

PAPER CUTS

“Try to understand, this is really hard for me
I never meant to hurt you, it’s just that we want different things”

Conflict, on both a personal as well as on a grand scale, would seem to be a hallmark of the human psyche. It is also a core theme of Megan Keating’s paintings, paper-cuts and installations.

The very term ‘paper cut’ inspires a very strange terror. We have all had a paper cut, that sly, sharp and, given the brevity of the wound, incredibly painful incursion into the skin. It is not the pain of a bayonet in the bowel, nor is it the pain of heartbreak and loss. It is a pain of surprise, of the benign turning against us with unexpected vengeance – how can a sheet of A4 or the edge of an envelope have such hidden violence? It seems safe, given the nature of her work, to imagine that Meg Keating has had her share of paper cuts.

Keating has often utilised the machinery and the personnel of war in imagery intended to jolt us out of our lackadaisical, even sloth-like, approach to the world around us. Writers as far-ranging as George Orwell and Marshall McLuhan have in the past commented stringently of the Western world’s tendency to absorb the mundane in a bid to avoid reality. We watch the heartbreaks on *Neighbours* but ignore the real sufferings of friends. We would prefer to watch the battle on the cricket ground rather than act on the farcical battle occurring in Iraq.

We have even concocted a language of the mundane to cover our emotions. How more accurate could Keating be when she moves for the first time into text-based works and states: “I don’t think this is working out. I think we should see other people. We weren’t really exclusive anyway. I would still like to be friends. Maybe we could meet next week for a drink or something.”

To the recipient this is often the paper cut from hell. It is immediately translated to: “You’re totally gross, utterly boring, lousy in bed, have bad breath and I never want to see you ever again.”

“Maybe we could meet next week for a drink...” allows the dumpee a to throw a life-jacket to the dumped, a small and totally insincere way to be ‘nice.’ Keating’s work is infused with such banalities that hide a deeper truth.

These are realities we have all incurred. The dumped experiences a moment of powerlessness, an all-consuming impotence. The dumper has the power of rejection, a force-field of words. Elsewhere the dumper says: “The truth is I just don’t do the couple thing.” This is most likely said after six months of dating, in which time the dumpee has introduced the dumper to all his/her friends and told them he/she was in love. As Keating herself says: “in part it is a lot about game playing, but playing by your own rules.” This is a language that hides as much as it reveals, and disorients rather than illuminates.

Keating’s harsh graphic aesthetic contributes to the camouflaging of the emotional content. “Everything appears in black and white, when nothing ever is,” says Keating. “In truth everything is one murky, toxic foul-smelling shade of grey.”

As anyone who has either studied hermeneutics or misconstrued a text message knows, language is a slippery thing at best. Keating juxtaposes her text works with images of hand gestures, which again, depending on the culture you are entering, can be deeply misconstrued. A friendly gesture in one part of the world can be deeply insulting on the other side of the planet or, alternatively, the only means of communication.

The notion of a language that doesn’t inform is something that Keating has been considering during her recent residencies in Asia. “The English I speak is not the same as the English of neither a Taiwanese villager nor a Muslim woman in southeast Malaysia,” she notes. “When I know we are speaking about the same thing often hand gestures are the only way.”

Keating’s work highlights the pointlessness and theatricality of so much of humanity’s varied conflicts. As she herself has stated of her militaristic subject matter: “the soldiers, planes, elaborate decoration and repeated motifs document the condition of entropy. While the images carry the potential of violence the pointed guns are never aimed at their targets. The rifles and guns are flaccid and impotent.”

Keating's sense of dark theatricality is clear when she depicts her military figures – supposedly figures of menace and mayhem – in dance-like burlesque poses a la Mel Brook's comedy classic *Springtime For Hitler*.

Elements of this exhibition at the Devonport Regional Gallery had a preview in a group show called *This Crazy Love* at the Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts in Melbourne in 2007. Black rubber cutouts of writhing figures hung from walls and ceilings and oozed from nooks and crannies. The pieces were constructed from a series of images of copulating figures, animals and bombs, and were presented across a large area so that they overwhelmed the gallery. Unless one looked closely it was difficult to discern what the figures were actually doing and the blanketing camouflage defused the impact of the figures even further. With what could be a fetishists' delight, there was also a heavy, cloying industrial rubber smell that permeated the installation.

"Through industrial materials and over-saturated imagery the audience is bombarded with often brutal motifs that are hand crafted in a labour of love," Keating said of the work. "The idea of labour is re-enforced within the heavy manufactured scent. A cheap and nasty perfume, courtesy of commercialisation and consumer culture, that overthrows the beauty and grace of the figuration."

Keating combines the graceful with the macabre, the beautiful with the horrendous. Her work encapsulates the yin and yang of human existence; a seemingly eternal clash of love and conflict.

This element of the human psyche is explored even further when Keating makes use of her Rorschach style graphics. These are harsh and explicit images where the artist pulls no punches. There is a nasty trick occurring here. A Rorschach test, in which abstract blobs are presented to the patient for interpretation, is a controversial procedure undertaken to judge a persons mental health. A healthy patient might respond to an abstraction by proclaiming 'I see two cute kittens!' In Keating's world we are given no choice – we see two cute kittens all right – being anally attacked by two sick men! If Keating is acting as our psychiatrist then she has already made her evaluation and it isn't healthy.

There is a kind of visceral thrill in encountering Keating's work that is akin to the repulsion and attraction of a car crash. Whether it be the psychological incursion of a break-up or the sense of being a patient in a bizarre test of ones' sanity Keating gets under the skin, reminding us of our fragility and our ability to cause pain.

Many elements of this most recent work were executed at the Rimbun Dahan residency in Malaysia, which followed a residency in Taiwan. These seem apt locales for Keating to expand and develop her work. The artisans of both countries work in intensely intricate, often graphic forms and both countries have their share of natural and cultural beauty. But both countries have seen more than their share of conflict. Even Tasmania, from where Keating hails, has had a tumultuous history. It seems that wherever humanity settles, conflict and calamity inevitably follow and Meg Keating isn't about to let us forget it.

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