Undercoat reviews Ben Howe at *Strange Attractor/Paper Dolls*


Paul Keller

Grant Hill

Docklands creeps me out. There's stuff here, lots of stuff actually. In fact, there's all the trappings of what appears to be a functioning suburb. There's beds, there's tables, there's ridiculous Chinese massage parlours which double as $2 dollar retail, and triple as fronts for international crime syndicates. All of these are in shops. Public transport seems to exist, I even got the luxury of a bike lane on the way here. As with most dormitory suburbs, there are no people around, but given what is on display for the ghost populace of Docklands, I am increasingly happy about that. At 427 Docklands Drive (since when did Melbourne have 'drives'?) I pull into a large square where there are matte-painted bronze statues immortalising Melbourne's variety performers. All my kitschmases at once. Luckily, I stumble on D11 gallery before I vandalise something.

Ben Howe is at the gallery to meet me. So are a range of building supplies and a significant amount of noise. I've come at the best and worst time to review art; when it isn't yet on the wall. It's that gritty moment before the gallery is ready for the world, as if it's looking at itself in a blurry morning mirror, wondering what happened the night before. Ben's co-pilots in the *Strange Attractor*, Paul Keller and Grant Hill, are also bustling around applying make-up to the space here and there, ensuring that tonight's opening will be a night to remember.
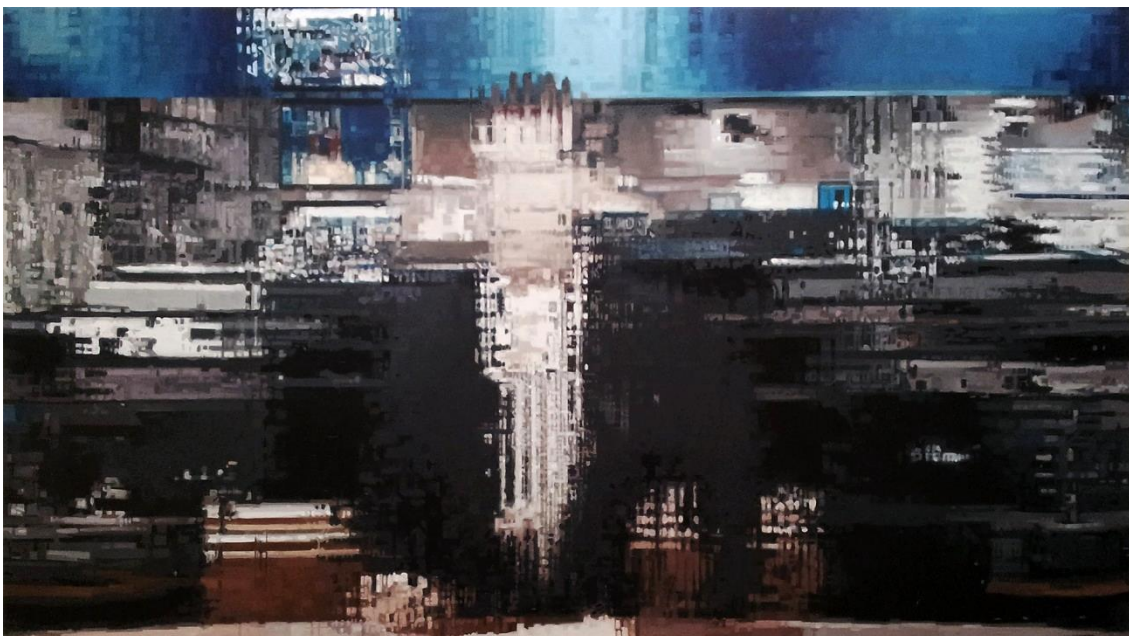
Ben Howe

The sound of the omnipresent drill ploughing through concrete that's apparently made of diamonds, stops for a moment, and Ben and I get a chance to chat.

'Docklands is like I imagine parts of China to be', says Howe. 'There is clearly no plan as to how to get a population to live in this space'. Looking around to what has made it up on the walls so far, it's clearly a broader subject that fascinates him greatly. At first glance I'm looking at a fantastic mash between photography and painting, the blurred out figures directly relatable to the static you get when you get a snowstorm on TV. Inviting comparisons with *The Matrix*, the content across the works stems from Ben's idea of the social construction of space, augmented, and distorted by digital technologies. As you can imagine, the tension created by this across the canvas is blinding, and you really feel as if those wasted hours on YouTube are staring right back at you. This is lamentably how so many of us envision our daily world, trapped by digitality and condemned to its frequent pixelation.

Ben Howe

The works' dampened colours (Ben tells me that for the majority he prefers to mix everything from primaries) create a realistic luminosity as the full impact of each evolves. I piece together a newsreader and a scene from a music video, and two streetscapes broken down bit-by-bit, literally. I'm particularly taken with one streetscape in which the subject stares, perturbed, to the left of frame. This piercing image brings about a bizarre empathy; I want to reach into the image and ask our hero what is wrong. The immediacy of this is overbearing, but the realisation that any chance of rescue will be undone by the disintegration of the whole space weighs just as heavily. I decide I have to ask Ben how this might be realistically achieved.

'The idea is about mapping social dysfunction through media,' he explains. 'I'm conscious as an artist that the space I create is always my own distortion of reality, so I'm trying to limit that as much as possible.' Howe's earlier work, he says, had him pushing people out into a crowded shopping centre, and asking for each to take a snapshot at one moment in time. Piecing together the fragments on a canvas, Howe is interested in the way a crowd looks at itself. 'These works take that same idea, but instead of a physical space, here we are in the mediated space of the screen.' My mind slightly itching, I ask about Howe's plans for the future; where is all this going?

It is here that I get the response I've been craving. As an artist who has the charm of a regular person, but irregularly immense artistic talent, Ben impresses with something like this: 'I'm not prescriptive with what I do. These themes may be the focus of what I'm working on at the moment, but I always have new ideas, so I will just keep evolving as I go.' Ben is shortly off to China to live in residence at an international arts incubator. No doubt the food for thought on offer there will fill his canvases to a new and exciting brink before too long. 'It's about being

honest as an artist, and being honest with yourself and where your ideas take you.' Reflecting, I see that is in fact a very bold statement to make with such ease.

Ben Howe

I pick up my stuff and shuffle around the rest of the works at the exhibition. Keller and Hill would have been great to tee up an interview with; alas they will be left for next time. Through the back I see the *Paper Dolls* space all set-up, a mishmash of installation and pop. I take probably a few more photos than I need to, feel as if there's music everywhere in the room, and leave. I feel as if this place would come alive at the opening. Until then, it's just waiting in the wings, rather lonely, for it's audience to arrive at 5pm.

Speaking of time, I am getting really fucking hungry, and there's no way on God's sweet Earth I'm putting anything in my mouth from Docklands today. I consider walking down to the waterfront for a beer, but it turns out I don't give that much of a shit. In fact it turns out I'm already on my way, having made my goodbyes, back to Melbourne, a busy place not pretending to be Sydney. My 2007 nokia beeps, I check it, and am glad it doesn't even have colours on its screen. I'm saved for now, but Ben's work is haunting me all the same. You want some haunting? Go and connect now.

Ben Howe's work features in *Strange Attractor/Paper Dolls*, a group exhibition with Paul Keller, Grant Hill, and Paper Dolls artists at D11 Docklands until 26 April.

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