

art guide

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AUSTRALIA

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Phillip George: Borderlands

Casula Powerhouse

Until January 18, 2009.

www.casulapowerhouse.com

Phillip George doesn't pull his punches. He is an unapologetically political artist. At a time when many Australians are still basking in a post-Olympic gold medal afterglow, George puts a politically acute spin on our obsession with sporting prowess saying, "We are so culturally insignificant in the world that we rely on sport to booster our national pride."

Not that George has anything against sport. In fact he's a genuine Bondi boy, born and raised in the heart of old school Aussie beach culture, a testosterone saturated zone in which respect is inextricably tied to physical strength, reputations are won and lost on the footy field and surfing is an almost compulsory rite of passage. At one point, George actually seriously considered a career as a professional athlete. He went to art school instead, but even today, as a silver haired forty-something George still surfs. His credentials as a genuine Aussie bloke are unassailable. He is also a 'man of middle eastern appearance.' Obviously, despite firmly ingrained preconceived notions, the two are not mutually exclusive, a point George hammers home in his stunning exhibition *Borderlands*.

The massive panoramic photograph and surf boards emblazoned with intricate Islamic patterns in *Borderlands* are the latest instalment in George's long term artistic investigation into Middle Eastern geo-politics, a topic he felt compelled to weigh in on after *that* fateful day in September 2001. George's fascination with the often bloody collision between East and West as played out by both Muslim and Christian fundamentalists, and his swarthy features, leads to the assumption that he has Islamic roots. However, George's cultural background is Greek Orthodox. But as he points out, "Greece puts you directly back in the Middle East." The fact that this irrefutable statement seems as incongruous as a wog-boy surfer draws attention to George's over arching project as an artist: he deliberately highlights the cultural fabrications which we unquestioningly accept as truth.

One of the misconceptions that George challenges is that we are always the good guys. Instead of the lucky country, or the clever country he calls Australia the "complicit country." He describes our actions in Iraq as "state sanctioned terrorism" and "wholesale cultural slaughter". According to George, former Prime Minister John Howard is a war criminal and he points out that rather

than prosecuting him at the Hague, Kevin Rudd honoured his predecessor with a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) in his first Queen's Birthday list, making our new government equally complicit.

As an artist, George asks, "How do you proceed in a country that supports invasion and terrorism?" In *Borderlands*, George's answer is to utilise the twin tactics of turning the spotlight on harsh political reality while also examining the mesmerising, almost transcendental, cultural beauty of the so called enemy.

George's 25 meter long photograph of six kilometres of the Sydney coast is tinged a luminescent, night vision green. Titled *Border Patrol*, this is an image of Australia as a fortress, a carefully monitored, rigorously defended territory where outsiders are very much not welcome. The cliffs are both a physical and a symbolic barrier: access denied. George's reference to the military technology of night vision goggles draws attention to the fact that our treatment of refugees is an act of open hostility. His sickly green *Border Patrol* reeks of paranoia, it peers into the psyche of a nation at war, jumping at the shadows of ill defined enemies.

In fortress Australia those culturally suspect individuals who have somehow already managed to breach the perimeter aren't treated much better than those clamouring to get in. Witness the swift reprisals against burka clad women in the wake of 9/11 or the Cronulla race riots of 2005; an abrupt explosion of tensions which continue to simmer. In a way, George's surfboards are a response to this violence, but instead of an aggressive clash of cultures they present a beautiful, harmonious and seamless hybrid blend.

George's 30 surfboards are covered with the elegant patterns of Islamic iconography: Ottoman, Persian and Arabic. Standing seven feet tall they are looming, impressive and slightly unnerving. For George, their almost anthropomorphic presence is an attempt to remind us of the humanity, incredible richness, beauty and sophistication of cultures which the West has cast in the role of baddies. Dignified, silent and achingly beautiful they stand like sentinels, watchful and wary. They also unequivocally stake a claim for people of 'middle eastern appearance' on the beaches of Australia and beyond. According to Phillip George they say, "We are here." The syncretic mix of cultural symbols embedded in his surfboards broadens the definition of being an Aussie; they mark a territory where white isn't always right and there is more than one way to be 'true blue'.

Tracey Clement