

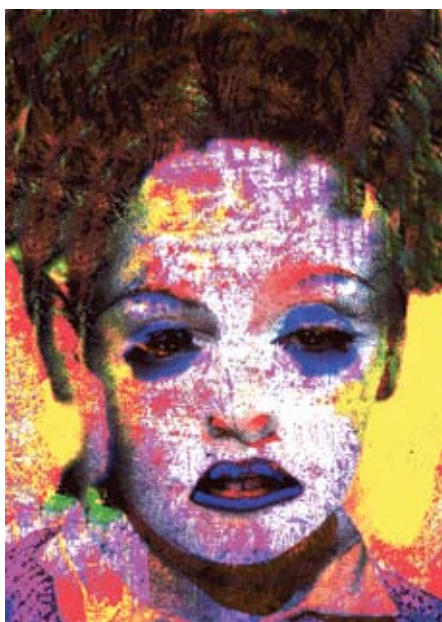
Past Into Present

Not only is the remembered past always viewed through the lens of the present, but our memories actually shape the present. Thus memory informs individual and group identity, belief systems, and self-hood at the deepest level.

By Christine Nicholls



Keith Giles, **The old school photo #2**, 2010. Giclée print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, ultrachrome inks, 71 x 100 cm.



Keith Giles, **The old school photo #3**, 2010. Giclée print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, ultrachrome inks, 71 x 100 cm.



Keith Giles, **The old school photo #4**, 2010. Giclée print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, ultrachrome inks, 71 x 100 cm.



Keith Giles, **The old school photo #5**, 2010. Giclée print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, ultrachrome inks, 71 x 100 cm.



Keith Giles, **The old school photo #6**, 2010. Giclée print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, ultrachrome inks, 71 x 100 cm.



Keith Giles, **The old school photo #7**, 2010. Giclée print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, ultrachrome inks, 71 x 100 cm.

B*ethink*, an exhibition of photography, mixed media, collage, embroidered works on felt and calico, video stills and installations, and more, on show during November 2011 at Adelaide's SASA Gallery, was an official part of the 2011 Feast Festival. Feast is the most significant event on the annual calendar for South Australia's gay and lesbian community.

Bethink, conceived and curated by Susan Bruce and Keith Giles, has proven to be a very successful collaboration. It explores and evokes the childhood memories as well as more recent experiences of four socially interconnected gay or lesbian artists, all of whom are now in their 50s or early 60s. The four (Susan Bruce, Michael Gabbedy who is Bruce's uncle, Keith Giles, and Gary Campbell, Giles's long term partner) are also socially engaged activists, albeit mostly in quiet, unassuming ways.

The central *thématique* of the exhibition relates to the remembered past and reflection upon experience through the fluid, permeable scaffolding of the present. Such understanding of the circular and paradoxical nature of time resonates with T.S. Eliot's conceptualization in the first of his *Four Quartets*, *Burnt Norton*:

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.*

Evident in many of the works on display was a potent sense of the unredeemable nature of time, and the multiple ways in which the past continues to bear down upon the present. Through the diverse artworks on display, *Bethink* explores different types of memory: individual; social or collective; cognitive; narrative; bodily; sensory; queer; traumatic, and more. All of the works in *Bethink* exist at the intersections between memory and representation, embodiment, and consciousness.

This exhibition, taken as a whole, also encapsulates a very modern expression of identity politics, albeit not imparted in a self-conscious or proselytizing manner. Indeed, the artworks themselves are central to the exhibition. Childers and Hentzi have defined 'identity politics' in the following terms: "One ... common use of the word 'identity' is in reference to group identity, as in the phrase 'identity politics'. The sense of identity offered by one's membership in groups that have suffered oppression on the basis of gender, race, class, age, or sexual preference is a major area of investigation in contemporary criticism and cultural studies." (Childers and Hentzi, 1995:145).

In his series titled *The old school photo #1 to #7*, Keith Giles investigates those wounded, often hidden, silent places in the self that result from oppression suffered on the basis of sexual preference—or simply on the basis of being somehow different. The original 'old school photo' shows Giles as a small boy with the lovely, gentle, sensitive face of a dreamer. It is a standard school photograph in which the child smiles diffidently at the camera. The photograph was taken not long after Keith's family had emigrated from England to Australia, when he was about eight years old, and a pupil at the Elizabeth Fields Primary School on the northern outskirts of Adelaide. Giles reports feeling an overwhelming sense of dislocation and alienation ensuing from his parents' decision to emigrate to Australia, and also remembers being labeled as different on account of his Englishness. In addition, the Giles family was stereotyped on the (inaccurate) basis that they were 'Ten Pound Poms' (subsidized British immigrants to Australia who only had to pay £10 to emigrate. The underlying thrust of this initiative was to keep Australia as British as possible. This preferential migration scheme was in place from 1945–1972).

Keith Giles's seven works, using the underlying image of the original school photographic portrait as the default position, are shocking in their collective impact. In *The old school photo #2*, Giles has rendered the boy (himself, that is) faceless. Such total erasure of identity is more poignant because it seems that no new or positive selfhood has suggested itself as a replacement for that earlier, extinguished self. Had the child been



Keith Giles, *The old school photo #1*, 2010, Giclée print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, ultrachrome inks, 71 x 100 cm.

rendered featureless by having had acid thrown into his face, the absolute nature of the identity loss suggested by this searing image would not have been greater. Giles has written compellingly of his experiences of being constantly bullied during his years of schooling in Australia (by other children and, appallingly, sometimes also by teachers) and about the concomitant perceived need for censorship and particularly for continuous *self-censorship* (my emphasis) during that extended period of time in his early life.

In the subsequent iterations of the same old school photograph (seven giclée prints on Hahnemühle fine art paper, hand-altered by Giles using ultrachrome inks), the child's original, innocent, as-yet unblemished identity undergoes a series of disturbing metamorphoses, the precise reasons for which must remain a matter of conjecture. Presumably the underlying reason for these changes was the child's perceived need to adopt a succession of masks until he was able to establish a stable identity that was the right 'fit'.

The altered photographic portrait therefore morphs agonizingly from what seems to be an image of a veiled martyr glimpsed from behind a razor wire prison of self-imposed censorship (or perhaps even self-hatred); metamorphosing into a heavy-lidded, sad-faced clown; then to depressive, painted, catamite-like youth; segueing into an image of a child whose facial identity has been suppressed by televisual pixellation; through to a self-portrait that shows its subject to have acquired impassive, Noh-mask-like features; undergoing a transformation into dazzling, neon-green queen and more. *The old school photo #1 to #7* collectively comprises a profoundly unsettling and confronting image of the changing face (and in this instance, also the facelessness) of childhood. This powerful group of photographs represents a convincing visual narrative of a child largely robbed of his childhood and selfhood. At the same time, taken as a whole, these works comprise a meditation on the nature of childhood trauma and its lasting effects, and the courage that it takes to come to terms with such a past.

Ken Barbie, Holy Communion, Shintaro and more... was one of two very different video installations exhibited in *Bethink* by co-curator Susan Bruce. In Bruce's *Ken Barbie* ... she has compiled a continual loop of photographic stills, portraits of friends who are members of Adelaide's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer communities. The work constitutes a form of homage to her subjects, each of whom has been photographed in a domestic situation of their own choosing.

A shyly smiling Fiona, for example,

proudly sporting the St Kilda AFL football team's red and white scarf, nurses a visibly adored, very self-contained French poodle; while a glowing Abbie, confidently standing in her kitchen, surrounded by gleaming kitchenware, cradles a teapot in a beloved multi-hued tea cosy; and Greg, positioned in front of a theatrical red curtain, beams at the camera, the word 'experiment' discernible on his light red T-shirt. Bruce's feeling for color contrasts is an outstanding feature of her photography. Each of Bruce's subjects is firmly lodged within their own personal narrative, coupled with much-loved objects (or pets). The fact that each person is clearly situated within their own quotidian performative rituals strengthens the narrative basis of this artwork. This technically capable work reveals Bruce to be an artist whose work is informed by strongly humanist values.

Bruce's photographs have been augmented, in some cases, by brief text-*mémoires* elicited from her photographic subjects, reinforcing the view that her approach to art-making is founded on narrative and humanist principles. The effect of these short statements is also to expand the narrative basis of the work as a whole. The installation's titular *Ken Barbie*, for instance, is a reference to an apparently androgynous doll that Fiona played with as a child, and to which Fiona makes wry reference: "... I loved playing with Ken Barbie doll. I was so upset when his head fell off."

Hidden, Susan Bruce's other video work on display in *Bethink*, in which the artist has incorporated dynamic movement, text, sound, and drawing, demonstrates a certain deep-seated kinship with the work in Keith Giles's photographic series, discussed earlier. In this work, Bruce, a dancer, apparently incarnates a whirling



Susan Bruce, **Fiona & Tiger**, from *Ken Barbie, Holy Communion, Shintaro and more ...*, 2011, video installation.

dervish-like persona, a talented, agile, and care-free performer moving unrestrainedly, creating scintillating (solo) salsas of dancing color through adroit bodily movements. On the surface this work appears to be infused with a joy that springs from the soul. It is only the title of the work, and some barely discernible flashes of text embedded within it, that serve to alert viewers to *Hidden*'s darker underbelly.

Of this work, Bruce writes: "*Hidden* is a reflection upon memories of my childhood, using movement, text, and sound. I developed a video choreography through editing stills, drawings, and text. I've used a 'scuba breathing' sound effect to accentuate water, as my favorite times as a child were times that were spent in water and swimming. I belonged to a swimming club, and this was one of the few times that my father and I had a bonding in our relationship. I also remember it as a time—and place—that was free and safe: I found swimming a 'freeing' thing to do All our holidays were spent doing something in the water, either fishing or swimming. These are the fond memories ... the tactile

experiences from those holidays are what I've tried to put into the video.

"On the other side (the 'hidden' side), I have not such good memories of the thrashings that I regularly received from my father. In *Hidden*, I have chosen to include only two reflections/comments that refer to this. One statement in the video relates to something that I only found out from a relative at a family reunion earlier this year. I had always known that when I was only 18 months old I'd been lost in the gold fields in Western Australia. It was a story that was told to me time and time again. But at the reunion the relative told me a part of that story that had always been left out. 'We were all worried, and all the men were out looking for you,' he said. 'And when you were found, your father thrashed you.' (My relative was shaking his head while telling me this) ... I could never quite figure out why a parent would thrash a child of not even two years old. ... but my Dad was young, and this is how he parented."

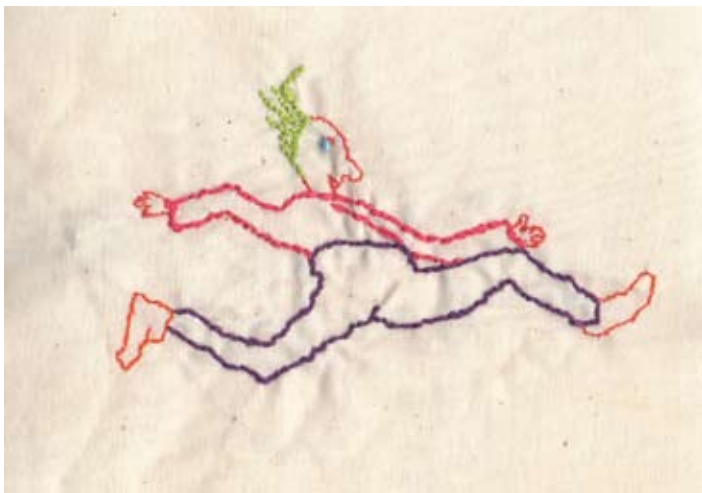
Michael Gabbedy, Susan Bruce's maternal uncle, also makes a significant contribution to *Bethink* with his two delightfully evocative embroidered works on calico, *Red Man* and *Running Man*. In the first of these lively works, in perfect cartoon style, Gabbedy captures an innocent, rather childlike act of boyish masturbation, whilst in his *Running Man* he depicts a dynamic fleeing figure, replete with splendidly windswept green hair. In equally lighthearted vein, and with a similarly (mildly) subversive subtext, is Gabbedy's hand-painted photograph entitled *Out for a Spin*. Gabbedy has placed the photograph on felt, adding embroidery to create a frame that imbues the work with great dramatic flair. In this small, captivating, ironic work, Gabbedy provides an engaging picture of two dignified but daredevil lesbians from an earlier era (perhaps the 1920s) enjoying a ride on the high seas



Susan Bruce, still from **Hidden**, 2011, video installation, 1:36 m.; color.



Susan Bruce, still from **Hidden**, 2011, video installation, 1:36 m.; color.



Michael Gabbedy, Running Man, from *Pictures* book, 2011, embroidery on calico, dimensions variable.



Michael Gabbedy, Out for a spin, 2011, hand-colored photograph on felt with embroidery, 13 x 18 cm.

in an undersized dinghy aptly named 'Fury'.

Richard in a dog suit, a photograph by Gabbedy, also on felt and 'value-added' by his addition of a symbolically pink embroidered fame, portrays the artist's late partner wearing a Dalmatian outfit, smiling happily and confidently toward the camera. The image is that of a person who is at home in the world—a relaxed, self-assured, firmly grounded gay man. Gabbedy is a master of gentle ironies and his hand-sewn artworks provided visitors to *Bethink* with immense visual pleasure.

As a bleak coda to the latter agreeable, optimistic work created by a blithe spirit and encapsulating a happier time, there is a very hard-edged photograph by Volker Mattar (*Richard's Funeral*, 2011) of Michael Gabbedy standing numbly at his partner's funeral, eyes closed, expression unreadable. There is a stark contrast between the *gravitas* that imbues this photograph and the aforementioned works on display in *Bethink* made by Gabbedy himself.

Indeed, Volker's sober photograph implies a very different Michael Gabbedy from the young boy who inhabited Susan Bruce's childhood: "... Michael Gabbedy is my Uncle and we grew up together in Western Australia. My mum was pregnant with me while Michael (my mother's youngest brother) was the youngest of seven children. Michael and I always had a lot in common. We both loved art as children, and spent time together doing interesting



Michael Gabbedy, Richard in a dog suit, 2011, photograph on felt with embroidery, 13 x 18 cm.



Volker Mattar, Michael Gabbedy at Richard's Funeral, 2011, digital photograph.

things, such as walking around the cemetery [the historic Karrakatta Cemetery in Perth] looking for things (money). I thought that money would rise up from the graves of the buried dead people! We would sit behind a sheet with a hole in it, watching the trains go by (my grandparents' house was across the road from the Karrakatta railway station). We'd also listen to Yoko Ono, who was screaming—with incense burning and budgies flying around the room in which she was performing!

"Michael, or Mick, probably does not remember these incidents the same as I do, because that's how memory is. As a teenager, I moved with my family to the Eastern states and Mick & I corresponded sometimes by letters that could be small short stories. We went on to take different paths, although not too dissimilar. We both are gay, and we both ended up going to art school as mature adults. We both performed/danced: he in Club West; me in full-time ballet, then later I was to lead the first big dance group from Adelaide to go to Sydney to perform in the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras."

Finally—and certainly not least—figuring among *Bethink's* many treasures are Gary Campbell's inspired left-of-field collages, collectively titled *anamneses*. Campbell wittily captures the innate queerness of things through his apposite assemblages of contrasting elements. From what seems to be a flowing stream of snippets from children's encyclopedias and quotes from various texts including books, newspapers, and other documents from

earlier eras, Campbell makes unexpected connections between disparate ideas and things. Campbell's sometimes poetic, sometimes symbolical, and at times Monty Pythonesque mind-ramblings, ostensibly issuing from an unbridled, free-falling imagination, are infused with an inventively muddled Boys-Own-Adventure-Story type pastiche of recollections from the past—a kind of historically informed, visual self-mapping. The result is a little like Proust on amphetamines.

About these works (which I found wonderful) Campbell has this to say: "... Rather than the Platonic/Socratic interpretation, the title *anamneses* for me is the more common garden variety, sort of 'Proustian'. I like the sound of the word; it is unfamiliar and out of general use; it covers a broad range and makes you wonder. It doesn't fit in to our everyday language—it is weird and foreign. A queer sort of word really

"I use it in the psychological context in that recollection of things past—events, images, short phrases, artifacts etc.—can trigger a response, reminiscence, a memory, a subtle reaction to the subconscious that can play on the emotions.

"I want the artwork to somehow get under the skin, to make the viewer look hard, to read the seemingly disjointed text and layered images, to read a story that may in some way link back to their own past. I also chose certain images and phrases that I hope act as a subtext to another consciousness ... of the view that doesn't fit with the *status quo*, that which could be read as 'queer'. My memory of childhood is layered with this context of being different, of not fitting in.

"While I sit at my desk and read, I gaze at the pictures on the wall, at the patterns in the carpet and on the cushioned chair. I need something to shed a light on a deeper meaning, and those childhood books on the shelf are somehow empty, devoid of reference to how I actually fit in, of how I feel. Yet I cannot dismiss their content—somehow I have to adjust it. So I hope that the installation *anamneses* is about jogging the memory, adjusting the images and the text to include another less-told story.

"That was very much the thought process that went into making this work. Memory, juxtaposing images, phrases, and recollections of the past ... reinventing it all ... bringing my own interpretation to it.



Gary Campbell, *anamneses*, 2011, collaged children's encyclopaedias, sticky tape, dimensions variable. Installation view at the SASA Gallery, Adelaide.

"Through the process of recall, memory can play tricks, but it also can shed light, give fresh insight, and engage with the present in an enriching way ... *anamneses*."

Ultimately, *Bethink* represents a significant achievement insofar as it reveals to its audiences—regardless of individual

sexual orientation—just how much we have to learn from—and about—memory as a theoretical, empirical, and curatorial methodology, practice and means of probing oft-unquestioned hegemonic social values, as well as representing a legitimate form of artistic inquiry. Equally important, memory projects such as *Bethink*, founded upon serious engagement with artistic and activist practice, not only enhance the psychological wellbeing and ontological and environmental safety of their contributors, but also offer real balance to public knowledge production. This brings with it the potential to create more socially just futures for all of us. Δ



Gary Campbell, *anamneses* (detail), 2011, collaged children's encyclopaedias, sticky tape, dimensions variable.

References:

1. *Bethink*, catalogue, 2011, published SASA Gallery Adelaide, South Australia.
2. Childers, Joseph W., and Gary Hentzi, 1995, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, Columbia University Press, New York.

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