I already had one, so why not use it? Another reason was that I was making work that referenced personal histories where I used stories from my family, or artefacts from my past to think about, and prove my existence. Recently, I decided I would amp it up and only make things that had my face to see what would happen. This was partly because I teach at art school and this is how art is taught: explore an idea fully, or do something you are good at. It has been an interesting experiment, because you are easily recognised, but I get sick of being talked about in terms of self-portraiture.

MD: Really? Yet, I don't experience your works as an example of the 'everyman'. Your face is so distinctive and the sculptures of it are amped up for maximum recoil.

RvH: Well, maybe not the 'everyman', more like the underdeveloped, unformed unman.

Buster Keaton had a great face; it was so blank that it worked well on screen, because it's all projection. The chaos of the world happens to him; buildings fall, trains crash, and he gets through it all wearing the same flat expression, and we want to be him, cool and unmoved, even a bit divorced from experience.

Like many people, I am a bit obsessed with actors, and acting, and like most of us, I don't confuse the actor with the act, but I suppose the conventions of art and the thrust of modernism promote the idea of individual authenticity, and of a therapeutic truth.

My particular generation—and a Marxist anarchist subset of it—put on sunglasses (They Live) and saw that the dream of 'freedom', glimpsed through the 'market', was distorted. Authenticity suddenly looked like an illusion, not to be trusted; the 'fake' and 'copy' then became the 'honest' object.

MD: Neuroses are your kryptonite. Sculptures like *Sausageman* (2010), *I am hammer 2* (2010) and *Bananaman (fallen)* (2010) read like manifestations of anxieties played out on the shrink's couch. And some of the figures are 'shrunk' down to a diminutive size. While the sculptures of little boys bestowed your adult face like *YOU!* (2016) are a perverse inversion of the concept of the inner child. Scale is part of the gag. How do you approach scale? And have you ever been in therapy?

***Paul*, 2014**. Painted Styrene, cast urethane, wigs, clothing, glass eyes, table, artificial salami. Collection of MONA, Hobart, Tasmania. Photograph Christian Capurro. Courtesy the artist.

***Bad Ronald*, 2013-18.** Detail. MDF, wall paper, cast resin, paint, speaker, sound track of 1974's TV film *Bad Ronald* directed by Buzz Kulik. Photograph Christian Capurro. Courtesy the artist.

RvH: Always in therapy, but not entirely convinced by it. But I like the idea of the 'Talking cure', where you lie on a couch and basically reveal your interior world to an objective listener who interprets your words.

The scale thing started with a work *Sick Child (ersatz)* that was related to a memory from childhood. I wanted to mix this childhood memory with the present. The 'figures mostly wear pyjamas, as if sleep walking and talking, in a state of being both present and absent. The installation of the figures at Buxton was also about creating the sensation you get when you are dropping off to sleep, of feeling gigantic and microscopic at the same time. It may be hard to believe, but the figures aren't intended to be disturbing or unsettling, but relatable and connected.

MD: You've made several works about your father's shed. The survey contains *Cold Shoulder to Cry On* (2010) and *Timing that flawed* (2009), a pair of personified 'garden sheds', each sporting long wooden legs, presumably for running or walking away. Men and their sheds are a massive cliché, like the idea of the 'man cave'. Is what's inside the shed as disturbing as it seems?

RvH: Even if what is revealed is disturbing, it is necessary to cross the threshold into the interior. It is interesting to talk about masculine positions as interiors that can be entered. I saw my sheds as having a symbolic meaning, not so much about my own relationship to my own father, but about boundaries. We often talk about childhood as a sequence of steps we take. We are born, we separate from our mothers, we develop independence, we reject our parents, and we move away from them and into the world. That step into the world holds a great deal of weight. We step out of the family home, across the boundary and are immediately within another, albeit larger, interior.

So the shed was the mystery of the adult life, the secrets, and a container of secrets, which I was exterior to, but once you have the key, the barrier disappears and there is a flow. The secret revealed is like when you realise your parents (and all adults) are flawed, and that you too are just like them.

MD: Your earliest 'alien' work in the show is *Drawings of UFO* (1995-96) while *Ersatz (alien)* (2003), is a sculpture of an alien in a child's pyjamas wearing a plaque that reads, 'Forget'. Yet we can't forget. I get the feeling you're enormously fond of 'aliens'? Are aliens more trustworthy than people?

RvH: Aliens, especially those pesky Greys, can never be trusted. They are the tricksters, and according to all reports are trying to fuck with our sense of reality.

These aliens are usually described as child-sized, with proportionally large heads. Many interpret these encounters with aliens as residual birth trauma—a repressed memory of being a foetus in the womb, and the shock of being born.

In many of these stories, people/victims are abducted at night, experimented on, probed, raped, and then returned with their memories of the encounter replaced or wiped. Many of the alien experiments are often to do with reproduction and making hybrid alien/human offspring. Very few people have a conscious recall of these experiences, and the 'truth' is usually revealed through the incredibly unreliable process of hypnosis.

The way people talk about the alien abduction phenomenon has shifted (I believe) from the visitors/abductors being from other planets, to now possibly coming from other 'dimensions'. This year colonisation has been described as being like an alien invasion, which I like, because the white Europeans become the aliens abducting the people of the land.

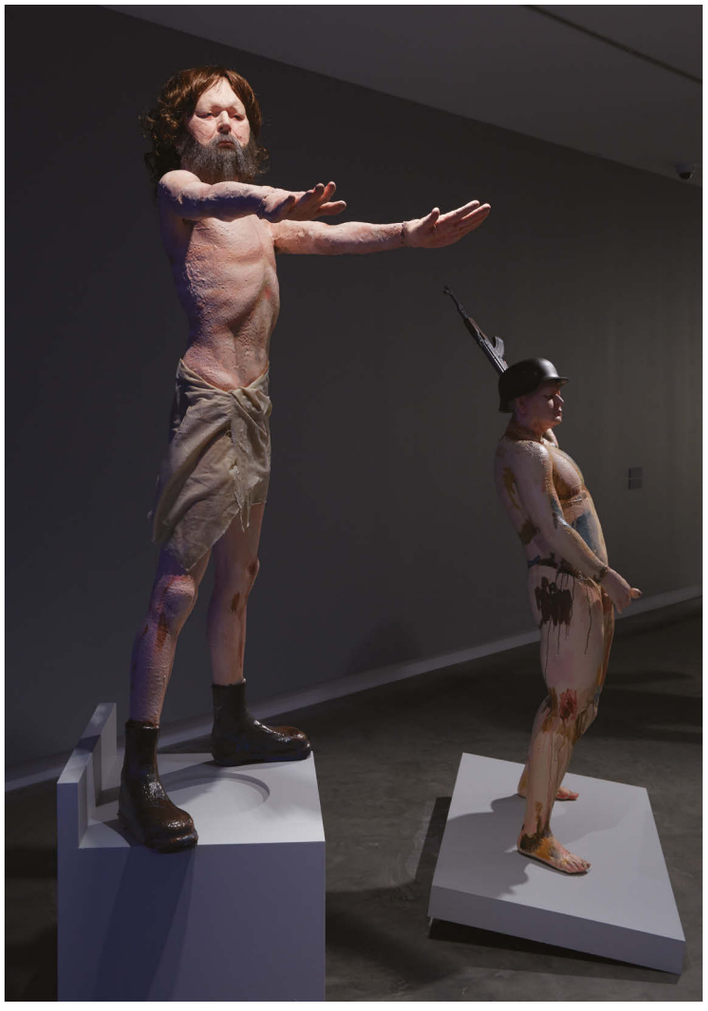
It is not important whether UFO or aliens are actual physical scientific truths (because they will never pass that test), but we need them, because we need the other. An explanation for the alien visits to Earth is because they need the other (us). They are genetically too similar, and need our difference to progress.

MD: In your video work *The Other Mother* you re-enact a scene from John Carpenter's horror *The Thing* (1982). In the film, the 'thing' is a parasitic life-form that assimilates and imitates other organisms. Do you relate to the thing?

RvH: I really should, shouldn't I? But if you think about it, all of the characters in the original novella are the author, John W. Campbell. It's a story about a man in a room wrestling with himself, and his relationship to his mother. The original book was titled *Who Goes There?* and someone suggested Campbell wrote it because his mother had a twin sister that used to look after him, and it disturbed him because the woman that appeared to be his mother would at times behave in a cold way toward him.

MD: You have made a lot of sculptures titled Ersatz meaning 'substitute'. The theme of the real versus the unreal is potent in your work. From *Blade Runner*'s replicants to your own charismatic fallen robot, I can't shake the feeling that all your work is a kind of weird response to the Voight-Kampff test. Can you talk about how you have worked with *Blade Runner* and what it means to you?

RvH: It is the idea of the stand-in, or replacement. The implication of an inferior substitute is both the weakness and strength of art, and by extension us. The exhibition *Ersatz* in Berlin (2004) incorporated my thinking about memory as a copy of an experience, and this led in a way to Philip K Dick and *Blade Runner*. I chose to remake the interview scene from the beginning of *Blade Runner*, because it was a simple two-person scene. I liked the interview set-up: it's a form of testing, a form of discourse, and it is also like a mirror, where the people seated across a table reflect each other—one is real and one is the copy.



***Bad Fathers*, 2018**. Installation views, Buxton Contemporary, Melbourne. Video projection, paint, urethane, polystyrene, wigs, glass eyes, toy guns, toy guitar, painted mdf plinths. Photograph Christian Capurro. Courtesy the artist.

The fictional Voight-Kampff test is a series of questions designed to measure empathy and memory in a subject to distinguish if they are human or replicant.

There is quite a lot going on, but a bit like Ridley Scott, I didn't really think about that when I decided to use it. I had been reading Philip K Dick, and liked the way he described the unravelling of a person's sense of reality. My version is a copy of a copy of a copy. One of the themes that the film treats well is the idea of experience and knowledge as an analogy of cinema, the persistence of vision as a mechanism of forgetting/remembering and becoming.

MD: What did you think of the *Blade Runner 2049*?

RvH: It looked good, and had some good ideas, but the overall theme and 'Hollywood' ending would have had Philip K. Dick throwing up his pharmaceuticals.

Film is consumed differently today. The sci-fi spectacle is a phenomenon that has links to fan sites, fan fiction, art, etcetera. Ridley Scott seems to be exploring the idea of a mega universe—connecting *Blade Runner* to *Alien*, and to *Halo*, which of course is what Philip K. Dick was doing with his novels as well.

MD: Do you see your own work as part of this 'participatory culture' or a force that reflects on it? Or both?

RvH: I would love to think I was a part of something, but the reality is none of my stuff is particularly successful, and one of my failures is my inability to apply a strategy to a process.

Regardless of how interesting these ideas are to talk about, the unspoken elitism of the art world still decides what a proper subject for art is, and dominant culture still determines what diversity should look like. Although I probably support the idea of participatory culture, my interest in 'other' subjects, and my relationship to the mainstream of art culture is critical and suspicious.

So in answer to the question, I am probably none of those positions. I stand at the threshold, in a defensive position, looking at the world through binoculars.

MD: How has living in Australia shaped your work? What are some of the Eureka moments when you look back?

RvH: I moved to Australia because someone offered me a place to live that was cheaper than living in New Zealand. No particular good reason, but I'm still here, and I guess it has affected me, and my work, but things shape you regardless of where you are. Possibly some years of stability, working in a

clockwise from left: ***Sitting Figure (StandUp)***, and ***Medicine Cabinet (Stand Up)***, **2016**. Painted Styrene, cast urethane, wigs, clothing, glass eyes, stainless steel plinth, Epoxy resin, painted mdf, fluorescent tube; ***Sick Child II***, **2005** (back). Collection of the Suter Gallery, Nelson. ***Dave***, **2014** (front). Collection of Rae- Ann Sinclair and Nigel Williams. Painted Styrene, cast urethane, wigs, clothing, glass eye, epoxy resin, fibreglass, plaster, painted wooden chairs; ***Ersatz (Alien) and Ersatz (sign)***, **2004**. Painted resin on polystyrene, clothing, wooden signs and string. Collection of Garth Cartwright. Photograph Christian Capurro. Courtesy the artist.

Crawling Figure,* 2016. *Empty Doorways, (foreground), **2016**. Painted Styrene, cast urethane, wigs, clothing, glass eyes, stainless steel plinth, Epoxy resin, painted mdf. ***Handwalk,* 2015**. Single channel video projection, sound (music by *Dead C*). Photograph Christian Capurro. Courtesy the artist.

studio, and easier access to materials and processes, have enabled me to make certain types of works that I otherwise may not have attempted (which is neither here nor there).

Who knows what could have been? It is odd to think about Eureka moments. Often it's the work I like the most that no one responds to, and often it's shows that are absolute failures (there are many) that shape your career. I couldn't really say that what I have done in any way, shape or form could be described as a career. I have moments, like the Buxton show or Justin Paton's 2003 survey *I've Abandoned Me* where there is attention. The public respond to my work in a particular way, and the art world has another take, and I stumble like a drunk man from one breakdown to the next.

MD: It seems a bad time for irony (in general) but not for the Buxton show. What's your own stance on irony?

RvH: I am Iron(y)(nie) man.

Irony is a way to look at the world, and it's a form of humour that indicates there is complexity and depth to how we see things. I think the term has been worn out and misused so we don't use it as frequently. It became short hand for a 'cop out', like sexist t-shirts worn ironically, which merged into 'just sayin'', or the New Zealand 'only kidding', and recently the insult followed by a smiley face emoji. So Irony has morphed into 'can't you take a joke'. 😀 We all love to be fashionable, so we don't say simulacra anymore, or image scavenger, and we talk about process and research. It's grounded in language, and because we are socially defined we become anxious when we can't pin meaning down. We need to agree on the words, to be on the same page, so we can feel included and also exclude.

MD: I read somewhere you grew up on a chicken farm. I didn't know this! What's it like to kill a chicken and is this why you are vegetarian?

RvH: It's not nice to kill anything, or be killed by anything. My parents leased a poultry farm for a while in Christchurch, and I later read that this was something the New Zealand government wanted Dutch immigrants to do. We weren't good poultry farmers, but you have to admire people who had for a generation or two worked in factories operating industrial machinery, learning to run a farm as a second job (while also still working in factories), which possibly made slaughter easier if its seen as a part of a 'process', or production line.

Not sure if it contributed to my vegetarianism, but even in the early days it felt a bit like living 'off-world'. I was detached from events and the people around me, pulling the guts out of chickens, and washing and watching their blood curl down the drain.

'All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.' Roy Batty ✹

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