

# Nigel Sense pays tribute to art, beer and everything

PREVIEW, REVIEW

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In 2004, a large group of British art critics determined that Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (a white urinal turned upside-down and signed 'R. Mutt') was the most influential work of the 20th century. Successive pop artists from Andy Warhol to Jeff Koons blurred the boundaries between art and life by insisting that art could be anything. Adding a twist of Australian suburbia, Nigel Sense continues this approach in his exhibition, *Art is Lettuce*.

In the first room of the gallery, a large painted-line image of a swimmer meets my eye. One arm raised in the air in a signal of triumph, there are few details to disclose the subject's identity. But a black wet-suited arm, the letters 'AUS' in white on the chest and a pair of blue goggles provide enough clues to guess that it's ex-Olympic swimmer, Ian Thorpe. Titled *Used to like Thorpey but now like beer*, the painting is one of six large works, painted on concrete board, that rely on simple bold lines and pastel or fluoro highlights for effect.

In *Art is Lettuce*, Sense has mined his childhood memories for subjects. The titles declare the artist's past fondness for Rambo and Muriel's Wedding, dinosaurs and skateboarding. Beer, however, is now the universal preference.

A larger group of over 30 mixed media works with titles bearing the 'Art is' preamble are displayed throughout the gallery. Originally inspired by a lunchtime chat with a workmate, Sense has explored the what 'art is...' idea within the context of his own life. Perhaps exploiting the famous words by Edgar Degas, "Art is not what you see, but what you make others see," Sense attaches these catchwords to a long list of ordinary objects and familiar things: art is cheap coffee and corn thins; art is flying Qantas and Shane Warne. Art can *be* anything.

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The work is jam-packed with visual information, half the multi-media paintings are overlaid on a background of multiple pie wrappers; the Aussie version of Andy Warhol's famous Campbell's soup tins. Displayed effectively in grid form, the paintings incorporate a mash-up of stolen phrases, sporting figures and brand names while paying homage to workday smokos, take away food and suburban living.

The remainder of the works (on unprimed canvas) are slightly less crowded and portray similar subject matter: a snapshot of Sense's day job, random conversations and weekend activities mingle with graphic images and phrases appropriated from commercial advertising. Mistakes are retained. Art can be created *from* anything. Employing various pop art techniques and the tactic of painting the things he knows, Sense considers his role as an artist and his work reflects an inclusive suburban upbringing and experience. If much 20th century pop art had a mocking or critical tone designed to shock the audience, Sense's work operates differently. He engages the viewer in an intimate way with his everyday world. Communicating through fun and humour, his paintings seek understanding and empathy. Who didn't like Muriel's Wedding? Who doesn't like beer? The painting *Art is Lettuce* even incorporates its own thumbs up.

**Art is Lettuce**

**Nigel Sense**

**9 March – 16 April**

**Flinders Street Gallery**

Sharne Wolff

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