

Gallery 2

Will French *Winner Take All*



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Winner Take All

Collecting memorabilia and keepsakes wasn't always exclusively a 'pool room' pursuit. The art of souveniring actually originated in wartime, when victorious soldiers began pocketing pieces of history to sell back home or keep as trophies. In darker days, a soldier might have stolen an enemy's head for sport, but since then battle flags have become an acceptable alternative. Souvenirs like these firmly establish hero status, even if morality has gone 'A.W.O.L'.

This show marks 10 years since Will French's first exhibition, and 10 years since his work was first 'souvenir'd'. It's possible no one but French noticed or cared at the time, seeing as Sydney was in the grip of Olympic fever. At that moment, more attention was being directed towards the ceremonial return of the first-ever Olympic flag by a competitor who had souvenir'd it in 1920. The man, an American bronze-medallist who had hidden the flag in a suitcase under his bed for 70 years, was thanked. It appears we can forgive a great sportsman because he was a sportsman, even if Hal Haig Prieste is now better remembered for being a thief. Hero-status: intact.

Coincidentally, one woman participating in that same flag ceremony – carrying the torch, in fact – was our Dawn Fraser: triple-Olympic gold medallist, Australian of the Year and...thief. At the 1964 Tokyo Olympics Fraser had apparently swum the moat of the Imperial Palace, scaled the flagpole and stole, you guessed it, an Olympic flag. She was arrested, charged and later released by Emperor Hirohito (who gifted her the flag as a souvenir of her ordeal). The incident contributed to a ban from competitive swimming that effectively ended her career, yet we still remember her as an Aussie legend.

The thieving of flags continued even after the Olympic dream ended. In 2007, French's much-loved *Bang Flag* was swiped from the front



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window of Pigeon Ground Public, resulting in a police investigation. Could this be taken as a sign of artistic success in an occupation that has no clear beacons, or was it simply someone's lark attempt at making sport of the art world?

It seems we cannot predict the impulsive acts that flags will provoke; they are simple things with difficult histories. The fact that nations, groups and individuals can be galvanised by a few shapes and colours is both fascinating and frightening. French is toying with powerful magic here, because to tamper with, remix or destroy a flag incites its own kind of cultural mayhem. Which must be why French continues to dig up, brush off and again rebury these moribund Australian legends. His works – and not just the flags – barely mask a desire to return to simpler times, when things were made well and for 'the right reasons', whatever they may be. It's clear that French, having first set out to poke fun at these relics, has spoiled his own fun by falling in love with them.

Perhaps it's time for us to raise our own white flag, admit we don't mind the contradiction, and surrender ourselves to the story.

Connie Anthes

G/2: 01 *D1664* 2010 MOMA tag

G/2: 02 *D36* 2010 Metropolitan Museum of Art tag

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