



Jay Kochel

DAVID BROKER

I MUST CONFESS that it was a pair of nylon-bouclé Triumph swimmers on the invite to Jay Kochel's recent exhibition, *I wish I was David Bowie*, that initially drew my attention to his work. Both the invite and the title evoked a campy nostalgia that seemed to overlay sexuality, youth culture and importantly, an element of thoughtful subversion that is more based on inquiry than open rebellion. While Kochel appears to exploit the viewer's individual memory, the nostalgia that imbues his work is not of the sentimental kind. Having entered into the spirit of his practice one finds that references to the past are but the means to a different, more personal end.

Working with photography, video, and found and constructed objects in installation, Kochel has used toys to explore their relation to a sense of self that is in a state of continual transformation. 'Toys', he says, 'are a form of social construction, a context given to us to engender learning through play; a way of relating to the world we are born into.' As such this exhibition is balanced at a point where popular culture, such as pop icons and fashion, takes over from where toys left off. In other words, Kochel explores the metaphor of 'adult toys' that continue to employ diversionary activities as a way of engaging with the world and updating identity. This context sets the scene for work that not only reflects society at large but also, more precisely, something profoundly personal.

Speaking in visual terms, David Bowie's 'presence' is subtle, but for those in the know, it is never far from the surface of the work. While there is an impression of slick sophistication in Kochel's work, it is also purposefully flawed. A close inspection of his robotic sci-fi toys sometimes reveal breakages and imperfections that suggest all is not and perhaps never what it seems. Just as Bowie invented a quasi sci-fi scenario that was in reality much closer to drag than the latest developments in science and technology, Kochel generates an impression of technological authority that is ultimately (and playfully) misleading. In fact, there are other, more important issues at play.

This is most obvious in a series of works using View-Masters, where some of the exhibited photographs are shown in the third dimension. Or so we think. In reality the stereoscopic view is but one of the many failed attempts to effectively imitate the third dimension, and its depth of field is strangely flat. For Kochel there are personal implications, and he explains that, 'I only see a flat world, a half world. The depth of things becomes a surface, a skin.' Thus ironically, the View-Master's inadequacy represents a struggle to effect a sense of distance with two-dimensional means, and historically this has been one of the enduring issues for the visual arts.

Importantly, the View-Master is a redundant toy that has pretensions to technological advancement as it attempts to re-present images in another dimension that most of us are already familiar with. And yet its perspective is nonetheless fascinating – opening up a strange world of stereoscopic popular culture for kids. Kochel's explorations of 'skins' or surfaces have already provided an intriguing insight into notions of superficiality. Essentially he dredges the shallows in search of depth; the technical and philosophical problems that emerge from this area of research have laid the foundations for what will be some interesting perspectives in the coming years.

FROM TOP: Jay Kochel, *Subtle Metaphors: 1st Movement*, 2008, still images from video (19 minutes, 50 seconds), exhibited in *I Wish I was David Bowie*, ANCA Gallery, Canberra, 2008. Jay Kochel, *I, Candy*, 2006, Blu-tac, from the exhibition TAC, ANU School of Art, 2006. Jay Kochel, *Hugz*, 2008, digital print on aluminium composite board. From the *Denuded* series, exhibited in *I Wish I was David Bowie*, ANCA Gallery, Canberra, 2008. Courtesy the artist. Jay Kochel, *Classic Repression*, 2008, silicon rubber, 12B, from the *Buffers* series, exhibited in *I Wish I was David Bowie*, ANCA Gallery, Canberra, 2008. Images courtesy the artist.



David Broker is a writer, curator and Director of Canberra Contemporary Art Space.