





DEVONPORT
REGIONAL
GALLERY



First we take Paris, then we take the World

JAMIN

DEVONPORT REGIONAL GALLERY SOLO COMMISSION EXHIBITION
SEPTEMBER 7 - OCTOBER 7, 2007



Now in its third year, the Devonport Regional Gallery's solo commission series continues to represent emerging and early-career artists, with the financial support of the Devonport City Council and Arts Tasmania. *First we take Paris, then we take the World*, presents the work of Jamin (Benjamin Kluss). While Jamin's exhibition history is relatively new, in the past four years he has made an enormous contribution to the arts both in solo and group exhibitions. Jamin is a founding member of the *Die Laughing Collective*, with Paicey and Empire, through which he has been involved in various state-wide and national projects. Jamin is currently studying a Masters degree in Fine Art at the School of Art in Hobart.

Through a hybrid of street and gallery-based work, Jamin identifies and parodies concepts of celebrity status, power, corruption and ambivalence evident in contemporary society. From local politician to international notoriety, Jamin presents the observer with visual critiques often disguised as colourful parodies: strata of meaning rise to the surface in progression as the punch line hits home. Yet while we laugh at that which beholds us, Jamin surreptitiously drops the observer into the picture and as consumers of popular culture, mass-media imagery and possible celebrity worship, we often find ourselves entangled in the 'joke'.

Meaningful commentary through art is an important avenue to express freedom and tolerance of others, particularly as the media appear to become increasingly homogeneous in their reportage of information. *First we take Paris, then we take the World*, is an exciting new body of work made possible through the Gallery's solo commission program. The commission has provided Jamin with funding and space in which to express and shape significant ideas through the medium of paint.

This exhibition presents the realms of war, peace, sedition, freedom and fear with humour and satire. In a political and social landscape often overwhelmed by an innate inability to laugh at itself, this body of work provides the viewer with an opportunity to reconsider the state of the world and its so-called leaders.

ELLIE RAY, Acting Director 2007



Sedition, 2005, synthetic polymer and spray & high gloss enamel paint on MDF, 6 components: 240 x 360cm (overall)

ONE NIGHT IN PARIS

It could be said that I know little about politics or painting but I do know Jamin and I do know media. It is through my continued exposure to Jamin's work and my own background as a media artist that I come to this text. The title of this essay echoes the naming devices often used by Jamin, referring to the subject matter of his work through a popular culture reference—*One night in Paris* being the title given to the official DVD release of the infamous Paris Hilton home porn recordings—whilst also evoking a romantic artistic construct, that of the Parisian night. Similarly, Jamin's solo exhibition *First we take Paris, then we take the World* refers to the title of a song by Leonard Cohen, whilst also evoking a movie battle cry; an equally romanticised image.

Jamin's mode of operation is embedded in the shifting global and local political dynamics occurring in a post 9/11 landscape, as seen from his vantage point of a small city on a small island with unique political dynamics of its own. As always, there is the artist, the process and the work. But furthermore, there are the bits in between: the overspray, the underspray. In the materiality of Jamin's work—the stuff it is physically made from—the overspray is where a sharply defined edge becomes dotty aerosol, where a drip becomes a splash, a spray becomes a brushstroke. This overspray also exists in the concepts, the content and the subject of the works; where sharply defined ideas of 'good' blur into 'evil', where politics becomes dominated by popular culture, where Paris appears in the same frame as Saddam Hussein.

Then there is the overspray of the artist himself—Jamin is Benjamin Kluss and vice versa. One usually appears in brackets. Two names: a nickname, a moniker, a tag. The simple duality between these two personae illustrates an oscillation that is evident throughout Jamin's practice. The elements of self-portraiture and performativity are undeniable in his work. They are rooted both in the self-exploratory and diarist nature of the artist but

Dawn of the Golden Age, 2005, spray enamel and acrylic paint on MDF, 240 x 240cm



also in his connection to street art, its awareness of itself as a highly public medium and the tension between notions of anonymity and recognition.

At the same time as producing lasting, collectable imagery, Jamin is also engaged in non-gallery work. This work takes the form of street art, community projects, workshops and murals, and is an evolving ephemeral dialogue between himself and other practitioners locally and beyond, who are engaged in a brimming contemporary resurgence in street art driven by stencils. Melbourne, where Jamin has made some of his work and exhibited often, has claimed and proved itself as an epicentre of street art; its inner-city walls have exploded outward in vast collective expression. Layer upon layer of messages have built up, objects have been stuck to walls, messages added to posters and paintings. Tourists can be found during most daylight hours perusing the meticulously complex surfaces of formerly unknown back alleys. After shows on the way home walls are scrawled, smiling politician stickers are stuck to a fire exit, a block or two down the road another hastily committed placement skews the sticker slightly. Glossy books published about Melbourne's graffiti scene combine with alleyway parties and festivals to celebrate the environment of high concrete walled, narrow bitumen alleyways bursting with art.

This collaborative essence, as part of the scene itself and through Jamin's integral role with the *Die Laughing Collective*, underpins his practice. This is underground on the ground where press releases are sent, photos are taken and articles are written, allowing Jamin's work to travel via complex networked routes to streets, galleries, magazines and newspapers. Formed in 2004 by Jamin, Paicey and Empire, the *Die Laughing Collective* has been an important ambassador for a fledgling Tasmanian street art scene and a strong emerging proponent of contemporary political art in Australia. Under an aptly biting title for a group of three painters, *Die Laughing* proudly produce what they label on their website as 'inbred Tasmanian stencil art'; spreading their message through galleries, festivals and commissions across the country.

MAY'S, May Lane, 2006, Die Laughing Collective





May Lane, 2006, Die Laughing Collective

> *Catch the Fire! (after John Howard)*, 2007 Die Laughing Collective (Jamin, Paicey & Empire)

spray enamel on aluminium, 240 x 240cm





Dissent Disrupt Desert, 2004, Die Laughing Collective (Jamin, Paicey & Empire)
 spray enamel and household paints on MDF, 240 x 1200cm
 Installation views from opening night with Hobart band *The Scandal* performing in space

In Jamin's gallery work, repeated nods to process are made, expanding and opening up the 'behind the scenes' element of the often slick objects he produces. In *Common Ground*, shown at BUS Gallery in Melbourne (2006), the razor-cut brown card stencils through which the paint passes are hung on the wall opposite the paintings. The artifice exposed, the room seems weighted on one side by the stark finality of the stencilled walls, contrasted with the skeletal, paint-stained remains of the stencils themselves, giving a sense of the studio.

At FirstDraft gallery in Sydney (2007), Jamin takes this 'in progress' idea further. The preliminary sketch for a wall painting remains unfinished, becoming a work in itself; the framework of the idea taking over the originally intended resolution, demanding its own wall space. These pauses and moments of reflection taken by Jamin during the production of his work are a vital component of his method. They allow his ideas to spawn their own tangents enabling him to consider his process and be guided by it every step of the way, rather than merely execute a pre-meditated idea. In this work John Howard is contemplative, proselytising; his gesture frozen mid-thought, mid-idea. There is infinite room for interpretation.

A deliberate duality seems to exist between all elements of Jamin's work; the banality and gravity of his subject matter, the serious and the comical, the grungy and the crafted, the finished and the unfinished, the push and the pull of the surface. Skin surfaces decay from a mixture of hand cut inconsistencies, ben-day dots, and video and print artefacts. The works occupy a space between the local and the global, in and around the generic media-scape that has branched out over the world.

In the freehand aerosol works that comprised Jamin's *Tasmania: Explore the Possibilities* exhibition shown at INFLIGHT gallery in Hobart (2007), the framing is tight and journalistic à la the publicity photograph. With visible drips, splashes and

Trevor Flugge (AWB, Our Man in Iraq), 2006 spray enamel on wall, approx. 110 x 120cm, BUS Gallery, Melbourne

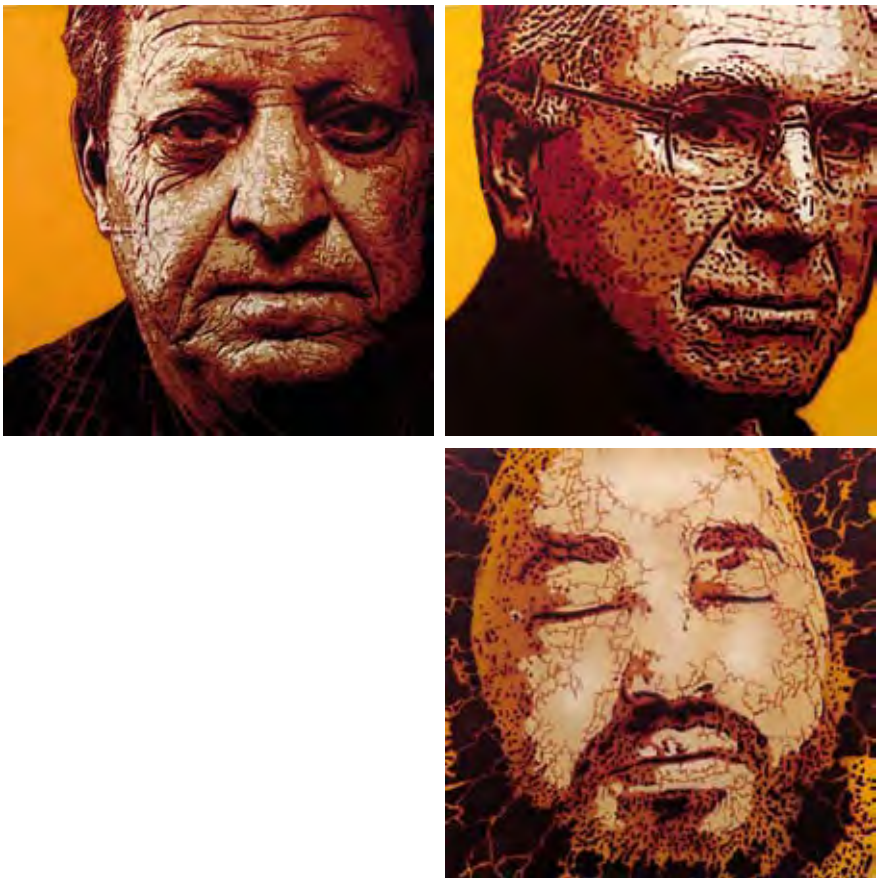




Common Ground, 2006, installation view of wall paintings, BUS Gallery, Melbourne



Common Ground, 2006, installation view of hung stencils, BUS Gallery, Melbourne



John Howard, Terry Hicks, Al Zargawi, 2007
 spray enamel on wall, 55 x 55cm each, Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney
 > John Howard, 2007, graphite pencil on wall, approx 300 x 250cm, Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney



transitions between paint and surface, the presentation of these portraits of Tasmanian political and business figures creates an expanse of dwarfing, shiny, monochromatic squares, moving away from the montaged stencil aesthetic seen in Jamin's earlier works. Small media-quoted panels of text accompanied each painting; presenting information that exposed some of the links and exploits of these powerful men. Formally, a distortion seemed to exist in the imagery of a more innate, gestural nature than the controlled cutting of a stencil. Features decay into darkness through a sinister surreal twist in the converging spray lines, dark eyes becoming vacuous holes. In one painting, Paul Lennon's head becomes bloated by an inner pressure and tension builds as everything takes on a swelling intensity culminating at the surface. There is an immediacy in these works, even more so than in Jamin's stencilled works, where an additional step of separation exists between the painting and the painter. The stencil itself becomes the primary focus for a lot of the labour in those works; where here the painting is deliberate and fast, the gesture akin to a 'throw up' or 'tag' on the street, a more unencumbered message.

The shifting visual planes, multiple perspectives and fragmented narratives that exist in Jamin's works have begun spreading out from the image surface into more sophisticated and subtle forms. No longer are juxtapositions and semiotic plays confined solely within the painting's frame. Instead, they have become more spatial; moving across frames and engaging with the exhibition space itself. What may have appeared as containment in his earlier works, a cramming of as much stencil painting into the frame as possible, has become a leaking out, a cohesion or a thread that moves across different works and surfaces. This heralds a more considered awareness of what these things are; their limitations and their possibilities. They are paintings, objects and images, they are comments, commodities and actions, they are concrete, they are ephemeral.

Paul Lennon, 2007, spray enamel on aluminium, 120 x 120cm





John Gay, 2007, spray enamel on aluminium, 120 x 120cm

> *Robin Gray*, 2007, spray enamel on aluminium, 120 x 120cm





Tasmania: Explore the Possibilities, 2007, INFLIGHT Gallery

While Jamin makes use of some of the formal devices of the 60s Pop Art movement, and of its predecessor Dada, it is necessary to zoom forward from the 1960s, through thousandfold increases of advertising, tech-wars, super-capital, global unrest, and cyberspace. The immersion is now stronger, and singular media images have taken on immense amounts of meaning over these generations. Media is ingrained in the psyche like a hereditary genetic reaction to radiation, passed down through generations.

It is also worth noting that one fairly unifying biographical feature of these Pop artists was a skills base shared between art and some other creative commercial trade such as design, display or printing. Jamin has a trade qualification in print design and still lists this on his curriculum vitae. This is a point of interest as it informs the way he has built his practice, placing his methods within the workings of devices used by advertisers and the media. In fact, in Jamin's practice, the act of painting itself has become industrialised through the use of compressed gas, exhaust fans, breathing apparatus and aluminium surfaces.

Throughout his work over the last few years, Jamin has continued what he describes as a 'long held fascination' with Prime Minister John Howard. John's media persona and the subsequent layers of meaning that can be derived from it have provided Jamin with significant amounts of subject matter. Through his appropriation and representation of media images, Jamin attempts to elevate and re-imbue images we have become so conditioned to seeing with the gravity, or conversely, the absurdity, inherent in their subject matter. The communication Jamin makes is deliberately ambivalent; there is no one overriding message that the viewer needs to 'get', but rather a frozen synthesis of mixed messages that are both inherent in the source media images and further complicated by Jamin's own manipulations of these images. The natural born reproducibility of these works aid the semiotic attacks they contain in reaching a broad audience—a Google image search on Paul Lennon or Terry Hicks, for instance, returns images of Jamin's work in the first few results.

"The suggestions were well received by the Opposition parties", 2006, spray enamel on aluminium, 120 x 120cm





Where The Kick Backs Are (after Maurice Sendak), 2006, spray and high gloss enamel on aluminium, 120 x 240cm

FIRST WE TAKE PARIS, THEN WE TAKE THE WORLD

In a fusion of front-page juxtapositions spawned by the 'news of the day' during the development of these new works, Paris Hilton has become the hero, the enemy, the metaphor and the motivation. In the sinister *Get the Girl, Kill the Baddies and Save the Entire Planet* Paris appears brainwashed. Empty and vacant, a container for meaning. John Howard appears intrinsically aware of both Paris's awesome power as a vehicle for any message imposed upon her, and his own control over the Australian people and relative invulnerability. Howard cackles menacingly skyward, neck muscles taught and constricted with the power and testosterone of patriarchy. Paris, or perhaps popular culture, has become Howard's secret weapon.

Maybe Howard's opponent Kevin Rudd has also come to the same conclusion. In *Closer*, named after the almost ring-tone worthy Nine Inch Nails' song of the same name, a hyper-real Paris is depicted literally melting under a shower of white liquid, sunlight reflecting viscously off her shoulder. Her whole body is caught in opposing angular brush strokes as though caught in a fit of reproduction, a suggested photographer snapping pics in the background. Meanwhile, John Howard and Kevin Rudd look upon the spectacle with an avid, stencilled rigidity. Is this Bondi Beach or the *Scores* strip joint in Manhattan? The cannibalistic, vulture-like nature of media consumption and the cult of celebrity sit at the core of this image, sparing none and brooking no opponents, including politics.

Touched by the Hand of God depicts Paris Hilton as the new Pope, shadowed by a slightly less defined John Howard either hanging on her every word or fading into obscurity. Howard, as the self-declared holder of morality and uprightness, is usurped by glamour, fame and lust. Surfaces blend seamlessly, such as in the freehand sprayed

Get the Girl, Kill the Baddies and Save the Entire Planet, 2007, spray enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm





Closer, 2007, spray enamel and oil paint on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

> *Touched by the Hand of God*, 2007, spray enamel and oil paint on aluminium, 180 x 180cm



edge of Paris's robe, or appear detached, such as a ghostly brush-painted hand suspended in the black of a suggested sleeve. The work is a biting commentary on the tendency of our Western culture to negate or forgive our own indiscretions, through some kind of proprietary ownership of spiritual absolution, whilst simultaneously using the religions of other cultures as proof of their barbarism and wickedness.

The combination of local, national and international, takes on an absurdly surreal quality in the dappled, airbrush-style fantasy of *Don't Cha (wish your girlfriend was hot like me)* in which Tasmanian Premier Paul Lennon's head is spliced with the body of a crawling and overtly sexual, bikini-clad Paris. Referring directly to Paul Lennon's million-dollar image makeover and possibly a perceived prostituting of the Government to business interests, this deformed cut and paste prank is at once visually seductive and grotesque. Jamin poses a biting comment on the production and consumption of personality, from sexpot to politician and back again. He questions the convoluted posed by image makeovers and political spin, where no erasure of or redemption from past misdeeds and flaws are offered, but rather more layers of synthetic materiality are added to the persona—a process that ultimately leads to an exaggeration of those flaws as make-up drips off peeling skin.

Vote or Die uses media publicity from a US ad campaign in which celebrities, including Paris Hilton, were shown wearing t-shirts sporting the slogan 'vote or die'—a statement ironically and unfortunately summing up the actual options for Iraqi citizens of the time. This image is infused with a quote from the captain of the Iraqi football team, Younis Mahmoud, in their Asia Cup win of 2007; an impassioned plea for the US occupation of Iraq to end. The quote is not referenced within the image, leaving ambivalence as to its origin. Did Paris say that? Are those Jamin's words? The 'vote or die' t-shirt becomes a metaphor for a one-sided media representation of a conflict in which the only deaths

Don't Cha Wish Your Girlfriend Was Hot Like Me, 2007, spray enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm



of any consequence are those of the occupiers; all others chalked up as either collateral damage or, as Condoleezza Rice put it, the 'birth pangs' of a new democracy.

It is Paris's ultimate changeability from handy-cam amateur porn star, spoilt rich kid, reality TV character and victimised prisoner to reformed religiously-enlightened persecute that makes her a potent mascot for our 'hidden in plain sight' government. Paris is a Bettie Page, a Marilyn Monroe, a film-clip horror queen; traded in some board-room Masonic handshake for the greater good of our increasingly privatised and mediated Australia. Saddam is her child. John has a plot. People are watching. The whole thing stinks of sex, lies, religion, power, money, greed, torture and aerosol fumes.

Smells like Australian spirit.

SCOT COTTERELL 2007

America, Fuck Yeah! 2007, spray and high gloss enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm





LIST OF WORKS

Get the Girl, Kill the Baddies and Save the Entire Planet, 2007
spray enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

Closer, 2007
spray enamel and oil paint on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

Touched by the Hand of God, 2007
spray enamel and oil paint on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

Don't Cha Wish Your Girlfriend Was Hot Like Me, 2007
spray enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

Smells Like Gay Lennon (John Paul II Remix), 2007
spray enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

Jaundiced Eye, 2007
spray enamel and on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

I Just Died In Your Arms Tonight, 2007
spray enamel and oil paint on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

America, Fuck Yeah!, 2007
spray enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

Internet Killed the Television Star, 2007
spray enamel and oil paint on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

Always Look On the Bright Side of Life, 2007
spray enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm

I Just Died In Your Arms Tonight, 2007, spray enamel and oil paint on aluminium, 180 x 180cm



Smells Like Gay Lennon (John Paul II Remix), 2007,
spray enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm
> *Jaundiced Eye*, 2007, spray enamel on aluminium, 180 x 180cm



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