

VISIONS OF RODEO

by Hilary Thurlow (printed in Sugarcane Magazine 2017)

Stockmen have resided on the Australian landscape, rearing the livestock they're named after since the early 1800s. Revered for their knowledge of the land and their stock, a stockman is someone who cares for livestock on rural properties, doing anything from mustering, keeping track of or looking after a herd cattle or sheep. Yet for many, they were not merely carrying out an occupation. Francis Adams in *The Australians* (1882), wrote that "a new race begins to unfold themselves" in between "the people of the [coastal] Slope and of the Interior." Adams believed settlers were transmuted in the interior: they entered as Anglo-Australians, and emerged as Bushmen or Stockmen, "the one powerful and unique type yet produced in Australia." Here is the cultural or mythological stockman, a masculine, nationalistic archetype.

From Banjo Paterson's *The Man from Snowy River* (1890) to Heidelberg school paintings by Tom Roberts or Arthur Streeton of the rugged figure in the lonely bush (1900-1920), the stockman epitomises the national narrative of a lonely figure battling against an inhospitable country. Like the American cowboy, the stockman is a figure of the wild frontier. They are both radically individualistic and free from social constraints. Unlike the American cowboy, the stockman is not heroic. Nor does the stockman have the two classic, opposing incarnations of the cowboy: one of untarnished good in a white stetson (the hero), the other, a scorched renegade in a black or, less forebodingly, brown stetson (the anti-hero). Unlike the cowboy, the stockman is never gloriously triumphant, and he never subdues the land. In one of the closing verses of Paterson's poem, we see the stockman pursuing, but never arresting the wild horses:

***He was right among the horses as they climbed the further hill,
And the watchers on the mountain standing mute,
Saw him ply the stockwhip fiercely, he was right among them still,
As he raced across the clearing in pursuit.
Then they lost him for a moment, where two mountain gullies met
In the ranges, but a final glimpse reveals
On a dim and distant hillside the wild horses racing yet,
With the man from Snowy River at their heels.***

Paterson closes the poem with these two lines: "The man from Snowy River is a household word to-day / And the stockmen tell the story of his ride." He may very well be a household word today, but so too is cowboy.

Unlike the bushrangers and diggers, who are also Australian archetypes, the stockman is more intertwined with industry, labouring and the everyday. Unlike bushrangers and diggers, stockmen are banal. In the hierarchy of a cattle station a stockman is the middle rung: more experienced than a trainee jackaroo or jillaroo, but not yet in charge of the herds as with a drover. Culturally, the stockman is white. (In actual fact, a large proportion of stockmen were Aboriginal men, employed because of their unrivalled knowledge of their land.)

In the late 1970s, Australian modernist photographer, Max Dupain (responsible for the iconic Sunbaker, 1937), was invited by CSR (Colonial Sugar Refinery) to make a body of work relating to rural communities connected to sugar production. At Canobie and Milungera in remote Northern Queensland, Dupain documented stockmen culture with a nostalgic eye, capturing flannel shirts, weather beaten wide-brim hats, corrugated iron roofs and running bulls. The series captures the aerial technologies of helicopters and light planes that have revolutionised the job of a stockman, lessening their overall responsibilities. Dupain's series shows the men in stockyards, not out on the plains. It shows a transitional period into declining relevance as new agricultural technologies are developed and the stockman begins to have more time in the yards with the animals, changing the shape of their role. These developments, captured by Dupain, coincide, not accidentally, with the rise of rodeo culture in Australia.

Re-evaluating the milieu of stockmen today is painter Bryce Anderson. Drawing upon reflections of regional Australia, his series "Rodeo Role Play" acts as an interrogation of the transition of Australian 'stockmen' into Americanised 'cowboys' through the first appearances of rodeo in Australia. Anderson's ongoing series (begun in 2016) is the result of visits to rural Queensland rodeos and the gathering of kitsch rodeo and 'outback' images from magazines and books published since the 1950s. The key figure captured within the "Rodeo Role Play" works is that of the cowboy in to whom the stockman transitioned with the rise of rodeo.

Stockmen to Australia, Cowboys to America; rodeo is an early instance of Americanisation, and globalisation more broadly, in Australia. Establishing a stronghold in the 1960s, the sport of rodeo appealed to stockmen who were already experienced in working with cattle, coalescing their close relationship to their herds. As herds dwindled and modern farming techniques advanced, the cowboy as athlete began to replace the practical stockman: rodeo had shifted from an exhibition of working skills to a professional sport. The spectacle filled a void in regional communities, providing an alternate career path for some and a community pass time for others. The sport has been embraced by Australia with over 20,000 members today and 200 registered 14 annual rodeos, a highlight for many struggling farming communities throughout

Australia. As one of the only nations left to legally participate in the sport, Australia is a global destination for international rodeo punters. Despite regional communities dwindling in size, rodeo has thrived within them, and so too has the cowboy. The stockman has not so much disappeared, but found new expression within the figure of the more glamorous cowboy.

In Bryce Anderson's *Rodeo Role Play 2* (2017) an Akubra-adorned cowboy enveloped in concentration wrestles the writhing bull he is mounted on, asserting man as the pinnacle of the animal kingdom. This found image of physical drama mimics the language of Paterson's *The Man from Snowy River*, pointing to an aesthetics of rodeo, a look to be aspired to. Anderson intervenes in the exuding masculinities of the sport and the stockman figure in an attempt to distort the mythological narrative of archetypal masculinity in Australia. What is visually understood as the horizon emulates the dirt floor of a rodeo arena as well as drought stricken landscapes. The swathes of purple and orange crepuscular sky are coded with feminine hues, pointing toward the superfluous, preconceived masculinity of what it is to be a stockman. This layered floral motif breaks the masculine discourse. It also adds to the rich irony of the male-entrenched identity of rodeo—the sport embraced women participants early on with women's competitions starting in the early 1900s. Anderson's compositional

technique of collaging found images and magazine cut-outs - such as the bucking bull and the dissonant boot overlaid - then fixing these constellations in a final form as a painting on canvas, is tied closely to Anderson's interrogations of stockman mythology and aesthetics gleaned from print media. The pictorial plane throughout the *Rodeo Role Play* series is earthed in an aesthetic flatness, giving way to all sense of proportion, scale and size, equating all appropriated media within the same physical and conceptual space. For instance, a flatly painted floral motif cuts through the pictorial plane, however, this interruption remains subordinate to the dominant masculinities. Yet, the quintessential cowboy boot appears as if from an advertorial, perpetuating that anyone can 'buy' into being a cowboy, can achieve the 'look', undoing the singularity of romanticised cowboy.

Loosely following the logic of Judith Butler and her seminal text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990), the cowboy is acting: his hyper-masculinised self is all a facade, a performance. For Butler, simply put, the gender categories of male and female are more complex than anatomy and social constructions (nature vs nurture), and instead should be understood as an active phenomenon, requiring certain features of being a man or a woman to be enacted. In this understanding, gender identities arise in the repetition of gendered actions that are consolidated into regular patterns of behaviour: gender is a performance. As the title of Anderson's series indicates, the hyper-masculinised traits of what it means to be a cowboy are 'role plays' - performances - of the romanticised notion of the stockman. Anderson's paintings decode and question these hyper-masculinities, by depicting the performance of an aesthetic that includes performative 'feminine' tones, ads for cowboy fashion and floral motifs.

To turn rodeo into a more dramatic, violent and masculine spectacle the more docile steers (neutered bulls) were removed from the sport and bulls became mainstream due to their tendency to put up more aggressive resistance. In *Rodeo Role Play 2* the cowboy's intense concentration sells this notion of an aggressive physical battle, hinting at the overt masculine motivations behind the sport. Anderson retains the masculinity of the cowboy and the dominance he yields over of the picture plane, while at the same time intervening through collaged elements. These discordant images decentre and thwart the pulsating masculinity of the figure by expanding the frame of reference. Yet, concurrently, Anderson portrays the rider in a respectful, contemplative way: the rider is placed uneasily within the picture plane whose dissonant subject matter creates a conceptual and aesthetic vertigo representing the struggle for survival against obsolescence; he is perpetually frozen between success and failure in his contest against the animal.

While Anderson interrogates the cowboy there is a respectful and nostalgic eye, like Dupain's CSR works. They both meet the contemporary cowboy-stockman, its culture and its aesthetic with curiosity and attempt to understand, rather than undermine, the cultural effects of rodeo and the passing of time on this ageing Australian archetype. Taking admiration and interest in the stockman from his forbearers, Anderson is reinterpreting the imagery and content of 'the stockman'. Questioning and rephrasing their relationship with masculinity through classic, stock-standard imagery, the stockman is reinvigorated, reinvented and turned into a cowboy. Forever evolving. At this point in time it appears the spirit of the stockman will never die. Yet, for some reason or another, the stockman is still a colloquial figure, never forgotten and ever present.