

# the art of joyous anger

## TIM GREGORY

*The tracing of borders has to do with the foundation of citizenship and politics, pointing among other things to the 'non-democratic' character of democracy itself, this is the problem we are confronted with at the very level of everyday life.<sup>1</sup>*

For Australia, the dispute over gas reserves in the Timor Strait (between Australia and East Timor), the “Tampa” and “Children Overboard Affair” (illegal refugees), the Peter Reith waterfront reforms (against militant unions) and the death of (the international television personality) Steve “The Crocodile Hunter” Irwin are just some of the examples which extol the non-democratic, identity histrionics of national borders. Phillip George’s exhibition *Borderlands* at Casula Powerhouse, Sydney (4 October, 2008–18 January, 2009) chose one of the most infamous of all border incidents as its catalyst—Sydney’s 2005 Cronulla Riots.<sup>2</sup>

While attitudes are amplified at national borders, they are rarely formed there. It is not until you invite a stranger into your home that the stranger becomes a friend. Phillip George invited us all to Sydney’s demographic home of the western suburbs, to a place conducive to changing attitudes. He also gave us the real means by which to redefine the borders. Thirty surfboards adorned with Islamic patterns stood waiting (supposedly) to be carried into the surf. They were arranged in marching formation, aligned towards Mecca, but their diverse, festive patterning precluded a military or fundamentalist vision. They appeared as real, imposing objects, each standing at two metres. This was art that could not be ignored. This was art that transcended the gallery context and broadcasted on all channels.

While surfing the web recently (the only type of surfing I do), I noticed something I had never seen before. I have a fascination/perversion with sex personals, and often peruse them to see what sorts of images are being used for the purpose of attracting a partner, as a barometer of contemporary erotic aesthetics. There are the usual badly-lit photos of sculptured chests, pouted lips and stuffed underpants. But something else has crept in—closeup pictures of tattoos of the Southern Cross.<sup>3</sup> Such people are displaying their racial ‘purity’, their tag of authenticity, which in their minds makes them a ‘perfect specimen’ for a white partner. I have only seen these on men’s profiles. What is of interest here is the statement they are making is not just political. These men seem to believe their best chance of getting laid is through what is debateably a racist mark, that this is the symbolism that makes them most attractive. This is what Phillip George’s boards directly engaged. He responded with a sophisticated and personal symbolism that undermined such racist denunciation.

Displaying a willingness to cross boundaries, George combined the religious and secular, East and West (geographic and cultural), male and female, hedonism and stoicism, the utilitarian and the decorative. He did this with such abandon that we might start to question the validity of such antipodes. It is not that George is ignorant of the history of these divides, conversely he is all too aware of history and hence unwilling to let the past dictate the present and future. This mixture of influences clearly reflects his life. While he grew up in Sydney’s Bondi, he is equally at home in the Middle East and has long been photographing the patterns that now appear on these surfboards. As such, the collection of patterns forms a type of personal travelogue. Yet each pattern is also steeped in a global history, some dating back to the tenth-century—mixed Sunni geometric patterns, Ottoman and Persian motifs. Internal tensions between the patterns are not insignificant. The history of the Ottoman and Persian Empires, as well as that of Sunni and Shiite Muslims cannot be conflated. It can’t be said that George has merely placed Islamic patterns on surfboards, since the history of each design is far more complicated. His almost naive willingness to make such connections presents Australia as a generous and curious nation eager to engage and risk offence, in an attempt to understand. A distinction needs to be made clear; George did not set out to offend or shock—to do so would have created boring, didactic propaganda. Instead, he offered a body of work that reveals an awareness of personal and political connotations, ready to engage with what has proven to be a very diverse audience. This exhibition has upset some members of the public. As George is not a Muslim it left him open to criticism, the biggest concern being that the *Inshallah* pattern on the two bookend boards is in such a position where

it could be stood upon if the boards were to be used.<sup>4</sup> However, such a concern does not acknowledge that these boards are artworks and while they *could* be ridden, they never will be. It is expected that they will spend the next few years travelling to galleries around the world.

Because of this mixture of Persian, Ottoman and Sunni designs, the viewer is encouraged to look for broader connections. What is realised is that the juxtaposition between design and board is not juxtaposition at all. The connection between the surf/surfing and Islam comes into relief. The patterns are predominantly made from images of nature (the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life motifs) and geometric patterns which suggest the infinite rationalism that underpins nature. Because of this mixture there are no particulars to isolate the symbolism; they escape the hypocrisy which seeps into every institutionalised religion. We are left with a theoretical spirituality which has nature and mathematics at its centre. We are left with an image of benign omnipotence that is *everything* rather than being represented *in everything*. This distinction makes Islam a more evolved religion than its two older cousins (Christianity and Judaism), because it does away with the necessity of personifying the deity. It avoids “the word... made flesh.”<sup>5</sup> The man with the white beard constantly undermines any reasonable notion of God, not only because of the hall of mirror effect (who created the creator?), but also because it wedges a problematic division between humans and nature (which most recently has led to an attack on Darwinism through “intelligent design theory”). What we see on these boards is far closer to pantheism than dogmatic religiosity.

Pantheism is the code for all surfers. Their connection with nature is key to the art of surfing. In order to catch a wave there has to be an understanding of the geometry of the surf, an ability to feel the mathematics of the ocean’s infinite surging. Surfers never try to master the wave; they respect it, move with and through it, feel its force around them. Once in the surf there is no distinction between themselves and all other surrounding life forms.

What George has realised is a connection which has always existed but has never been elucidated. Drawing from aspects of both surfing and Islam (as his own personal history does), he demonstrated the founding ideological similarities between the two. The oxymoron of an Islamic surfer reverses into a beautiful tautology. The jarring which appeared so stark on initial investigation vanishes and with it so might our prejudices. Beyond the breakers one is as likely to find a Sufi as a surfer. And if they were to talk they’d realise they were the same person.

Too often cultural contrasts atrophy into stereotypes; the Southern Cross tattoo faces off with the hijab. George has revealed the farce of such antithetical, political semiotics. However, *Borderlands* also uncovered the underlying conflict which fuels these stereotypes—gender politics. In order to observe this we must look more closely at the “clash of cultures” which ultimately informed *Borderlands* and examine the history of this “clash” and analyse the role of gender, in particular the defining one of masculinity, in the Cronulla Riots and a global precedent, the terrorist attacks on 11 September, 2001.

The Cronulla Riots, whose participants were predominantly men, underscored a long held Australian myth, that the beach is owned and defended by men. While women are tolerated or ogled, they are not supposed to partake in the politics of the sand. It is not only politics that women are precluded from. Women are not meant to partake in the two ‘proper’ activities of the beach—lifesaving and surfing. Women are expected to either swim between the flags under the ‘protection’ of the lifeguards, or wait for their men who are surfing. Commercial TV programs such as *Bondi Rescue*, supposedly involving Australia’s most professional surf lifeguards, show that this attitude is still prevalent. There are of course women surfers and Australia has a rich history of women world champions such as Pam Burridge (who is also the wife of the maker of George’s surfboards and a former world number two surfer). Surfers are by no means a homogenous group, but the men rioting in Cronulla (mostly *not* surfers) represented an updated version of the myth of Australian masculinity. The pressure to preserve this myth, no matter what surfing ideology tells us, has made the history of surfing in Australia problematic. Russell Ward’s *The Australian Legend*, first published in 1958, has perhaps added to this myth. Ward summarises Australian identity in the following passage.



According to the myth the 'typical Australian' is a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser, ever willing 'to have a go' at anything, but willing, too, to be content with a task done in a way that is 'near enough'. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause... Though he is 'the world's best confidence man', he is usually taciturn rather than talkative, one who endures stoically rather than one who acts busily. He is a 'hard case', sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally... he is a great 'knocker' of eminent people unless, as in the case of his sporting heroes, they are distinguished by physical prowess.<sup>6</sup>

Ward's *The Australian Legend* contains practically no reference to women or indigenous Australians—they are invisible in his summation of 'Australian identity'. He considers 'Australians' and 'Australian males' to be one and the same.

In the United States of America we can see a different manifestation of the myth of masculinity. The 2004 re-election of the straight talking George W. Bush signified a shift to a very different style of masculinity. Bush represented a pioneer myth laced with Manifest Destiny due to his fundamentalist Christianity. This image suited Bush post-'9/11'. The bravado of bringing "democracy" to the Middle East was a revisit of a policy which had seen the USA declare war against Mexico in 1846. Mexico, like Iraq, had never done the USA any harm. In fact one of the main reasons for war with Mexico was that it had outlawed slavery, and the expanding USA needed indentured labour. The USA needed a valuable resource. The parallels one hundred and fifty years later are all too apparent. It is worth noting the words of Abraham Lincoln, who as a senator at the time of the war against Mexico, said of his President Polk;

*Trusting to escape scrutiny, by fixing the public gaze upon the exceeding brightness of military glory—that attractive rainbow, that rises in showers of blood—that serpent's eye, that charms to destroy—he plunged into war.*<sup>7</sup>

President Obama (as a Senator) was in the same position as Lincoln during Bush's plunge into war, but we never heard anything nearly as brave, poetic or damning from him (nor from Australia's now Prime Minister Kevin Rudd). History has dismissed Polk as it will Bush, as the ad nauseam playing out of the maxim that absolute power corrupts absolutely. While we may feel optimistic about Obama, history is not on his side. Our optimism should be moderated with scepticism.

The tone of this new rise of masculinity was quickly enforced by the old patriarchy. In *The Terror Dream* (2007), Susan Faludi analysed the media in the weeks following the September 11 attacks. The number of women on the weekend news commentary dropped by forty per cent, *The New York Times* and *New Yorker* showed a fifty per cent drop in female bylines. *The Washington Post*, which doubled its editorial section, did not contain one article by a woman.<sup>8</sup> The USA, even before Bush had declared war on the Taliban in Afghanistan, reverted to a type of masculinity that suggested women needed to hide, while the men did what needed to be done. There were many articles comparing the World Trade Centre Twin Towers to an old married couple—when one falls, the other *had to fall as well*. This violation meant that America had to defend its *honour*. American women were equated with 'the land', requiring protection from any further violation. The idea of woman as landscape, man as protector, is nothing new, but the veracity of such a subsequent notion suggested the twenty-first century began with the same gender politics of the eighteenth-century—a third of the women who were kidnapped by native Americans chose to stay with their captors rather than return with their rescuers. Perhaps the same phenomenon can be observed now somewhat obliquely, with Islam becoming the fastest growing religion in the USA.

The reprise of chauvinist attitudes is the most ignored aspect of the "clash of cultures". Repeatedly in the Australian media men "of Middle Eastern appearance" have been depicted as violent, sexual predators, while conversely, Islamic women are depicted as sexually repressed, servile and mute. Both are supposedly not to have any business on the beach. This combination of stereotypes has led to an exaggerated fear that white women need to be protected from Islamic men. In Australia, Islam is often reduced to an issue of gender rather than religion. It is highly likely that the rioters at Cronulla Beach in 2005 had no understanding of Islam nor of the many cultures of the Middle East.

In an ABC radio interview with some of the (Cronulla) rioters, "Mark"<sup>9</sup> when pushed to explain the difference between the two cultures said, "The morals our parents teach us and the morals their parents teach is completely different. I think it's got a lot to do with respect for women."<sup>10</sup> His expression was thus limited to one of gender, although "Sarah" did give a concrete example, "People saying to me, like, just names and stuff, that I'm being called for wearing a bikini in my own shire."<sup>11</sup> In the same radio interview one caller, who was considering joining the retaliatory attacks said,

"I have a mother. She said to me; 'Don't get involved.' I've been raised very closely by my mother. I respect her word, respect her opinion. I chose not to."<sup>12</sup> We are faced here with the underlying hypocrisy of this "clash of cultures." At the same time Islamic countries were admonished for their supposed lack of respect for women, the West reinstated sexist stereotypes in order to make violence and discrimination the manifestation of that same admonishment. Karen Hughes, a member of George W. Bush's cabinet, who resigned so she could spend more time baking cookies after the horror of '9/11' became the lauded standard for women in America, primarily for acknowledging the time to get off the stage and let the men deal with the tough decisions. On the other hand the Jersey Girls were labelled "rock stars of grief" by Debra Burlingame for their active call for an inquiry into the attacks that had seen them lose relatives.

In the USA the *image* of this new masculinity was found in the New York fire fighters; in Australia by surf lifesavers. The catalyst for the Cronulla Riots is reported to have been an attack on off-duty, out of uniform lifesavers by men "of Middle Eastern appearance".

The Cronulla Riots emanate from this crucible of a re-establishment of stereotyped gender roles, both nationally and internationally, surfing thus becoming embedded in such symbolism—the surfboard presented as phallic symbol of masculine potency. Situating *Borderlands* in such a paradigm makes it possible to understand its importance. Phillip George's work evolved from a "clash of cultures" to become a powerful rebuff of Australian masculinity. The surfboards may be considered "decorative," the term having a certain gender reference. George declared that he "Mambodied"<sup>13</sup> the pattern colours to make the boards "prettier", more "intense". The utilitarian nature of this art might lead to the notion of "craft", which falls into the same category as "decorative". Thus George's "decorative craft" confounded any inherent sexism of the gallery and the beach.

Without an understanding of any of the intricacies of the history of the designs or the symbiotic relationship between nature and Islam, George's work reverts to a gender binary. In essence, he has put decorative patterns (read 'girly') over surfboards (read 'men's stuff'), and in doing so he confounds this separation of gender roles.

Phillip George is angry. *Borderlands* resonated with this anger, not only at the Cronulla Riots and what it represented but also at seeing Australia become more vindictive and less generous. A space for tranquillity in which to deal with anger is important. Too often our anger is expressed without recourse to this space. Beyond the politics of white sand and the breakers, surfers have discovered such a space. As a regular surfer George experiences the space to recollect the powerful overflow of feelings, at which most of us can only despair. He gives us a poetic pathway out of this despair. If the gallery is to be anything other than a tool of class distinction, then it can also be a space of tranquillity; a space to neither dull our feelings, nor to institutionalise our politics, but a space to formulate useful anger—anger which we can take into the world and change what we see.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Manuela Bojadžijev and Isabelle Saint-Saëns, 'Borders, Citizenship, War, Class: A Discussion with Étienne Balibar and Sandro Mezzadra', *New Formations* 58, 2006: 24

<sup>2</sup> The Cronulla Riots of 2005 were a series of racially motivated mob confrontations which originated in and around a beachfront suburb of Sydney. Soon after the initial riot, ethnically motivated violent incidents occurred in several other Sydney suburbs. On Sunday, 11 December 2005, approximately 5000 people gathered to protest against reported incidents of assaults and intimidatory behaviour by groups of non-locals, most of whom were identified in earlier media reports as Middle Eastern youths from the suburbs of Western Sydney; see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005\\_Cronulla\\_riots](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005_Cronulla_riots)

<sup>3</sup> An "Australian pride" tattoo in the shape of the Crux Australis, a constellation visible in the Southern Hemisphere

<sup>4</sup> However as these boards are "thrusters" and the pattern is located on the top end, it would be technically impossible to ride a wave while standing on the *Inshallah* pattern

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, John 1:14, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952

<sup>6</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958: 1-2

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Lincoln, quoted in Kurt Vonnegut and Daniel Simon, *A Man Without a Country*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005

<sup>8</sup> Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America*, London: Metropolitan Books, 2007

<sup>9</sup> "Mark" and "Sarah" are pseudonyms, as they feared reprisals for their comments

<sup>10</sup> Liz Jackson, 'Riot and Revenge', *Four Corners*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, first broadcast 13/03/2006 transcript <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2006/s1590953.htm> 6/1/09

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Mambo, an iconic Australian surfwear company