

RICHARD LEWER YOU WOULDN'T MAKE THIS STUFF UP

New Zealand-born Richard Lewer uses art to delve deep into a world of idiosyncratic characters, marginal settings and unlikely life-stuffs.

By Rebecca Gallo

Opposite
RICHARD LEWER
Black Dot (detail), 2014
oil on board

Left
RICHARD LEWER
Worse Luck I am Still Here (still), 2014
blu-ray animation
4 minutes and 47 seconds

Right
RICHARD LEWER
Worse Luck I am Still Here (still), 2014
blu-ray animation
4 minutes and 47 seconds

Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

Melbourne underworld gangsters; catholic nuns running a hospital; a love-suicide-euthanasia pact that goes tragically awry; an amorous gymnastics coach who lusts after his young charges. Unlikely tales and odd characters are a constant in Richard Lewer's work. His art houses stories that would be hard to make up, and in some cases you wouldn't want to.

Lewer's output – encompassing videos, performances, large-scale murals and the paintings on canvas, steel, foam, maps and billiard table cloth for which he is best known – represents an ongoing documentation of the worlds and subcultures that he visits and inhabits. Figures and settings in Lewer's drawings and paintings are simplified and stylised, and stories take on a narrative voice, empathy and humour that are distinctly and idiosyncratically his.

The Melbourne-based artist describes himself as a social realist, working in the tradition of Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier, but his is a distinctly contemporary and Australian vernacular, with echoes of Drysdale, Nolan and Tucker at their stripped-back best. Originally from Hamilton, New Zealand, Lewer made Melbourne his home base almost two decades ago, with a two-year stint in Fremantle and regular trips to remote corners of the country in between. He recently received widespread acclaim for his animation *Worse Luck I am Still Here*, exhibited in the 2014 Adelaide Biennale *Dark Heart* and for which he was awarded the 2014 Blake Prize.

Lewer generally starts his day by reading the local papers to gather ideas and stories, but the choice of what to paint is never arbitrary. Connections and relationships are of utmost importance, and Lewer immerses himself deeply in each of the worlds he explores.

THERE SEEMS TO BE A COMMON THREAD OF THE MARGINAL, OFFBEAT AND THORNY THROUGHOUT YOUR WORK. WHAT DRAWS YOU TO SUCH STORIES, AND WHERE DO YOU THINK THE DESIRE TO TELL THEM COMES FROM?

I don't see these things so much as marginal stories. They are things that I have connections to and that I find extreme, and I come across them through making work, rather than searching them out. For example, the Parnngurr work that I've made for the Sydney show. Parnngurr is one of the most remote Indigenous communities in Australia. It's home to the Martu people and many of the Martu artists who work with Martumili Artists. The first contact [with white people] for many of the people I met there was in the 1960s, and you don't get much more extreme than that remoteness. I'm really drawn to the idea of those extremes. I don't go out looking for the roughest environment that I can place myself in, but these things happen over time. I had spent two years in Western Australia and had a rapport with Gabrielle Sullivan, the arts and business manager for Martumili Artists, and some of the artists were actually in the

Adelaide Biennale [alongside Lewer], so the connection has built up over time. There is a relationship and trust, which I think you need going into a community.

WHAT DID YOU HAVE IN MIND WHEN YOU WENT OUT TO PARNNGURR, BOTH IN TERMS OF MAKING WORK AND DAY-TO-DAY EXPERIENCE? DID YOU SPEND TIME COLLECTING MATERIAL TO BRING BACK TO THE STUDIO, OR WAS THE WORK MADE IN SITU?

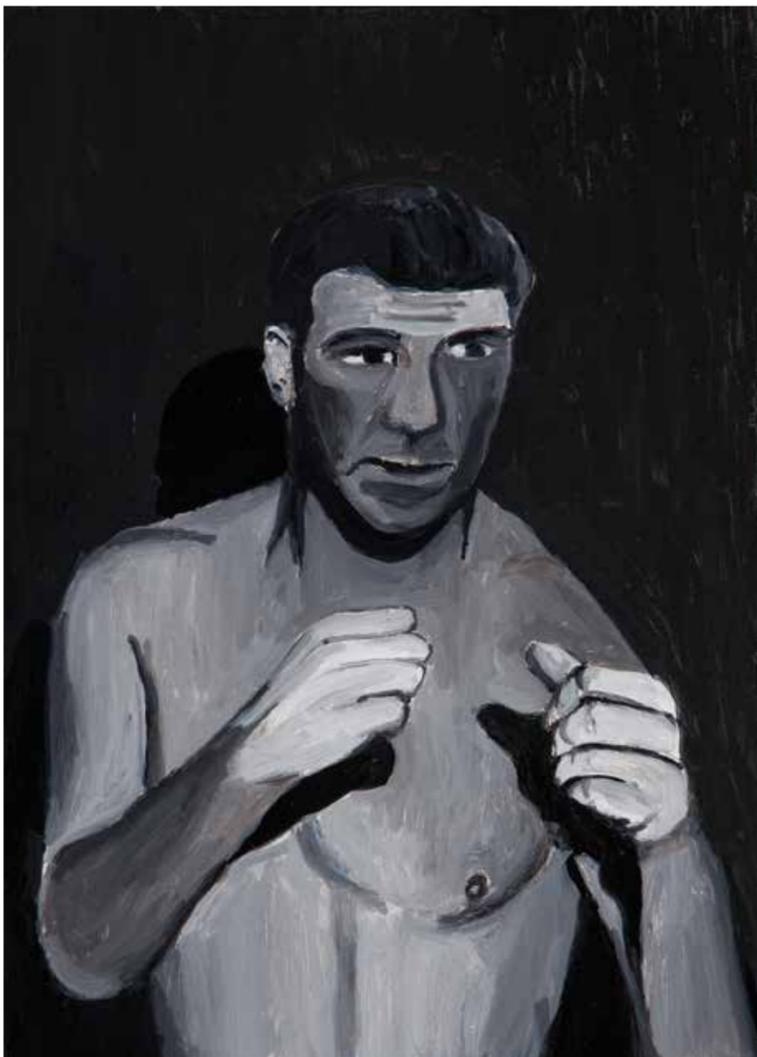
Most of it was pretty much done there, which was different to how I usually work, and that was a good thing. I thought I could take photos and then come back into the studio and make the work, but then you lose that sense of where you've been and the atmosphere around you. To place the work in the right environment, it must be made then and there. That's probably why they're very simple and stripped back.

I couldn't control things. There were lots of people making work next to me, and you know, I never do that. It affects the work and starts to inform it. If I took photos and brought them back here, people [there] wouldn't see the way that I work. I brought oil paints because some of the artists wanted to get back into using oils. The whole idea was a conversation about the way that I work, about portraiture, about how they work – the shared experience of working together. It's what I do every day, and what they do every day, so you just get in there and get going.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE LIVING AND WORKING IN SUCH A REMOTE LOCATION?

It was probably one of the harshest places I've been, but at the same time it was incredibly beautiful. I felt really isolated, geographically being so far away panicked me a little bit. But I love going into those situations that are totally unfamiliar. Going into these communities, you have to have the right attitude. I don't want to preach, but I think it's something everyone should do. You get to converse; you get to see a way of life that you had no idea about. It was scary too. I was attacked by dogs, which everyone was pretty upset about. At one point I was really hungry and we went looking for witchetty grubs. I wouldn't know where to find a witchetty grub – I would die in that space without their knowledge.





Right
 RICHARD LEWER
In the Blue Corner, 2014
 oil on board
 30 x 22 cm
 Left
 RICHARD LEWER
In the Blue Corner, 2014
 oil on board
 30 x 22 cm
 Courtesy the artist and
 Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney



RICHARD LEWER
In the Blue Corner, 2014
 oil on board
 30 x 22 cm
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IN A LOT OF YOUR WORK MADE WITH COMMUNITIES AND SUBCULTURES - WITH PARNNGURR, THE BOXING GYM, NUNS - I GET THE SENSE THAT YOU DEVELOP QUITE TENDER RELATIONSHIPS, AND IT'S MORE THAN JUST DOCUMENTATION. LIKE *IN THE BLUE CORNER* (2014), THE VIDEO WHERE YOU TAKE A BUNCH OF GUYS FROM BOXING IN FOR A LIFE DRAWING/PAINTING SESSION...

Yep, it's not a one-off thing. I've been boxing for 14 or 15 years now, and with those particular guys it was two years of trust that they'd built in me as their trainer. They knew I'd be in their corner during their boxing matches; there was a level of total respect and trust on both sides. The funny thing is that they see artists as extreme. These guys didn't really know what it is that I do, and it was a great chance to actually bring them into my studio and show them...well, not really what I do every day - I don't usually paint from life models - but to give them a sense of what it means to make work in terms of painting and drawing. The outcome of that was phenomenal, more than I ever expected. They stayed the whole day, they loved it, and a couple of them have since applied to go to art school. It blew my mind. I guess 15 years ago when I did the boxing match with Luke Sinclair [for *Adrift: Nomadic New Zealand Art*, Melbourne, 2001], no way did I ever think I would stay on at that gym and go on to be a trainer.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SPORT AND ART KEEPS COMING UP IN YOUR WORK. ONE WAY IN WHICH IT ARISES IS IN TERMS OF SPORT BEING DESCRIBED AS AN ART FORM, AND ART BEING LIKENED TO SPORT IN TERMS OF DISCIPLINE AND TRAINING.

I just think they're so intertwined and close, and I always have. When I was at art school, I was a bit embarrassed by the idea that I had my tennis racquet underneath the table, but the connection for me has always been so strong. When I started boxing, I was training at five in the morning and five at night alongside professional boxers, and that's when I saw that what they were doing in terms of skill and training was exactly what I'd be doing in the studio. And that's where that connection became really clear to me.

SO IT'S PRACTISE, REPETITION AND DISCIPLINE.

Exactly. So the works I'm making right now on steel are very physical - it's about scrubbing off and putting on, that repetition of action. And then you're looking for that special moment when the painting starts to work. Matthew Pavlich [captain of the Fremantle AFL club] opened my exhibition in Fremantle last





Opposite
 RICHARD LEWER
Muuki Taylor, 2014
 oil on canvas
 75 x 75 cm
 Below
 RICHARD LEWER
Karnu Nancy Taylor, 2014
 oil on canvas
 61 x 61 cm
 Courtesy the artist and
 Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

Bernie took his life at our local beach in Fremantle. It was on TV the second week I was there, and I really wanted to get a grasp of what was going on. I normally read three or four papers every morning and I gather things to start my day, and that's the way that I collate and collect and then sort of work out whatever I'm doing. But I think the best thing is to respond and react, and that's what I tend to do in my work. So if I place myself in a situation or an environment that I'm unfamiliar with, I'm almost a social realist or a journalist in a way. I go in and respond and react. That seems to be the way that I make work and form relationships with people. Like Billy Longley who was one of Melbourne's major underworld figures, a hit man. I've done lots of work on crime but I think it was important for me to actually go and meet these people as well and hear their sides of the stories - that way I know I'm not sensationalising things. So immediately I go back to the studio and start retelling

these stories, retracing things. You know, I always thought that if I wasn't an artist I'd end up being a policeman.

A DETECTIVE?

Yeah, absolutely. I love retracing things and working through clues and the discovery. Researching as well - I love going to archives and libraries and the different historical societies, local museums. I love those places, to actually just go and talk to the people working there. It spurs the work on but it also makes it more than art, if you know what I mean...**V**

Richard Lewer's *Parnngurr* shows at Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney until April 11, 2015.

Richard Lewer is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney; Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide; and Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland.

richardlewer.com
 sullivanstrumpf.com

hugomichellgallery.com
 gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz



year - over there he's like a god and so many people came to the opening because of him - and he said that in footy, the difference between a good player and a great player is creativity. It was fascinating hearing it from someone like him. It clarified things that I'd been thinking as well. The idea that you go into the studio every day and build up your skills - that's your training - and then you let your hands go. That's when spontaneity comes in.

HOW DOES THAT WORK IN TERMS OF FAMILIARITY WITH MATERIALS? ON THE ONE HAND YOU USE QUITE TRADITIONAL MATERIALS - YOU DRAW WITH GRAPHITE AND PAINT WITH OILS AND ACRYLICS - BUT THEN YOU THROW THESE CURVE BALLS LIKE FOAM AND BILLIARD CLOTHS AND STEEL.

Like the stories, they come about over time. The pool table cloths came about when I was reading a lot of crime stories, and found out that Richard Ramirez, the 'Night Stalker', got caught because he bragged around a pool table. So it was immediately interesting to see the pool table as this device that people tell stories around. The pool table became this mystic object, with its history and stains and all these underlying stories that have been told around it. It has a conceptual framework to begin with. Another part of it is the physicality of it. I'd never

painted on pool table cloth before, so immediately it became a complete physical and mental challenge to work with. The more I struggle with the material the better. I'll never use pool table cloth again - that was a particular time in my practice. Once I become too familiar with a material, I lose interest in it. I make it really hard for myself.

IT'S THE SPORT THING, RIGHT? THERE ALWAYS HAS TO BE A NEW CHALLENGE.

Yep. For dealers it's a nightmare.

ANOTHER STRAND OF YOUR PRACTICE IS ANIMATION. CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE ABOUT THE PROCESS AND THE IDEAS BEHIND SOME OF THESE WORKS, IN PARTICULAR *WORSE LUCK I AM STILL HERE* (2014)?

Whenever I'm doing an animation or whenever I'm making work, there's heaps of experimentation, and sometimes it's about failure. Until I put [*Worse Luck I am Still Here*] in the Adelaide Biennale and saw the response, I was nervous about how it was going to be received. I had an elderly man play [the voice of] Bernie at the start, but I decided this work didn't need it, that it was best to keep it simple... It's like painting, you put so much into a painting, but when you strip things back is when you get the truth and the honesty.