

## Art Catalyst Interview: Ben Howe

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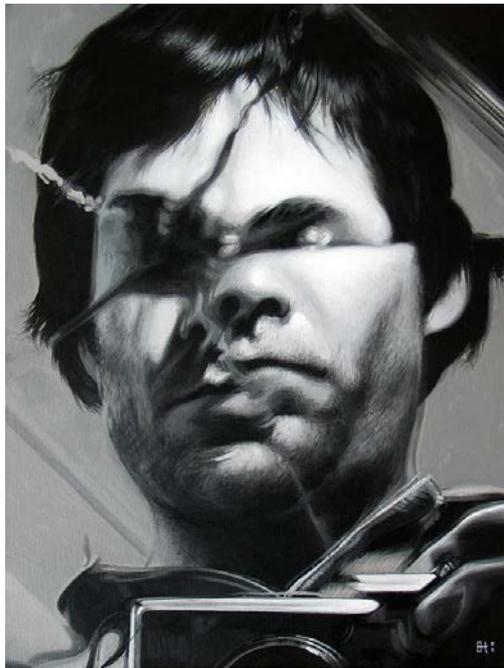
### FORTHCOMING EXHIBITION:

#### Pigeon Hole #2

Friday 13 March, 2009

38 Hutchinson Street, Brunswick, Melbourne

Opening Party Starts at 6pm



Ben Howe, Focus

**Ben Howe is a visual artist, teacher and composer based in Melbourne, Australia and Hamburg, Germany. Howe completed his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1998 at R.M.I.T, Melbourne. In 2001, he subsequently undertook a graduate Diploma in Education at Monash University. In 2007, he moved to Hamburg, where he took up residency at the artist collective SKAM. He now works from his Brunswick studio, the Pigeon Hole.**

**[PR]** You completed your fine art degree at RMIT in Melbourne. I've heard mixed reviews about people's experience at art schools - what was yours like?

**[BH]** It seems a long time ago now - looking back my experience was also mixed. I think that I was a bit too young to fully comprehend it all: most students were much older and wiser than me. I only learnt how to fully appreciate what it meant to lead a creative life once I had some real experiences. I did, however, learn the importance of critical thinking.

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the pigeon hole

**[Paul R]** Ben, you work from a studio in Brunswick, Melbourne with a host of other artists - can you tell us more about the Pigeon Hole?

**[BH]** The Pigeon Hole was originally a commercial production house - and little more than an enormous empty shell when a small group of creative people had the idea to put it to some good use. It has come a long way since being reclaimed from the pigeons: A series of bizarre and inspiring studios have been constructed, and a solid group of 14 artists have occupied and turned the warehouse into a thriving, living collective. Events are held monthly, classes are held weekly, and guest artists can organize exhibitions for free.



At work in the studio

**[PR]** Many artists live and work primarily on their own, so what does it mean for you to be part of a 'collective'. Tell us about SKAM and your residency in Hamburg.

**[BH]** Being part of a collective is not for everyone - it requires dedication, creativity and a desire to be part of something bigger than yourself. Of course working on your own can be productive as well, given the absence of all the social and managerial problems, but the exchange of ideas, support, shared knowledge

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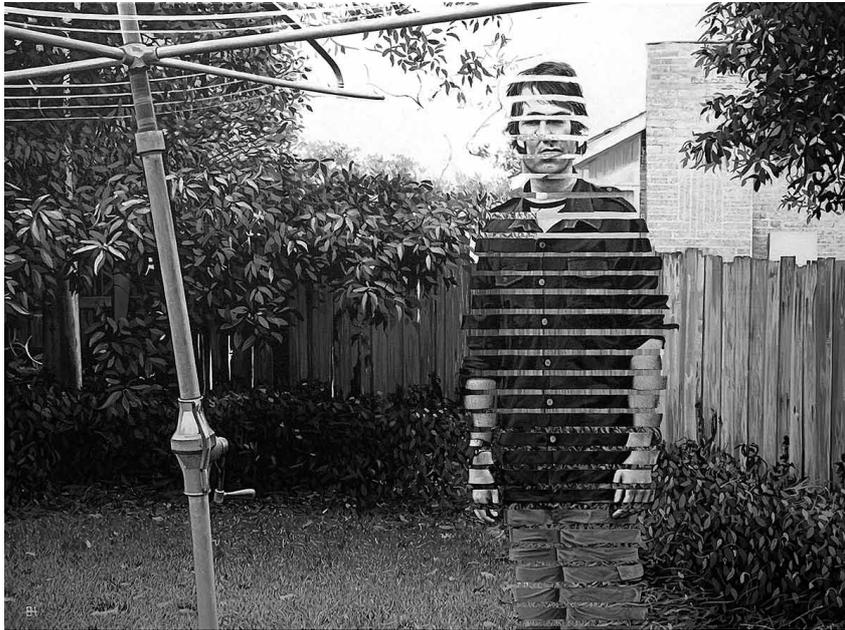
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and feeling of community has become extremely important to my practice.

**SKAM** was my first experience of working in a collective, where everyone came together to make sure artists had a fertile space to create and exhibit their work. SKAM itself was established around 16 years ago, and has been the point of contact for many hundreds of subversive artists over the years. Once an old bowling ally on Hamburg's most famous stretch (the Reeperbahn), the space has withstood the barrage of capitalism and urban planning for a long time.



Suburbia #1 Acrylic 100 x 75 cm

**[PR]** You have tackled varied subjects over the years, from paintings of still life works (bone arrangements) to urban scapes, also portraits. Do you think there's a common thread or concern that underpins your work?

**[BH]** There are always threads - it is impossible to spend so much time thinking about and working on each piece for there not to be.

The bulk of my work circles issues of representation, structure and consciousness. I am also fascinated by the process of the works - and the life of the art 'outside' the canvas. Many of my paintings are disruptive to conventional paradigms of aesthetic beauty, and they depict a struggle to reconcile the sum of disparate elements with the initial subject.

I am concerned with change: be it physical change, the aging and possible deformities of the human body and mind, or the change of a living city: the way the walls crumble, the event posters that fade and are replaced, the graffiti struggling for dominance...



Arrangement #3 Oil 76 x 76 cm

Even my "still lives" are based on a series of sculptures that I made representing a human skeleton in its entirety. In keeping with the interest of destroying my sculptures, I began to break some of the pieces as my work progressed. I also added some intrusive elements such as sculptures merely influenced by the shapes of bones, but which could never assume a function. These impurities and injuries enter the compositions like cancer cells, obliterating the possibility of the pieces ever working together in a conventional sense. So yes, my concerns travel with me despite the apparent differences in aesthetics and visual style.

**[PR]** I first saw some of your work at [Brunswick Street Gallery](#), they were great examples of paintings where you slice, fragment or distort the human subject.. what led you to depict the human form in this way?

**[BH]** Many reasons... I called my first exhibition of these works "surface variations", and taken simply - this is what they are. But alongside these experiments in reconfiguring a familiar and intimate subject (what can be more so than the human body?), I was striving to come to terms with the ugliness of disfigurement, and emerge satisfied with a new and disorienting notion of beauty.

Within this context I could not avoid exploring individualism and Identity. Many of the sculptures are based on my own image, or a perceived representation of my aging future person. In creating these works, I inadvertently began a process of intense introspective examination.



Ribbon Bust Oil 100 x 75 cm

**[PR]** When I look at your work I can't help but consider the influences of film and photography in contemporary painting. The dramatic play of light over forms, the cropping and the controlled palette. Are you conscious of these influences?

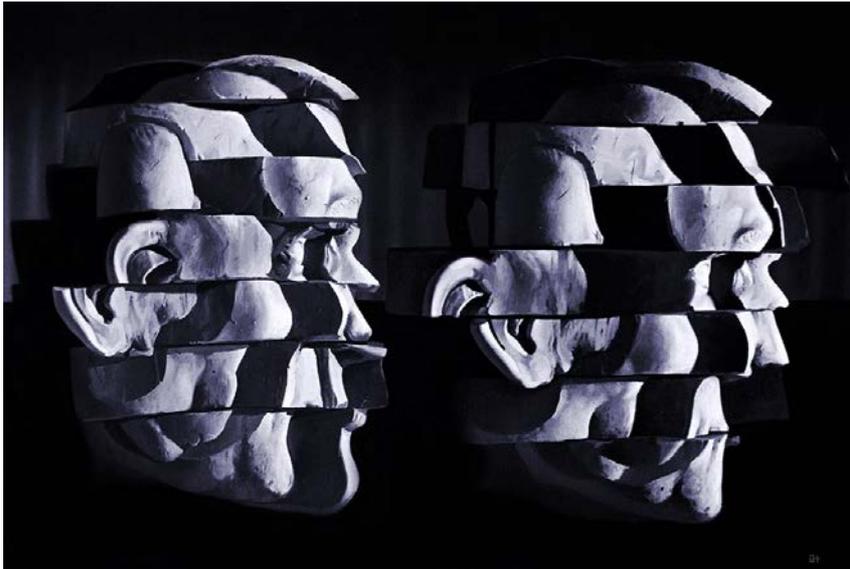
**[BH]** I am sure there are influences that I draw from such as these, but they are secondary. Certainly photography is an integral part in the development of my works given that I often set up precise lighting and photograph my subjects before beginning the painting. This can totally alter the tone and outcome of a piece. As for film: subconsciously. I have enjoyed many films.

**[PR]** Art historically, are there any key artists you feel indebted to?

**[BH]** I was completely blown away by Goya's 'black' paintings. Rodin. Yes. And no, my art bears no resemblance to either. There are many artists I admire, but I mostly just get ideas when I see contemporary works now. I studied historical artists for a long time and I am sure they are all in there somewhere!!

**[PR]** Can you share with us some of the techniques or methods used in your image making process?

**[BH]** With my 'surface variations' and 'bone arrangements', I produce the initial subjects either photographically or in clay. These are disassembled and reconfigured to form new compositions and meanings, and I use the results as the basis for my paintings.



Cubed Bust Acrylic 100 x 81 cm

The time spent on the preliminary sculpture engenders a sympathetic tactile familiarity. The object is then corrupted, shedding its familiar character and the translation to canvas before its ultimate destruction and reconstitution (the same block of clay is used for each work) lends the pieces an air of cyclical life outside the sum of their materials.

In my urban works I employ a number of different techniques to reflect the subject: layering and peeling away strips of paper, utilizing stencils to mirror the street art which covers the walls, and playing with the idea of working "free form blackout" over carefully deliberated colour maps.



Hafensrtasse #1 Acrylic 53 x 30 cm

Apart from spending a lot of time planning the work from concept, through sketches, sculpting, remodelling and photographing, I can broadly suggest patience and knowing the limits of the medium used.

**[PR]** You have said on your website that some works have more "political leanings and initiate dialogues concerning gentrification, aesthetic beauty and mass movements". Tell us what initiated these concerns in your work?

**[BH]** A while ago I began to stop looking inwards for my subject and started to consider the problems of a more socially integrated art practice. I began to look at

the individual as part of a wider system - more defined by its surroundings and interactions. Experiences of riots in Hamburg spiked my interest in the physical and psychosomatic dynamics of crowds and opposing forces, the individual within this context, and the prevailing energy of mass and inertia. Upon my arrival in Hamburg I began to refine a critical vision of the modern city in relation to my experience as a recent migrant.



Crowd Dynamics 150 x 130 cm

**[PR]** In 2001 you undertook a graduate diploma in education and moved into teaching- how has teaching others fed into or influenced your work?

**[BH]** I have spoken with many teachers who have said that it sucks the creativity out of you. I was warned against becoming a teacher. But as soon as I started I found the opposite to be the case. I would return home after school brimming with new ideas. Teaching helped me to develop a more distinct impression of what it meant to be creative. Having said that - I no longer teach full time - I stopped years ago. I only teach small private classes for adults now , as the energy and commitment required could never allow me to develop adequately as an artist.

**[PR]** Finally can you tell us of any current or future exhibitions for 2009?

**[BH]** I have two booked in so far, but there are sure to be a lot more.

Firstly and very soon is:

**PIDGEON HOLE #2 - Friday 13 March**

**Opening party starts at 6pm. 38 Hutchinson Street, Brunswick**

This will be a large group exhibition at our Pigeon hole collective on featuring 14 artists, floating exhibition walls, flying performers and walk around sculptures.

And secondly, also this month is:

**CONDUIT: Objects, space and connection - Friday 27 March**

**Brunswick Street Gallery 322, Brunswick St. Fitzroy, Opening 6pm**

Five artists including myself will be responding to each others work and the interior of Brunswick street gallery. We have had one month to integrate our practices - to shape conduits between subject and form.

The results should be a unique and thought provoking experience, combining the perceptual, spatial, visual and tactile.

**You can see more of Ben's work here:**

Ben's website: [www.ben-howe.com](http://www.ben-howe.com)

The pidgeon hole: [the-pigeon-hole.blogspot.com](http://the-pigeon-hole.blogspot.com)”