



# Cover Versions: Mimicry and Resistance

Shepparton Art Museum

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Kate Warren



## Cover Versions: Mimicry and Resistance

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By Kate Warren

There is nothing I enjoy more than a good impersonation. I recently came across a video of a young Martin Short appearing on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. The conversation had turned to the various impressions that Short was working on, when off-camera a voice is heard to ask, "Do you do

me?" It's actress Bette Davis, who had been Carson's guest prior. Without missing a beat, Short turns to Davis and says, in pitch-perfect imitation of her distinctive voice, "Well, I mean, you aren't that easy to do!" Short's mimicry is so spot-on, in fact, that Davis fails to recognise it as an impersonation of herself. It is an extremely funny moment that captures the pleasures of good impersonations, but also their innate subversiveness. Impressions always exceed their referents – they threaten to unsettle the established order, to make visible new understandings paradoxically through acts of repetition and copying.

Examples of repetition, re-enactment, sampling, appropriation and so on are omnipresent in both contemporary art and broader visual culture. The current exhibition at Shepparton Art Museum, *Cover Versions: Mimicry and Resistance*, delves into these questions. Cleverly, the exhibition begins with examples not as prominent in contemporary art's obsession with representations, namely mimicry in the natural world. This allows *Cover Versions* to acknowledge the specific local contexts of the museum's regional community and history. Shepparton Art Museum is known for its collection of historic and contemporary ceramics. The exhibition begins with a nod to this, displaying a delightful earthenware charger by ceramicist Arthur Merric Boyd that depicts a lyrebird – an Australian native known for its uncanny ability to mimic sounds from its environment.



Arthur Merric Boyd (ceramicist) Neil Douglas (decorator), *An Earthenware Charger*, (circa. 1948-58). Image courtesy Shepparton Art Museum and © Bundanon Trust Photograph: Jamie Durrant.

Lyrebirds imitate natural and artificial sounds without prejudice. In this sense, they are bellwethers for the encroachments of development and “progress” into the natural world. This theme is continued through Michael Candy's *Synthetic Pollenizer* (2017). For the project Candy designed and constructed robotic flowers, resembling yellow canola blossoms, that attract bees and then deposit pollen on the insects for dissemination. Originally installed in canola fields in the nearby regional town of Dookie, Candy's



project is a clear engagement with the social specificities of Shepparton and the larger Goulburn region, often referred to as the “food bowl” of Victoria. Yet the necessity of Candy’s ecological mimicry also points more sombrely to the factors afflicting bee populations globally, having disastrous impacts on agriculture and the environment.



Yuki Kihara, *Culture for Sale*, 2014, still from performance at City Gallery Wellington, NZ. Image courtesy and © the artist. Photo: Sarah Hunter.

*Cover Versions* has been curated with the specificities of its local contexts in mind. Shepparton sits on traditional Yorta Yorta lands and is a culturally diverse area. Greater Shepparton is home to numerous multi-ethnic communities, including a Pacific Islander community who host the annual Pasifika festival. While such cultural festivals are important vehicles for the celebration and sharing of culture, *Cover Versions* presents a parallel discourse through Yuki Kihara's *Culture for Sale* (2014). The series consists of five videos of Sāmoan dancers, and viewers must activate each performance by inserting a twenty-cent piece into an adjacent coin slot. This set-up references colonialist practices of “displaying” indigenous



peoples in exhibitions and travelling attraction shows, specifically in this case the German *Völkerschauen*.

Much is made of artworks that “implicate” the viewer, but Kihara’s work is particularly effective. As you decide whether to insert the coin, it is impossible to not be confronted with the reality of what you are doing – paying for the consumption of another’s culture. Also turning the tables of the “gaze” and the “subject” through re-presentation is Christian Thompson’s series *Museum of Others* (2016). Thompson re-presents famous images of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial figures, from Captain James Cook to John Ruskin, holding copies of their portraits on enlarged placards in front of his own body. The first time I saw this series, I almost did not notice Thompson’s own eyes peering through slots cut into the masks. The slightly cross-eyed appearance that this creates seemed almost natural. Rather than throwing his voice as is the case with impersonators, Thompson throws his gaze, and as with a good impression you come to almost believe the illusion.

Although not included in this exhibition, Thompson’s practice also draws heavily on performance, singing and popular cultural references. As the exhibition’s title implies, *Cover Versions* frames artists’ uses of mimicry in terms of activism and resistance, especially those engaging with popular music and culture. Frédéric Nauczyciel’s video *A Baroque Ball (Shade)* (2014) exemplifies this strongly, featuring members of Paris’s queer–trans (LGBTQI) community “voguing” to a soundtrack of the Baroque composer Antonio Vivaldi. More than simply blending so-called high and low culture, the performers in Nauczyciel’s work revel in the acts of combining fandom and critique, pleasure and subversion. Likewise, seeing *The Kingpins’* satirical music video *VERSION* from 2001 was a blast from the past with renewed prescience today. Dressed in garish drag king outfits, the all-female collaborative group lip-sync and restage Run-DMC’s 1986 hit “Walk This Way”, which was itself a cover of Aerosmith’s original recording.



The Kingpins, *VERSUS*, single channel video, 2001, 5:30. Courtesy the artists and Neon Parc.

Both works have their hearts in the 1980s and 1990s. Hip-hop culture has long been a focus of criticism in relation to its representation of gender relations, which *The Kingpins* take pleasure in playfully but caustically confronting through their mimicry. However, in light of recent, long-suppressed exposés about the misdeeds of Hollywood powerbrokers, from Harvey Weinstein to Kevin Spacey, popular culture across all genres is increasingly implicated in systemic power imbalances and abuses. Being a fan today is complicated. It means having to balance enjoyment of our favourite cultural products with a necessary level of criticality, and even a growing sense of complicity in having taken pleasure in individuals or institutions now disgraced. All this within a world of content-overload, as we are bombarded with remakes and self-reflexive creations.



Soda\_Jerk & The Avalanches with Chris Hopkins & Sam Smith, *The Was*, 2016 still from digital video, 13:40 minutes.

Image courtesy and © the artists.

If any artists have come to epitomise this world of hyper-cultural literacy and active prosumers it is Soda\_Jerk. With their two videos *The Popular Front* (2011) and *The Was* (2016), a collaboration with The Avalanches, Chris Hopkins and Sam Smith, they assault their viewers with barrages of clips, quotes, pop cultural references and knowing winks – to the point where I was quickly forced to give up any hope of identifying all the






references. For some critics this might signal the ultimate post-modern death of the original; however, in *Cover Versions* their work took on a different and timely tone. There was almost a sense of relief at still being able to take pleasure in these creations despite not “getting” all their references. But more importantly, Soda\_Jerk remind us of our ongoing obligations to renegotiate and re-evaluate cultural meaning and appropriateness. Kevin Spacey was a brilliant mimic after all, his impressions were some of my favourites. Impressions and impersonations may not always stand the test of time – but neither will clinging to “pure” notions of the original. Resistance will involve repeated actions, to make visible what may be hiding in plain sight.

*Kate Warren is a writer, curator and researcher based in Melbourne, with a particular interest in cross-overs between contemporary art, film, photography and moving image practices. She received her PhD in Art History from Monash University in 2016.*

Frédéric Nauczyciel, *A Baroque Ball (Shade) [Paris Ballroom Scene & Dale Blackheart (Baltimore)]*, 2014, digital video, 5:13 minutes. Courtesy and © Frédéric Nauczyciel.

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