

Vol. 5

Painting Australia With Nigel Sense



January 2015

Nigel Sense is an Australian pop artist whose work has been showcased at the inaugural Colombo Art Biennale in Sri Lanka as well as galleries around Sydney. His award-winning first solo exhibition, *I Work with Tools*, held at the Sheffer Gallery in 2012, firmly established him on the Australian art scene. In this interview, we'll hear Nigel talk about how his youth in Dapto, move to Sydney's inner west and travelling have all helped shape his identity as a uniquely Australian pop artist. Nigel's tattoos, his flowing wavy hair, wide-brimmed hat and laid back demeanour make him look the part of the subjects in his artwork. But as we'll hear, Nigel has struggled to fit into the box of the suburban Australian male and has often used his art to examine what it means to be a strong gripped, beer-drinking, meat-eater who watches footy and works a trade.



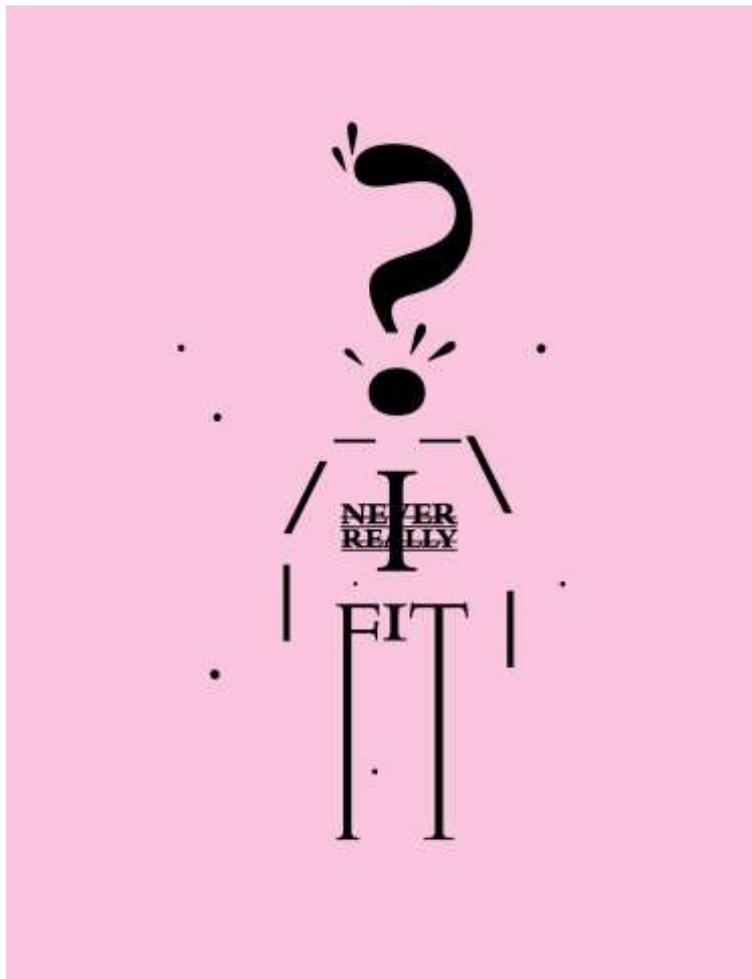
Nigel Sense--- 2 November 2014

By Lorenzo Princi

What do you do?

I was told at a very early stage in my art to paint what I know so-- by a lecturer at Wollongong Uni and I've always just painted my day to day life, mainly first world problems, just-- and things that I see, commuting from-- to my job. I think if I didn't have a day job I'd lose a lot of-- a lot of ideas, most of it just comes from what the guys say at work, stupid little things and just my upbringing. In-- being an artist in Dapto, I think has affected me a hell of a lot, where it was considered just to be a bit odd and-- and I never really fit in as, as a person and growing up your role models are your dad and my dad, he's a manly man. He was a mechanic, you know, he drives a car, cooks barbeques, eats steak. I don't drive, I don't know how to fix a car, probably couldn't even put a tyre on; I don't know how to turn a barbecue on, I don't eat steak, I hate football. So my identity of what a man is, in Australia, yeah, is a little lost. So most of my work is usually about that, just looking into the things that I grew up with that I kind of love but hate, the suburbs-- I've got great memories of when I was a kid mucking around with my mates but kind of-- I don't like it either, I could never live there. It really does-- because I'm living in Engadine at the moment and just, it really does affect your mental state, it's a weird, I know it sounds weird but even Mon(ica, Nigel's fiancée) said, "oh, just, it really does, you start thinking things differently." I don't know, it's just, not for me but it's so familiar, weird to have this love, hate thing.

"I never really fit in."

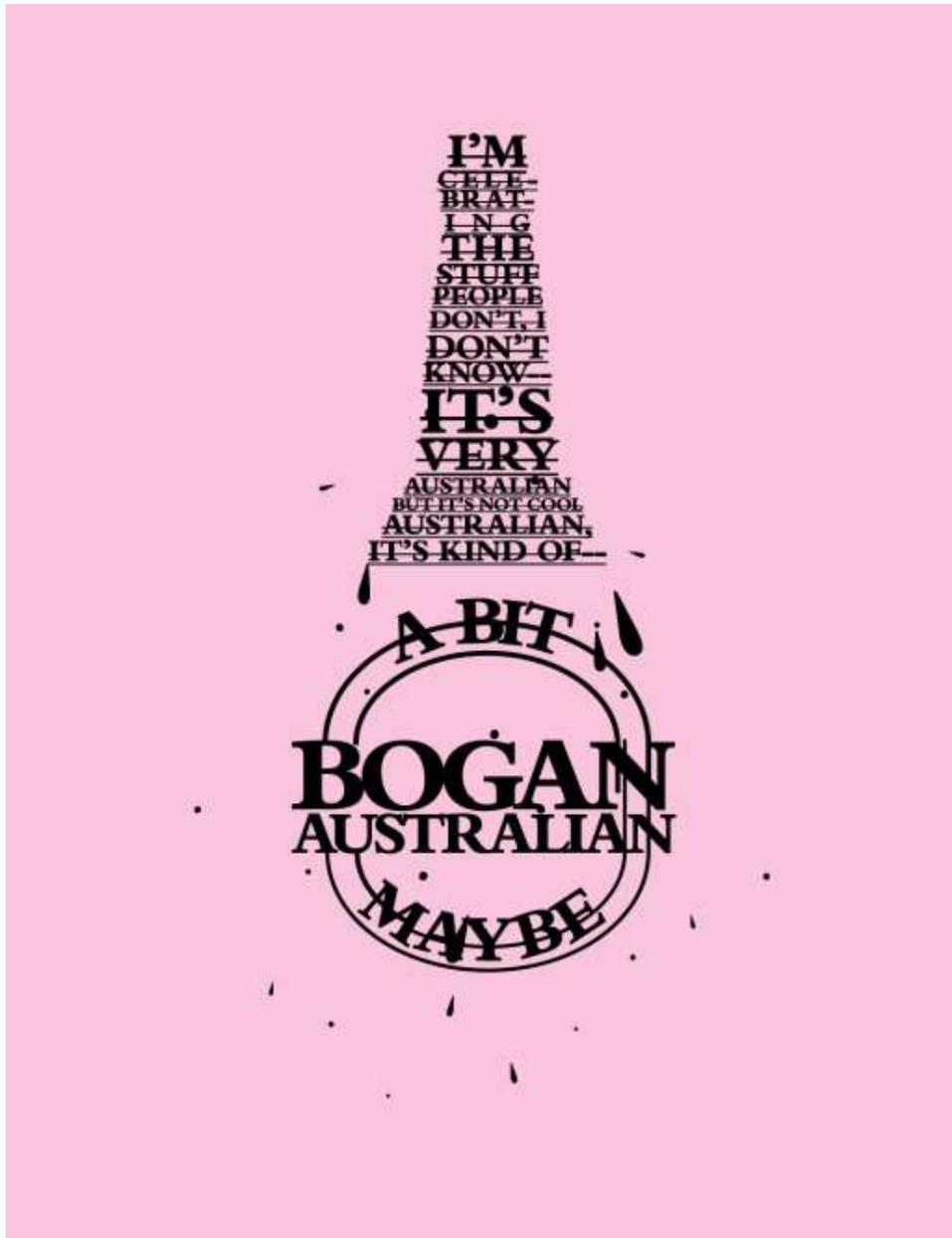


Lorenzo: Yeah, I understand, I'm from Adelaide and it's a similar kind of experience...

Yeah, I think the next show I'll-- in-- for Sydney, which is April will be-- I think I'll call it Blokes and Sheilas and I'll be really looking at-- probably going to-- twenty paintings on what I think a man should be but

what I'm not. So you know, maybe it'll be a guy with a you know? Barbeques, you know? Footballs, cars, bad tattoos, you know? I don't know, going to Bali! Yeah I grew-- that's exactly you know, yeah, I'm just the total opposite of what I grew up with. You know, me and Mon got engaged, Mon proposed. Trying to explain that to my work, I just decided not to tell half the people because it was just too hard, anything out of the ordinary is too difficult. But yeah, that's usually, that's what my work is, it goes down that line.

"It's Australian but it's not cool Australian, it's kind of a bit bogan Australia maybe."



The past 5-10 years or so I've noticed a general interest in art/design has infiltrated the mainstream, probably due to the fashionable cafe/festival culture which certainly endorses it. I guess it runs parallel to the geek phenomena sweeping pop culture. Growing up, this sort of thing was "arty" or "nerdy" but nowadays saying you're an artist or musician or a software developer is much more accepted than it was 15 years ago.

I guess it depends but, which area-- I don't know, I still think if I said I was an artist or a software programmer, they'd just be like, "don't you have a real job?" Like, a plumber-- trade, you know? So-- in here, you know? In the inner west, definitely get it and that's great and that's kind of why I like it. For someone who grew up as the great outsider, to come here and be a big insider is great, is-- everybody wants to be loved man, that's just the way it is, you know and it's kind of like that. That's why I did the Newtown Art Seat at the beginning of the year, just because it was kind of nice to have a piece of my work and have everyone-- in the place I love just on public show. It was quite nice.

Lorenzo: Do you think that's helping people wanting to become artists such as yourself, to have that acceptance?

For me, yeah, for some people maybe not, they want to be loathed, that kind of tortured artist. That kind of Adam Cullen syndrome, the artist warrior or something and you know? It doesn't really work for me, I'm not that kind of guy that necks a bottle of Vodka before he starts painting in the morning yeah. It never ever worked, as a student, definitely would have tried it and, "painted all night and got drunk, wasted" and woke up the next day and... "what a waste of paint that was." And so it never-- it never really works for me.

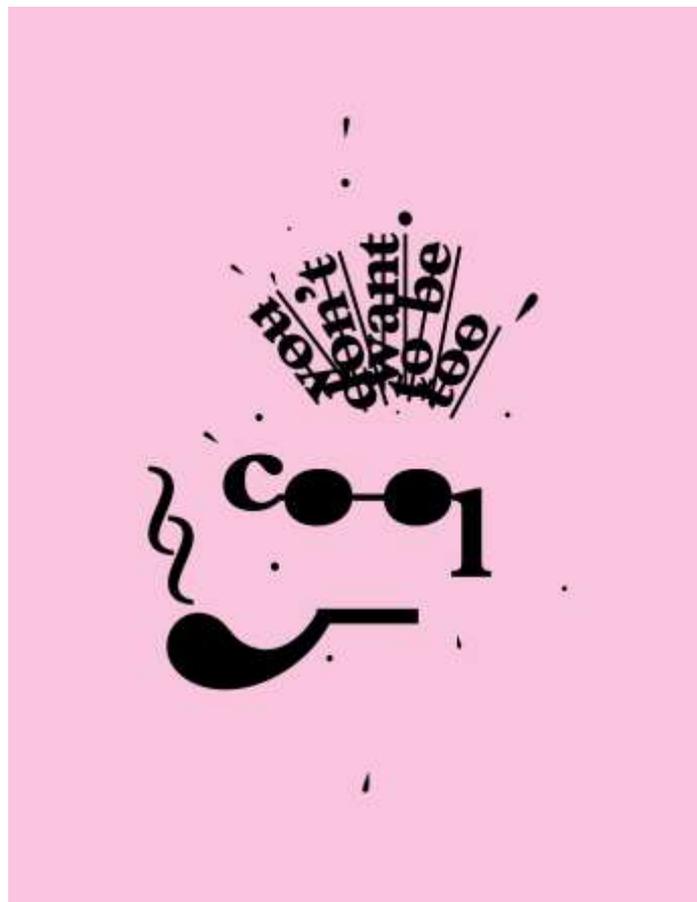
I-- I think it's great to be around art and like minded people, here, I can go to twenty different shows in a week if I wanted to, can't always but it's, it's, yeah it's nice, I think you would struggle to be an artist in a place that doesn't really accept it.

It seems to play into your own approach of reflecting mass-media or mass-production and you seem to embrace the attention the community receives. But do you feel that level of attention has almost made the art community more defensive about their ownership of it?

Nah, I think the art world embrace that, because the cooler it is, the more money that everyone is getting and no one wants to see another gallery go bust or go under so, no I think that's good-- But then again, it's a weird-- you don't want to be too cool-- like say street art, when we (Nigel and his fiancée Monica) first came back from Sri Lanka. Man, that was, like "Street Art!" Everyone was street art, people were even calling me street art, I'm like, "I'm not street art, I never painted on the street ever, ever, I paint in a studio man, I'm not street art." But now it's kind of vulgar, no one, they don't like it as-- the high end galleries, I like it but I mean it was in high end galleries everywhere and now it's not as much. Installation art was everywhere, now painting started-- everything's a cycle in art. So you don't want to be too cool.

I think, the good thing about painting is, it's never cool, cool, but it's always there, it's level, so that's-- that's okay, I don't mind that. If you want to be-- take the highs, you're going to be very uncool eventually as well so I like that about painting, it just kind of stays level.

"You don't want to be too cool."



Humour or irony play an important part in your work, is this intentional, the comedic commentator, or has it just emerged that way, with your personality coming through?

Yeah, I think it was just a way of engaging to start with, I've-- to be honest I've kind of taken it out a little, I still leave it there-- yeah I think it was just originally used to engage with the viewer and I-- hopefully my work is strong enough that I don't have to have that on every work now. Maybe it was a crutch to start with, you know, "put something funny down and these people will come over and pay attention," yeah, I've taken-- and I like artists like Basquiat, that uses a lot of words, I think I'm like a tortured kind of poet or something, you know I've always wanted to write songs-- I'm just woeful, so I kind of saw my paintings a little bit as, as songs but as I've gotten stronger in my imagery, I think-- I just don't-- I've taken it out a lot more.

There's a thin line between design and art, a lot of the time it seems artists move into design to help pay the bills. You seem to have done the reverse, by bringing graphic design sensibilities to your pieces. Not only in terms of layout but also in subject matter, by reflecting on advertising, product packaging.

Especially with your works from I work with tools and Get Wasted. Would you agree?

Yeah, I'm a designer who decided to be a painter, one hundred percent, I draw up on the computer, I match-- I pick out all my colours on the computer, I use (Adobe) Illustrator, it's basically like, I'm going-- it's like doing a design job and when it goes to print, I'm the one who prints it, you know, I paint it. That's just the difference. But yeah, it's approached exactly like I would a design client, it's just I don't have any briefs, I can do what I want.

Your work in Heroes and Zeros plays right into the comic book explosion I mentioned earlier by blending prominent artists/public figures and silver age comic book superheroes. What was the idea behind this particular exhibition?

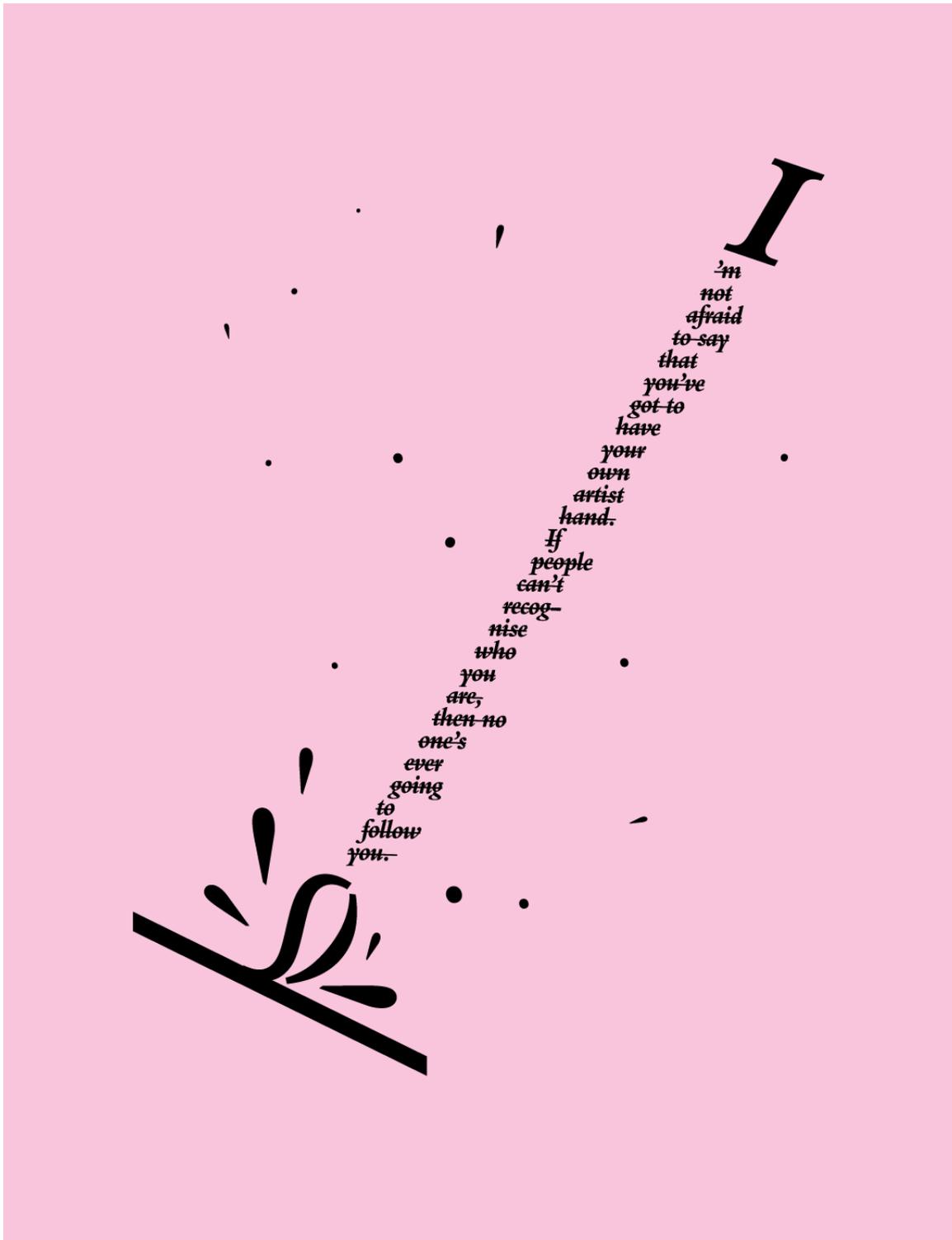
The idea was, you know, if-- I showed a painting of Jackson Pollock to one of the guys at work and he just went, "that's a waste, blah, blah, blah." And I was thinking, "that's worth five million or something." And if Jackson Pollock then-- if that guy at work was at the same time as Pollock was doing it and met at a bar and then he listens to this guy, he may never have done these great paintings, you know, so what happens if David Bowie, you know he's done some woeful frikkin' albums but one of his last albums were great but he gave up because he listened to everyone else? That was kind of what I-- I was just-- you know these great people have just given up because they failed once or because people told them it was a stupid idea, we'd never have this great kind of art or music, it was basically just about that like-- The Ramones, you know, played a couple of chords, can't sing but they're great man, you know, you can't always listen to every critic or every person, you just kind of got to believe in yourself. That sounds a bit airy fairy but it's true, if you don't have any belief you can never become great, so it was basically really a simple idea.

Lorenzo: It was certainly was one of your most striking or dynamic pieces and as you mentioned a shift, a bit more serious?

It was a big shift from the packaging I'd been doing. Yeah, I think I always wanted to go that way and I slowly shift to be honest and that work was a little drippy, still really tight, where now-- my last show in last Feb(uary) was a lot more looser, it's just that-- I don't know, I think you've got to progress, you got to change it but you've got to be careful, I'm not, you know, I'm not afraid to say that you've got to have your own artist hand. If people can't recognise who you are, then no one's ever going to follow you. You know? I think artists are kidding themselves if they don't think it's-- it's the-- it's a business, you know? And it's no difference between Coca-Cola and Nike, they understand their brand, I understand my brand. So I won't move too much, I'll take my words out maybe but you can still know it's my work through colour-- but you still got to keep changing because it just gets boring otherwise. I'll go do a day job then if I don't challenge-- constantly challenge myself.

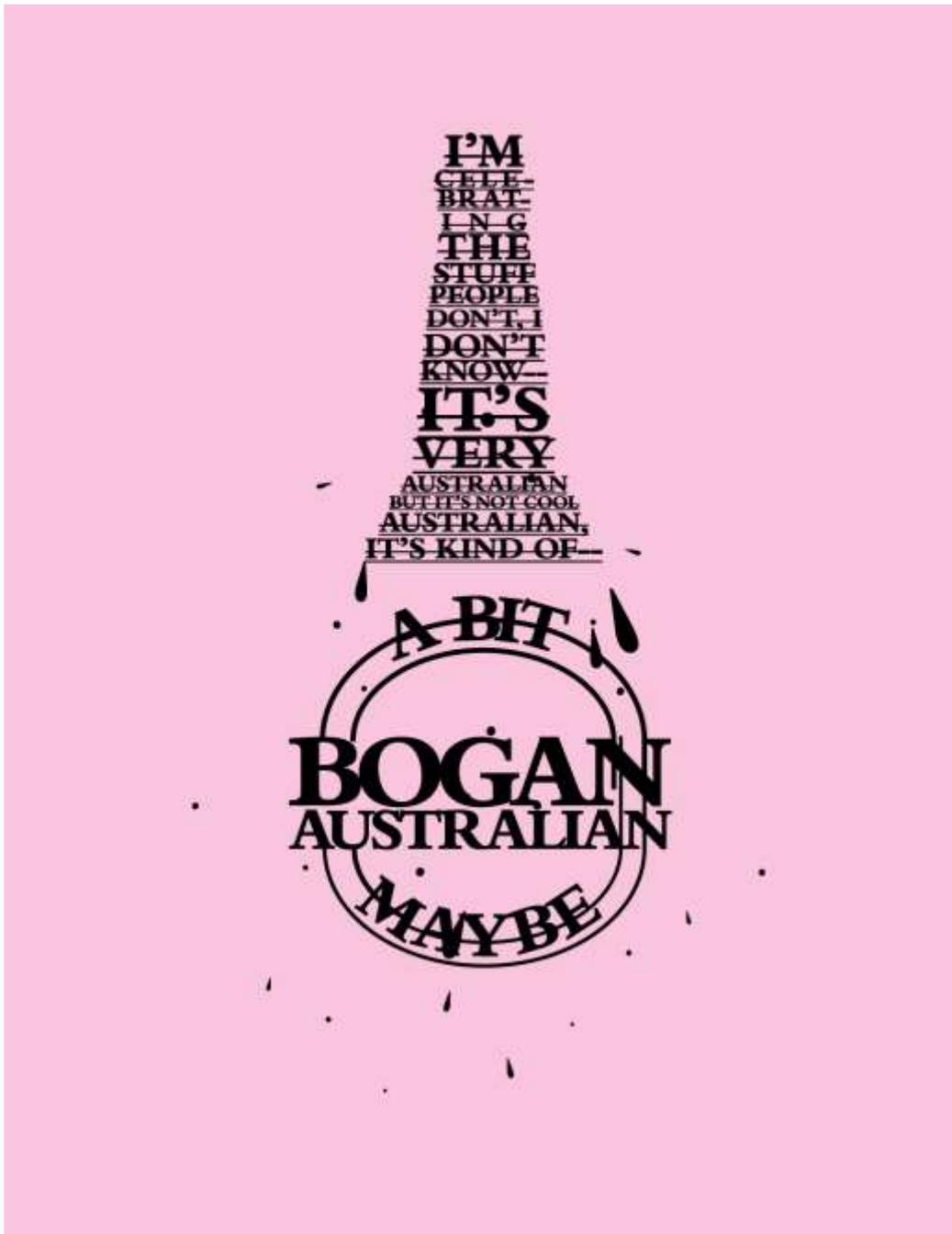
So yeah, it was just a shift into-- into painting, you know? More people and I was just-- I'd done a couple of shows just doing packaging and it was kind of I don't know, it wasn't as fun to do so-- I'll go back, you know? I'll always be able to go back and do it later on.

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Your work is what I would call urban Australia. There is a sort of nostalgia to it, would you agree? Oh yeah, definitely, "Cultural Cringe" someone said, "Yeah! That's exactly what it is man!" You know? I'm celebrating the stuff people don't, I don't know-- It's very Australian but it's not cool Australian, it's kind of-- a bit bogan Australian maybe but-- yeah, yeah, it's definitely just very-- I guess I paint what I know so you know? It's what I've been brought up...

"It's Australian but it's not cool Australian, it's kind of a bit bogan Australia maybe."



Who are your influences?

As in artists? Basquiat, Pollock, (William) de Kooning, Australian artist Adam Cullan, Howard Arkley. They're probably-- But I really like Cullan, Adam Cullan, you can probably see the influence in my new-- my latest work. I'm not afraid-- as long as I think it looks like my work, you can have influences there, everything's been done before, we're just re-hashing. I'm not inventing the wheel here, I'm just painting a painting so...

I'd certainly say there is a style to your work, it's not like it looks like Warhol just because it's packaging... Yeah, some people have got weird about that don't-- "oh, it's nothing like it," it's like, "well, it's okay man."

You know, Wolfmother as a band, "oh we never heard Led Zeppelin, we never listened to--" "Of course you have! It's okay though man, it's alright."

I am who I am because of them and if they weren't there I wouldn't paint or do it the way I-- even the processes, I love watching videos on artists, on how they paint in the studio to see their process. I'm just obsessed with how they paint, they did two lines and then have a sip of coffee or have a smoke, I don't know man, I love seeing that process because it's such a kind of, I don't know? A private moment you can watch.

You spent a great deal of time in India and Sri Lanka where you participated in the inaugural Colombo Art Biennale. How did that come about and how did the experience of being in a vastly different culture help shape your work and outlook on life in general?

Just India, we wanted to go to India and we went through Sri Lanka and it was the cheapest way to get to India, we liked it so we thought we'd come back. Found a little place in the beach, started painting-- never to sell, I call it the lost summer, because it was just free, it was a very cool three months and someone bought one, actually gave me alcohol for it. Yeah, gave me alcohol for one painting and I was like, "maybe I can get food out of this." So I did, I got food and someone bought one and someone bought one, like, "shit man, we're nearly cutting even here, on paintings." Someone saw my work and said, "you should come back, there's going to be some big shows next year."

So, we went to India, came back (to Sri Lanka), someone gave me a number for the Biennale, "you should call this lady up, she's the director." Imagine doing that here! As in, "hello, my name is Nigel Sense, can I come up for some tea?" I actually said that and I did. And yeah we, we, Mon was in that as well, my partner Monica was in that and it all just took off from there. That basically opened doors to everything, I showed at the Paradise Road Gallery in Colombo, which is the number one gallery there and it was an interesting time because it was still-- the war was still on and it's where I cut my teeth, we probably wouldn't have even-- my painting is totally different now, (it was) purely abstract but yeah, it was where I started. And I could cut my teeth with no influences pretty much because it was Sri Lanka, you just didn't have anything, I just kind of figured it out myself. I think that's-- that's, you know? Been great for my-- my process, being over there, because coming back it's a different ball game.

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What is the artist's role today? Where all forms of expression are being very quickly gathered up by the corporate world, even unknown bloggers just doing something for themselves can soon become influencers if they get enough, or the right followers. How does the artist fit into that, can you be both?

Yeah, street artist Anthony Lister just did a Telstra ad. I don't man, it's interesting, there's going to be backlash if you ever do that. I saw some posters-- just paste ups around saying, "Anthony Lister is a commercial artist?" - with a question mark [laughs]. You know? I don't know, it's-- everyone's-- you got to make money, I think that's-- I don't know, I think if Telstra gave me some money, I'd be, "okay, yeah, cool man, whatever." You know, as long as you're not trying to be someone you're not, which he wasn't. I don't see the harm in it really, it's-- it's all a game, it's, it's-- the more money you can get the better-- the more painting you can make, the better artist you can become, you know? I'm not afraid to say I want to make money from my art, I do, I really do. Then I don't have to work a day job and it kind of validates me as well.

The more money you make from painting, technically, the better you should be. It probably doesn't always work but the better, it's-- and the more people kind of look at you as a-- where you are on the food chain as well, you know?. So I'm-- yeah, I think it's a fine line but if you don't sell out. If you don't change who you are and you're not you know, all of a sudden, I don't know, dressing up as a rapper and you're a guy that likes heavy metal, you know? If you're not changing your personality I don't see-- I don't see any problem with that.

"As long as you're not trying to be someone you're not."



You're now renovating your home/studio to give yourself your own gallery space. What was the decision making process?

My house was falling down, that was the idea behind that [laughs] and we had a giant rat in the roof that was terrorising us [laughs] and it's going to be a bigger space, it's a better space. There's division between where my painting studio is to where we live. I need that because I'm one of those people, I just-- I paint, I'm, "Oh, I'm just going to put down two colours and I'll be right back-- it's just a commercial break." And then three hours later I come back with paint all over me.

So I really do need that separation between painting and my personal life or anything else-- If I was single, I would-- you-- I would just be in the studio painting-- and it wouldn't be healthy anyway. And you need-- you need that break because you need-- if you keep painting all the time and don't think about it you would probably produce more, you know? Shit paintings because you need to have that process and think it out before you put it down. Like, my paintings don't take that long to paint but the thought process can take weeks and weeks and weeks. I'm always kind of-- I've always got like bits of paper in my pockets at works, I'm always just scribbling down ideas and then refining, refining, refining and then eventually, I come back into the studio and paint.

And I'm getting more shows now so, it's more areas to store work because-- because I'll usually paint on at least a couple of shows at a time, it's usually how I do it.

What's next for Nigel Sense?

What's coming up? I've got my first, like, this year's been a quiet year just because of the renovations so I've been out of the studio. It kicks off in February in Perth, for my Perth gallery, then April is Sydney and then I have some stuff-- couple of things-- going down to Hobart-- Hobart, Melbourne, Brisbane. It's a big year next year actually. I haven't-- I'll do the other-- I'll just do Sydney and Perth in the early part and try and have a bit of a breather and then do rest in the later-- 2015. But yeah, it's going well-- it's actually not too bad, I've sold out of most of my galleries now and because I haven't been able to supply them with anything because I haven't been painting as much-- people want what they can't have, so it's actually worked in my favour, where they're-- galleries never usually ring you, they'll just-- they'll just email you and blah, but these guys, some of these guys are actually ringing me and, "come on man, we really need some work man," "Well I can't give it to you." So that's usually, "yeah, yeah, I've got a couple here, I'll chuck them up," so that's worked out kind of well-- in my kind of favour. But yeah, yeah, so, just painting in the studio and getting back to normality of how we live [laughs] you know, I miss painting and I miss being creative after work because, I don't know, it kind of-- that's what I do, that's who I am. I think I'll lose my identity a little bit when I've been living in Engadine-- not a bit, I have! You just become one of the working stiffs and it's just not who I am you know, it's like yeah, once you lose your identity, I don't know, that's a scary thing actually.

So I'm just looking forward to moving back in and kind of painting and pushing forward and you know, try and get onto some magazines. I've always got like little hits I want to make, I want to get into the Sun-- The Herald but like I've been in that twice, I want to get into the Spectrum part of it on the Saturday. So there are little things you just got to try and achieve. Yeah, and then just enjoy painting, basically, get back into it and try and start-- you know I really want to sell out a show, that's what I want to do. I'm starting to sell okay now and my price range is-- it's good-- it's very entry level for most people so and Perth will have a good chance of doing quite well in the sales. And it's not about the money actually, you know I have a day job. The money is going to be great you know but selling out a show. It's-- it's what it means, you know? People know you sold out a show, it's credibility, not just-- as for my next show, it puts my prices up and just gives me, yeah...