

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Hyper-realism of Juan Ford's Degenerator unsettling and absurd

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Degenerator by Juan Ford, oil on linen. Picture: Courtesy of the artist Source: Supplied

**AFTER a visit to the local store to buy a balaclava and sunglasses, Juan Ford dressed himself in a T-shirt that he splattered with green paint. He made a makeshift gun from twigs collected from around his home, located on the outskirts of Melbourne. He then set up a camera in his back yard and took photographs.**

“Thankfully, I have a high fence so the neighbours couldn’t see,” Ford jokes.

Ford and I are discussing his painting Degenerator, which has just been acquired for the RMIT University Art Collection but is now on display in the exhibition In the Flesh at Canberra’s National Portrait Gallery.

Degenerator is representative of a series Ford has been working on for six years.

“It draws upon landscape, botanical illustration and figuration, all smashed together to make a new genre of Australian representation,” he says. “Degenerator is one of the more figurative works. For me, this confrontational figure represents what it is like to approach and deal with the medium, to grapple with it, to work with it.

“I hope it is thought-provoking. When I make work, I like to insert ambiguity into it and hopefully it is intriguing enough for the viewer to ask questions and wonder what this is about.”

When I ask Ford if he considers his picture a comment on terrorism, war or gun culture, he replies terrorism is part of the zeitgeist today.

“That has inevitably made its way into it, but at the same time, there is green paint coming out of the eyes and he is holding this ridiculous stick gun,” he says. “It is confrontational but it is toothless at the same time. Those two are in opposition. So yes, it is terrible but absurd.

“I am not trying to make a comment specifically about the ridiculousness of war, but inevitably that which is happening around me bleeds into the imagery. I’m a sponge and I just suck it up and push it out.”

Ford, who was born in Melbourne in 1973, studied engineering before attending art school at RMIT University. His practice is interdisciplinary, ranging from painting and sculpture to installation. He is known for the hyper-realism of his images, which are so precise they are often mistaken for photographs.

He has been a finalist in the Archibald Prize with a number of self-portraits. He also recently completed a portrait of the late Sir Isaac Isaacs, the country’s first Australian-born governor-general, which was unveiled in the Victorian Parliament House.

Penelope Grist, curator of *In the Flesh*, says Degenerator was partly inspired by the makeshift guns created by the child of one of Ford’s friends. “There is intense self-reflection and the motif of the play weapon,” says Grist. “For me its significance is how it represents the struggle of making the work. I also really love the ambiguity of this work because it is vaguely absurd, as well as frightening. You are not quite sure and so it unsettles you.”

Grist says before seeing Degenerator, she had seen miniature images of it but was “knocked over” when she did eventually see it.

“It is the impact of the actual work that really hits you, and that is such an important experience of art, particularly these days when people think they can look at something on a screen and they think they have seen it, but that is absolutely not the case with this.

“With hyper-realism you think it translates on screen as a photograph, but it doesn’t. It is a very physical experience.”

Juan Ford, *Degenerator* (2013). RMIT University Art Collection. On display in the exhibition *In the Flesh*, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, until March 9

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