

Mel Dare is an artist who dares to bring new perspectives on the strength, fragility and intensely personal theme of masculinity. Her contemporary artwork is innovative, distinctive and explores new aesthetic ways of creative production. In her most recent solo exhibition, "looking at him" at the emerge Art Space, Dare produces her first showing of purely figurative work. She examines the masculine form, although was somewhat surprised by the results.

Shy and unassuming, 33-year-old Dare is a full-time artist who holds an honours degree in Visual Arts from Curtin University. She has held a variety of group and solo exhibitions in WA and overseas as well as dual shows with Tori Benz at the Breadbox Gallery and PICA (Perth Institute of Contemporary Art) in Northbridge. Dare's previous exhibitions have predominantly been abstract painting and sculptural pieces experimenting with unique mediums, such as liquid paper, and aesthetic shapes.

"looking at him" presented a new challenge for Dare in working within the confines of a set thematic idea. Dare was first attracted to ideas of masculinity and the representation of the male form at an early age.

"I've always been interested in masculinity. I was brought up on a farm and acutely aware of how gender operates at a young age," Dare said.

"Gender is a seemingly important category that determines how we see ourselves. A large part of [gender] is performance."

In order to reflect the different perspectives of masculinity Dare recruited five of her male friends to be her subjects as she wanted to avoid the atypical view of gender being linked to sex and sexuality. Instead Dare wished to create an alternative view of gender and explore the intimacy of personal relationships in a non-sexual way.

She admits asking her friends to be her models was both a provocative and nerve-racking act for the sake of art. She allowed her subjects freedom to choose their own setting and positioning, granting them a sense of autonomy in how they were perceived and portrayed.

"I left everything up to them as each of my friends displayed such trust in allowing me to represent them; I wanted to honour this" Dare said.

With each model "...we talked about what masculinity meant to him and how it related to his body. They all had very set ideas. Some of them wanted to relate masculinity to what was happening in their lives; some were more interested in the psychological aspects."

The very individual ideas of masculinity led to an assortment of unique pieces that opens the viewer to a new perspective of the male body. Instead of creating male subjects who are stereotypical representations of the strong and muscular Australian man, Dare has produced works that create an intimate glimpse into masculinity. Both private and personal, each individual piece initiates a more conceptual vision of masculinity.

Despite the autonomy granted to her subjects, through her creative process Dare discovered that her pieces soon became more about her own views of masculinity. Her work was largely self-reflective of her conceptions of her relationships with each of her friends-cum-models.

"Most of the positioning of the subjects was left up to me," Dare said. "I had a choice of how to represent each male friend but, due to the way we position ourselves, within our lives and with other people, the other person is always going to come from a different perspective."

"I spent so much time with their images that after so many months they became mine. I put them only in positions I would feel comfortable being portrayed. In the end it became an extension of me, once I realised this I felt very narcissistic."

The response that Dare has received from her male subjects has, however, put her mind at ease.

"It's really hard to paint people you know. You always think how am I going to portray them, am I showing too much or too little?" Dare said. "All of my friends were really positive, one of them had a sneak preview even though I was rather scared of his reaction." Another "wanted the exhibition to go on a lot longer, so he could show heaps of his dates. He was very happy with the view of his bottom!" Dare laughed.

Dare views paintings as mirrors, reflective mediums that allow you to draw your own scripts and deconstruct ideas. Pieces from "Looking at Him" that stand out in particular for Dare are "Molly and Him" and "Elbows and Knees".

In "Molly and Him" a stark image is presented where man and dog almost appear to be one. Dare described this piece as "really successful" and reminiscent of her sense of humour.

"I also really liked 'Elbows and Knees' and loved working on such a large scale piece," Dare said. "It's wonderful to spend so much time with a painting - you end up having a relationship with it. Since it's larger than you, you're fighting with it all the time."

Dare is one of the many artists represented at the emerge Art Space. The Emerge Art Space opened in May this year by directors Jan Morskate and Sherri Staltari. Located in East Perth, the gallery is designed to showcase the talents of up and coming Perth artists. emerge gives them the support they need and helps them on their way to become established artists, no matter how old or how experienced they are. Their philosophy is based on supporting the creative spirit of emerging artists and allowing them to explore their ideas in different ways.

"Wrapped Up" is the final exhibition of the year at emerge Art Space open until December 15, 2006. This group exhibition is a celebration of the gallery's first year of business. "Wrapped Up" showcases eleven artists, two male and nine female, and their intriguing, beautiful and startling pieces of art.

Co-director Jan Morskate explained that the pieces in "Wrapped Up" were individually chosen by the artists.

"The artists selected and chose the work," Morskate said. "We've given them free reign and have trusted their abilities. We've had a really positive response from 'Wrapped Up', and the artists have had great exposure."

Morskate also believes that emerge allows the novice art lover to start buying original pieces and building a collection.

"emerge provides art buyers affordable pieces while still having the quality. For people looking to invest in art, you can buy a piece of original art under \$1000. It's a great opportunity to get into the low end of the art scene."

Dare is a keen supporter of emerge and sees Perth as a great community to start an artistic career with many opportunities available to exhibit. Her future plans involve participating in many group shows during 2007 as well as a solo exhibit early 2008 in which she plans to have a "conversation with herself", this will no doubt be extraordinary.

Emerge Art Space
23 Brisbane Street
East Perth

Open:

Wed – Fri 11am – 4pm

Sun 2pm – 5pm

And by appointment

www.emerge-art.com.au