

untitled: (dead boring) 2008-09 installation detail
32 components: modified polyurethane on glass, reflective vinyl, shellac, wax,
antique frames, hand forged nails & vintage picture lights. dimensions variable

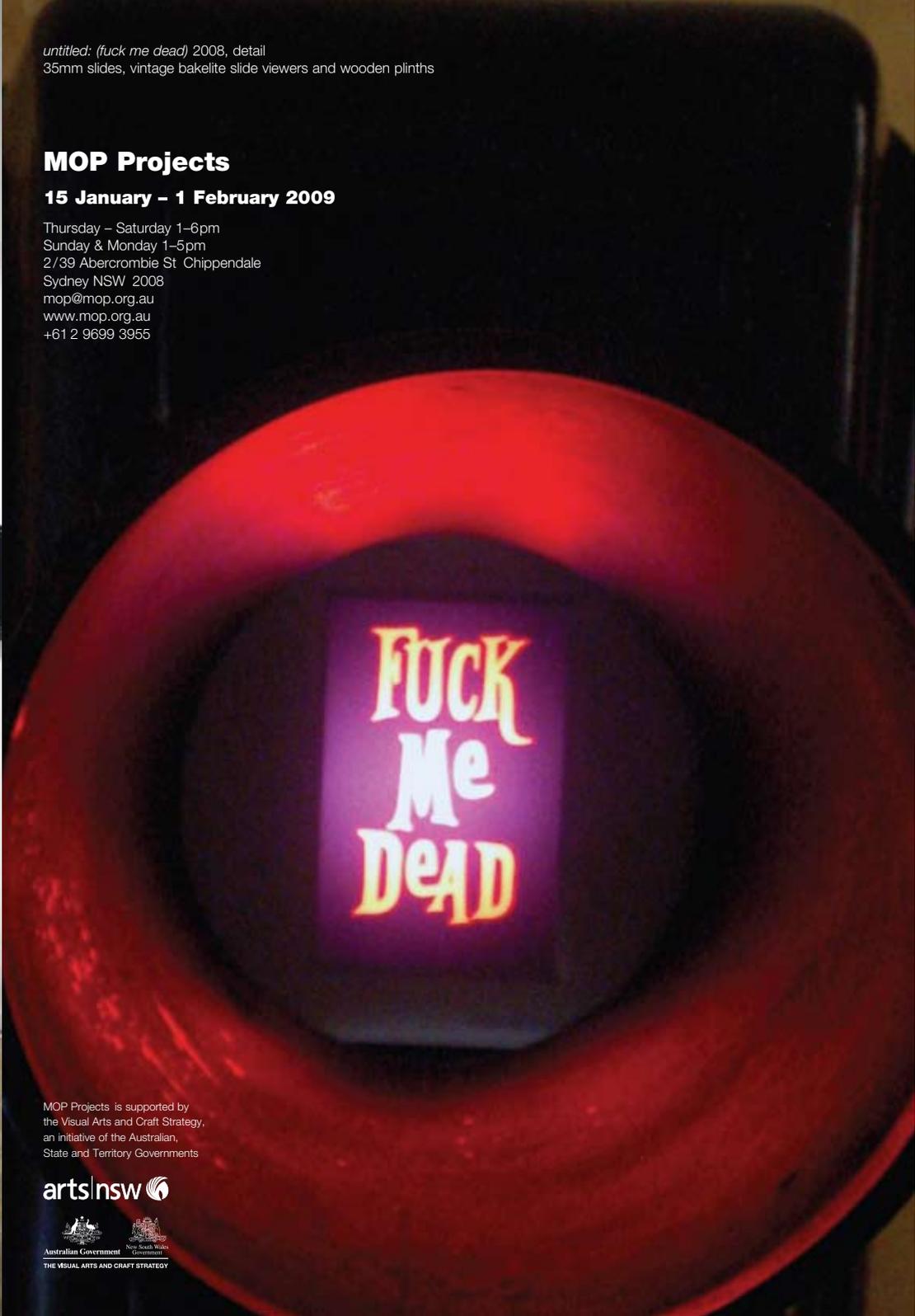


untitled: (fuck me dead) 2008, detail
35mm slides, vintage bakelite slide viewers and wooden plinths

MOP Projects

15 January – 1 February 2009

Thursday – Saturday 1–6pm
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another nail in the coffin
clinton garofano

Dead serious: the recent work of Clinton Garofano

Clinton Garofano has been dealing with death for some time now. It has been a recurring subject within his work for at least the last decade or so, alluded to initially in his Spiritual Painting series of 1996 and 1997, and appearing more explicitly in later works such as: *Straight to hell*, 1999; *Motorhead*, 2002; *untitled: (drop dead)*, 2004; *untitled: (100 meditations)*; and in the more recent *untitled: (dead obvious)*, 2006, and *untitled: (dead straight)*, 2007. While the earlier works particularly were motivated by personal experience and displayed a distinctive meditative quality in their use of single symbols on large expanses of colour, Garofano’s interest over time has moved to a wider exploration of the subject, alternating between a core interest in Buddhist symbology and a more frequent referencing of subcultural iconography. On reflection the contrast seems strong, the appearance of the Sanskrit script of a seed syllable from a mantra in one series for example, followed by a leering death skull favoured by skinheads in the next. The common factor, of course, is the very value accorded to death in these vastly different representational codes. We could say that each faces death: Buddhism with its highly evolved symbolic language encourages a consciousness of death, using imagery to accustom its followers to key principles of impermanence and emptiness; while the embellished skulls inked into the skin of boys and the associated paraphernalia of their souped-up cars represents a cruder, entirely worldly facing-off of death where mortality is linked with sexuality and emblazoned as an emblem of desire. In this exhibition, Garofano continues his interest in the representation of death presenting three works: *untitled: (dead boring)*, 2008-09; *untitled: (motorhead II, 1-5)*, 2001-08; and *untitled: (fuck me dead)*, 2008. He also continues to mix it, signalling through its jokey but macabre title, *another nail in the coffin*, yet another take on just what our relationship to death might be.

With religious imagery central to its development, death has long been a subject of Western art. Even as art became secularised, death has continued to arise from time to time as a favourite theme of both individual artists and periods. The expression of vanitas in 17th century Dutch still life painting and the work of the Symbolist painters and poets in the late 19th century are commonly cited historical examples. In the realm of contemporary art, death can also be considered an established theme having been addressed variously from the 1960s through to the 1980s and 1990s by artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, Arnulf Rainer, Ana Mendieta, Bruce Nauman, Derek Jarman, Christian Boltanski, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Andres Serrano, Jenny Holzer, Marlene Dumas and most spectacularly Damien Hirst to name a few. Hirst’s diamond encrusted skull, *For the love of God*, 2007, perhaps exemplifies what has recently been described, in relation to an examination of ‘our relationship to the dead’ in contemporary art, as the ‘new visibility of death’. While Hirst’s work is a testament to the excessive speculative capacity of the art market in the era of late capitalism, and could be perceived as a crowning glory to the now ubiquitous presence of the motif of the skull in contemporary culture, addresses of the subject through the 1980s and 1990s were less market driven, frequently responding in a more contestatory way to personal experiences of HIV and AIDS, issues of cultural memory, loss, and remembrance.

In his various representations Garofano doesn’t depict death as such, that is, death in the guise of the human corpse as portrayed, for example, in Marlene Dumas’s work (although the deadpan title of her recent retrospective, *Measuring your own grave*, does suggest a humour similar to Garofano’s); neither is he interested in depicting dead things; nor rendering the horror or modes of death as in Andres Serrano’s confronting yet highly formalised 1992 series ‘The Morgue’; nor is he interested in attempting to show the actual moment of death; nor indeed its immediate aftermath as in Andy Warhol’s Disaster paintings or the shadow cast by death in Warhol’s posthumous portraits of Marilyn and those of a grieving Jackie. We could also observe that Garofano’s work is not commemorative. Rather, it is as if he is trying to remind us of our relationship with death. A frequent enough observation is that our relationship with death in our culture – including most things to do with the dead and dying – is repressed; and that our usual response is one of denial. Cultural theorist Elisabeth Bronfen has described the dynamic somewhat more insightfully, that ‘we can acknowledge death while convincing ourselves that it is not – or not at present – our existential concern’; further observing that death is both ‘troubling and fascinating because its description ultimately eludes our cognitive grasp.² It seems that Garofano’s interest lies somewhere in this area. Certainly in *untitled: (dead boring)*, the major work in this exhibition, this concern appears especially evident.



Untitled: (dead boring) comprises 32 component parts, and features the use of a range of ornate, antique frames which have been ebonised; each surrounds a text-based painting consisting of two conjoined words, the first consistently being the word ‘dead’ as the adjectival descriptor in a familiar expression such as ‘dead certain’, ‘dead weight’, ‘dead simple’. Importantly as well, all have been painted using the same comic-horror font which conjures mock gothic cartoons or more specifically, for a particular generation, the opening credits to the widely popular 1960s hit TV series the ‘Addams Family’, cleverly undercutting the high seriousness of the frames. Additionally, *untitled: (dead boring)* can be considered as part of a larger series, continuing from the previous *untitled: (dead obvious)*, 2006, and *untitled: (dead straight)*, 2007. Each body of work has followed a similar format, using repetition as a generative strategy and as a means to reinforce the work’s conceptual concerns, however, varying in details such as, the selected expressions, number of components, decorative finishes of the frames, and their installation – in this case, the makeshift use of chains and nails and the way the line of paintings seems to peter out giving over to abandonment.

In viewing *untitled: (dead boring)* the surprising realisation is not only the extent to which, but more so, how death inhabits our everyday language. If Garofano’s concern is to query our particular wavering relationship with death and its ever-present possibility, it is a fact he seems to be pointing out, that we are more than happy to embrace in our everyday language in the most emphatic way. Here, death is accommodated by displacement, an abstraction which nevertheless stands in for the expression of something authentic and real, with the word ‘dead’ employed to function as an affirmation of an indisputable truth, to convey serious intention or finality. Its sideways transfer is also edged at times with a hard humour. However, there is more to this work than just a droll record of punning. There are other factors at play which indicate the complexities of this work and which we might consider. The first is to do with the pervasiveness of these expressions and their absorption into our everyday language; and here I am relying on the work of scholar Jonathan Dollimore, regarding the connections between death and desire. ‘The commonplace’, Dollimore has observed, ‘works as a kind of disavowal, allowing us to see and not see at the same time ... by acknowledging an ‘obvious’ connection ... the commonplace allows us to forego thought about it.³ The second arises from Garofano’s interrogation of language, what we might call the ‘representability’ of death, that is, the very possibility of its expression in both language and the domain of the visual. With a further factor that we might consider being the compensatory function of images: if we accept the proposition that we generate images to stand in for the dead, for their ensuing absence, then what we are presented with in these text-based works, whose frames are redolent of a certain history of painting, is a double absence.

Garofano’s work is both dark and playful. And on first encounter it might seem that flippancy governs his practice. That a certain humour permeates his attitude and approach is not in doubt. In talking about his use of the frames in *untitled: (dead boring)*, for example, he jokingly tells that ‘their lifespan is over 100 years’ and that they have been ‘re-birthed into my work⁴. And in previewing this exhibition he also cited the seemingly off-hand, jokey advice of one Buddhist teacher, ‘Death is like moving into a new apartment.’ However, like this instruction, Garofano deploys his humour for a purpose, taking aim at our capacity for awareness and fear; something like the jolt we receive when we recognise the conjunction of death, sexuality and desire in *untitled: (fuck me dead)*; or the challenge to social convention conveyed in the amusing subterfuge of the bizarre in the ‘Addams Family’. In looking at Garofano’s work we could say his concern is to interrogate the difficulty of death and that a deadly seriousness underscores his investigation of this troubling and sometimes unbearable subject.

Bronwyn Clark-Coolee

¹ Six feet under: autopsy of our relation to the dead, Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld/ Leipzig, 2006, p. 8.

² E Bronfen, Six feet under: autopsy of our relation to the dead, p. 42.

³ J Dollimore, Death, desire and loss in western culture. Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1998, p. xii.

⁴ n.p., in conversation with author, December 2008.