

David Noonan

Seven scenes among many

Jennifer Higgin

Scene one

A reverie of images: in one, a man with a moustache and a dandelion; in another, a bell, a flower, a performance; someone covering someone else's eyes with their hands, laughing. Panels fit together like pieces of an eternal jigsaw. Time is vague and genders are confused; baggy clothes and veils allow the body both to hide and sing, while masks and disguises let complications run amok. People play games with enigmatic rules, their pleasures and complications frozen in a concentration of shadowed, collaged layers. The gestures and gesticulations of hands here are as articulate as words; lines of energy move between figures and fingers.

David Noonan's deeply private yet highly communicative pictures – made in the last few years from silkscreen prints on jute and linen, or gouache and paper collages – imply, despite their stillness, an animated world of richly expressive possibilities. Preferring to leave the meaning of his work loose, most of the artist's pictures are untitled. In the last few years, many of the images he employs were sourced from

books about art education from various countries around the world. Their message of freedom through creativity is often reflected in a specific design aesthetic – a clean minimalism inflected with hallucinatory explosions of figuration.

In recent shows, Noonan has carpeted the gallery floor with a rough sisal rug that unifies the space while suggesting a sense of an environment outside the gallery; someone's home or theatre; a field on which the scenarios in the show may have occurred. (The horizon line in many of Noonan's pictures allude to a stage, even when the theatre is not explicit.) In Noonan's show 'MARKUS' at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney,¹ the rug emphasised the strong narrative and formal links between the images; of private rituals in public spaces. The title could refer to any of the draped characters in the show, an unknowable drama in which characters wordlessly sleep, play and invent themselves.



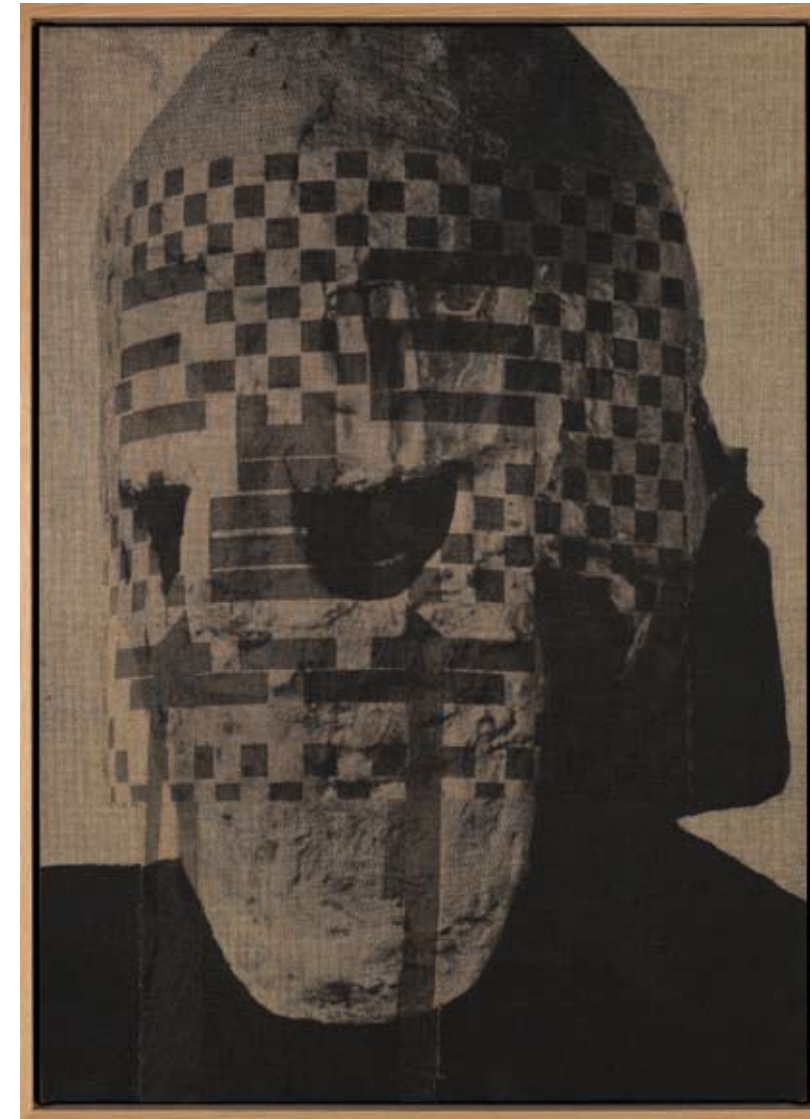
David Noonan, *Untitled*, 2007, silkscreen on linen, 210 x 150 cm, courtesy the artist and Foxy Production, New York.



David Noonan, Untitled, 2007.
paper collage, 48 x 48 cm, courtesy
the artist and Foxy Production,
New York.

Scene two

The image shifts; long, elegant arms curve in a gentle, almost melancholy, gesture of containment. One face is hidden by hair and a hand, the other by the crop of the image. The colours are muted, often sepia, but full of dramatic shifts in mood and tone. There is always a suggestion in Noonan's world that time and space are as sly as snow; that despite an appearance of solidity the world can swallow us without warning. (Someone is always watching someone else in these scenarios. It's hard, it seems, to find time to be alone. The world has never been this crowded.)



David Noonan, Untitled, 2007.
silkscreen on linen and jute collage,
150 x 105 cm, courtesy the artist and
Foxy Production, New York.

Scene three

The image shifts again: to a head, covered in a grid that somehow seems more than a mask. The body below is a black mass; the atmosphere is chilling. There is more than a hint of violence here, but without supporting information, this violence, or the identity of the person wearing the mask, will never be known. (Sometimes, though, in a world so full of brutal convictions, an image that allows some slippage in certainty can offer more comfort than a dossier full of facts.) Another image: a man with an umbrella, his face hidden, the smooth skin of his torso indicating he has only recently left childhood behind. He is

wearing strange trousers, although perhaps 'trousers' is the wrong word – they look like fur, or strangely sturdy cloth, covered partly with embroidery. (What would a centaur wear? Why does this question occur to me?)

It is impossible to know who these people are, what they are hiding, or who they are hiding from. Yet, for all their drama and sheer vividness, the pictures are silent. But, as in many early films, there is so much going on, so many layers of action and innuendo, that their silence is almost surprising; although a faint hum of music never seems far away.



David Noonan, Untitled, 2006,
paper collage, 48 x 30 cm, courtesy
the artist and Foxy Production,
New York.

Scene four

Another image: a young man in front of highly decorative wallpaper. He is surrounded by flowers, deeply absorbed in his thinking. This is all, this is everything; the silent image a homage to introspection.

The image shifts, the atmosphere builds up with layers of innuendo, playfulness and real feeling, sexual ambiguity and sadness. The pictures are full of burlesque; of still and sober deliriums. A head turns one way, and next to it, the same head reproduced, turned upside down. Like a puzzle, the heads mirror each other yet reflect entirely different personalities. The result is both chilling and fun – cognitive

experience literally turned on its head, ideas played with until they become grotesque and hilarious, like crazed rituals full of charged psychological energy.

Moving images constantly surround us; it is almost astonishing that still ones such as these can exert this fascination. Their stillness and what you can impose on them can, in a swooping moment of realisation, make you aware of how subjective an activity like looking is; how important reverie is in finding solace. There is more than a hint here of a hunger for myth; the need for stories and rituals that help explain ourselves to ourselves.



David Noonan, Kabarett Keif,
2007, silkscreen on linen and jute
collage, 200 x 142 cm, courtesy the
artist and Art:Concept Paris, Paris.

Scene five

The figures build from stripes, like Tudor houses made flesh. They stand like sentinels, or beams, guards, actors or lunatics. Relationships between people here are inscrutable, nuanced. People turn away from each other, hiding their intentions, their secrecy as urgent as a hunger for food. Noonan knows that beauty can lurk in disguises, that friendship can accommodate mysteries, and that emotions can swing from the operatic to the humble in the blink of a painted eye. In one of his rare titled pictures, *Kabarett Keif*, 2007, the Tudor motif becomes a kind of beautiful camouflage where the smoky, layered textures of the picture cloak any kind of real clarity with an impression of dreamy theatricality. One man, deeply absorbed in his own

world, eternally stares out from the picture; his costume comprises stripes, breasts and a large hat. He is surrounded by areas of abstraction, and the intimation of other figures. The 'Keif' of the title refers to a now-defunct Austrian vaudeville group from the 1970s.

Each show Noonan makes is built on associations and the architecture and personality of each space he hangs his work in. Narratives flow around the walls; images react to each other. Chance, intuition and free-association are the life-blood of these pictures. They reiterate the impossibility of reducing the description of a personality, a life, to one line, one reflection, one feeling.



David Noonan, Untitled, 2008,
from 'MARKUS', silkscreen on linen
and jute collage,
300 x 210 cm, courtesy the artist and
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.



David Noonan, Untitled, 2007,
silkscreen on linen and jute collage,
320 x 210 cm, courtesy the artist and
Foxy Production, New York.

Scene six

Noonan returns again and again to youth; to a time when rules are only loosely conformed to and then discarded; a time when music is more accurate than a conversation and decisions are made that will affect the person you will become. In these pictures teenagers are judges in bare feet, their facial expressions often obscured by hair, their laughter transformed into the wailing of a maenad with the slightest shift in mood. Most young people are natural artists; it's usually adults that frown at such imaginative flexibility.

Revealing by covering up: glue becomes another medium; cool sections of linen alternate with layers of warmer tones. Some elements are emphasised with pieces of jute that are crudely stuck down, ripped and re-assembled. In this, the works remain firmly in the tradition of collage: assemblages of different forms, made to create a new whole.

Scene seven

Noonan's images describe utopias formed from freedom of expression: a belief that is less interested in dictating rules of how to live than encouraging the accommodation of difference and mystery. Grimaces, wrinkles and distortion, laughter and ambiguity, acting and hiding – all have a place here. Noonan's pictures remind me that we have always needed the exaggerations and nuances of theatre to reflect the strangeness of being human back on ourselves – and that a single picture on a wall can be the best theatre of all.

¹ 'MARKUS', Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 3–26 April, 2008.