



Left:
Coloured People #33, 2008,
acrylic on linen, 101 x 101 cm
Coloured People #35, 2008,
acrylic on linen, 101 x 101 cm
Flap:
Coloured People #29, 2008,
acrylic on linen, 101 x 101 cm
Coloured People #31, 2008,
acrylic on linen, 101 x 101 cm

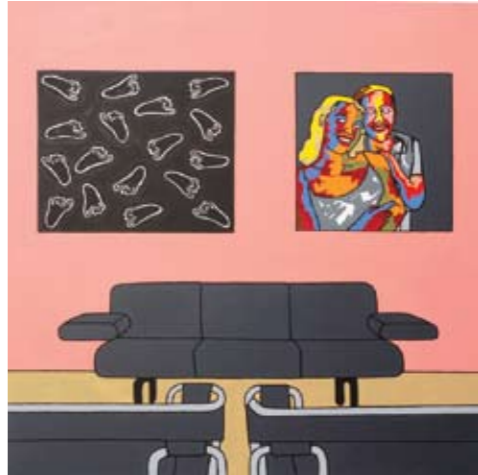


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John **Citizen**

aka Gordon Bennett



Left to right:
Interior (Oranges), 2008, acrylic on linen, 152 x 152 cm
Interior (Bedroom), 2008, acrylic on linen, 152 x 152 cm
Interior (Grey Vases), 2008, acrylic on linen, 152 x 152 cm
Interior (House Plant), 2008, acrylic on linen, 152 x 152 cm
Interior (Grey Lounge Suite), 2008, acrylic on linen, 152 x 152 cm
 Cover:
Interior (Candlestick), 2008, acrylic on linen, 152 x 152 cm

GANYMEDE AND ROSALIND

*All the world's a stage
 And all the men and women merely players
 They have their exits and their entrances
 And one man in his time plays many parts*

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII¹

Recently, two paintings by John Citizen, *Interior (Orange Chair)* and *Interior (Grey Couch)* (8 Jan 2007), were exhibited with works by seven other Australian artists in Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Manila and Hanoi.² While responses to the works differed from city to city, the most exceptional reaction was to the paintings of two Western Australian artists, Nancy Naninurra Napanangka and Boxer Milner Tjampitjin from Balgo. The artists' individual use of a 'dot' style was presumed by audiences to mean that these works were created by 'primitive', desert-dwelling people.

By contrast, *Interior (Orange Chair)* and *Interior (Grey Couch)* had a readymade context for arts' audiences in these cities. A rampant commercialism, fuelled

by the rush to develop urban economies, has opened market opportunities for Western companies who are serving and creating the demand for new consumer goods in the wealthier cities of Asia. While designer commodities remain only a window shopper's dream for most of the population of Thailand, The Philippines and certainly Vietnam, the idea of apartment living (albeit amidst pirated designer goods) is increasingly becoming a reality.

In this context, John Citizen's *interior* paintings are culturally loaded. For some, the images form representations of aspirational standards of living. However, for others in these cultures, Citizen's *interiors* symbolise a system that promises only spiritual and cerebral emptiness, a way of life focusing on material satisfaction and comfort to the detriment of the values associated with traditional work and life. What responses do Citizen's works invite in our culture at the bottom of the world? Is there a similar ethical dichotomy at play? And how are we to think of works by a painter who is the creation of another artist: as his imaginary friend, product of a schizophrenic ego or as another feature of the creative condition?

Gordon Bennett has been painting domestic scenes under the nom de plume John Citizen since 1995. This period is longer than the duration of any Bennett series and designates Citizen as an adolescent. This teenager's output is remarkable for its consistency – the initial *Interiors* and subsequently the *Coloured People* – while over this interval Bennett senior has taken the significant step of shifting from figuration into an abstraction.

With an enduring exhibiting career (and identity), Citizen now no longer comprises a stratagem for Bennett to work outside the art system, nor a disguise.³ If Citizen's *Interiors* and *Coloured People* offered a refuge while Bennett tested the possibilities of abstraction in previous years, what is Bennett's strategy today (apart from the convenience of having established predetermined subject matter), in continuing with Citizen's folio of quirky private spaces and the party people that inhabit them?

The links between Bennett's reflection on, and critique of contemporary attitudes to Australia and its history from psychogeographical and a range of socially and

culturally political perspectives, and the banality of Citizen's everyman 'interior landscapes' have been well made.⁴ The relevance of associations between who looks and what goes unseen is increasingly heightened in Citizen's images. Distinguishing motifs are becoming almost caricatured by their repetition within a limited perspective, which has broadened only fractionally from the initial focus on furnishings or aspects of rooms decorated with colour field paintings – generally in acrid or unmatched colours (mauves, pinks, greys and fauns are popular) – to the sections of interiors containing the *Coloured People* and compositions mimicking Bennett's stripe paintings.

In this most recent series Citizen has bought the two artists together, in a sympathetic relationship that is certainly not schizophrenic. Or alternatively, is this Bennett responding to Citizen's metaphoric appropriation of Bennett's concerns with the interior landscape, by inserting his paintings into Citizen's world? Bennett literally furnishes the indoor environments with his earlier signature references to the inappropriately plagiarised indigenous art

championed by Margaret Preston and the latest stripe paintings, complete with their own an indigenous and western art historical legacy. Citizen, learning from his kin, draws on sources from elsewhere: in this instance the fashionable compositions from designer photo shoots, the *Coloured People* from newspapers, and abstract forms from a contemporary artist who is reproving aspects of modern art and culture.

Cultural, personal and social dichotomies imbue these deceptively prosaic paintings. John Citizen continues to strengthen the narrative potential of his art, expanding his schematic atlas of the things that constitute everyday reality, while Bennett minimises the referential possibilities of painting. Yin and Yang, but which is which? Like all good stories, the Citizen/Bennett Interiors keep us guessing. Lacking any signs of unruly life, the scenery of this morality tale is set for both Citizen and Bennett to make celebrity appearances, entering from the invisible stage left and right, to commence their next Act.

Zara Stanhope
 Deputy Director & Senior Curator, Heide Museum of Modern Art
 June 2008

1. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Rosalind disguises herself as the male Ganymede and acts in both roles in a complex narrative of persecution, deception, unrequited love, and, eventually repentance and marriage.
2. The works comprised the exhibition, *The world in painting*, an Asialink and Heide Museum of Modern Art partnership, and appeared at: Chiang Mai University Gallery, Chiang Mai, Thailand – 31 October 2007; Chulalongkorn University Art Center, Bangkok, Thailand 30 November – 25 December 2007; Yuchengco Museum, Manila, The Philippines, 23 January – 13 February 2008; Vietnam Fine Art Museum, Hanoi, 7 – 17 April 2008 and Heide Museum of Modern Art, 26 July – 9 November 2008 to be followed by a regional tour in 2009 organised by NETS Victoria.
3. Ian McLean, 'Who is John Citizen?', John Citizen, *Interiors*, exh. cat., Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, 2006.
4. *ibid.* and Gordon Bennett & Ian McLean, *The art of Gordon Bennett*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1996.