

Archie Moore: Comic Paintings (2005)

Small details in Archie Moore's *Comic Paintings* from 2005 identify them as closely autobiographical self-portraits. *Archie in Pooh!*, one of the larger paintings, includes the address 34 Bilton St, Moore's childhood home, which has been the subject of many artworks and exhibitions since. Moore grew up in the small town of Tara in the Darling Downs region of rural Queensland on Baraggum Country. He lived with his family in considerable poverty in the Bilton Street house, ramshacked by generations of trauma. Trauma, on his mother's side of the family tree, was the outcome of systematised dispossession from Country and other cultural erasure since colonisation and the spread of pastoralism. The effects of this existentially, emotionally and psychologically numbing inheritance for Archie's family were exacerbated by little or no formal white education and alienation from economic mobility within the colonist's imposed systems. "I didn't have any traditional upbringing, which severed me from any connection. Only a few dirty words in Kamilaroi language survived."¹ Ever present racism infiltrated all aspects of daily life for the young Archie and the social and economic circumstances in which he grew up. In an artist statement in 2014, he wrote about his childhood experience of home:

Where and how I lived was determined by factors of economy, family and identity. We lived on the outskirts of town, in a house of peeling paint and holes. It didn't seem to be worth much and that's how I felt about myself. I would be ridiculed about who I was and the house got the same treatment. [...] Looking at the half-painted house that everyone despised, it seemed to mirror my own sense of futility and entrapment. I felt as dirty, immobile and reluctant to improve as the house appeared. I did eventually leave and the house no longer exists. It became a 'sorry place' after my father had died. It seemed like that for as long as I had known it.²

Whereas in later artworks, Moore recreated three-dimensional domestic environments through the accumulation of found, degraded objects so that he might put viewers 'in his shoes' in a generalised way, the significantly earlier *Comic Paintings* articulate very specific and scarring teenage memories via comic dialogue — speech and thought bubbles and the narrator's voice in captions.

In addition to experiences of home and self-image, the *Comic Paintings* recount stories of bullying in the classroom by students and teachers, discrimination in romance with white girls, the trials of puberty combined with being targeted with racist slurs and, in possibly one of the more confronting works, *Uncle's Stories with Archie*, the confusing anti-social behaviours of a close family member who carries the residue of generational trauma in displays of disturbed mental health. Moore has said of *Uncle's Stories with Archie*, wanting to "allay fears of misogyny" that might be inspired by this work, that his uncle "was a victim of violence — these violent rantings come from a violent place." Elsewhere he has said, "My



father was well-educated and serious but every other adult I had contact with was like a child: doing erratic and silly stuff."³

Moore very often uses text in his work and has done so since art school. An oil on board self-portrait from 1996, ten years before the *Comic Paintings*, when he was still enrolled at QUT, shows a figure bent over with their heart spilling on the floor with the accompanying text, "I have lost the will to love"⁵. Text has enabled Moore to point directly at subjects of concern and their outcomes in the lived experiences of First Nations people. It appears in his work in many forms, both created and found, short and long. As well as its potential as a poetic vehicle, the written word is a vehicle for power, controlled knowledge and an instrument of oppression. Found texts in Moore's work have included bibles, encyclopedias, atlases, parliamentary transcriptions and coroner's reports, all playing different roles in the erasure of First Nations' culture and knowledge.⁶ As artist's materials, these various papers carry Moore's aesthetic of fragility which operates metaphorically in many ways. By contrast, the *Comic Paintings* demonstrate his strident ability with caricature and graphic design, seen elsewhere in his flags and t-shirts, to convey conceptual content. *Archie in Class* is an early example of his fondness for play with words and mathematical symbols. *Archie in Pooh!* is a particularly devastated self-depiction in which he has painted his own name in a typeface of comic excrement, the shit signature being in extreme contradistinction to Moore's demonstrated capacity as a writer and thinker.

Archie found his way from Tara, the scene of the *Comic Paintings*, to Brisbane in his late teens, put himself through a TAFE course, then an undergraduate degree at QUT. A Samstag Scholarship in 2001 saw him studying at the Royal Academy in Prague. A couple of years after his return from Europe, he commenced the NEWflames residency where he made the *Comic Paintings*. Michael Eather, who largely facilitated the residency, recalls:

He had a twinkle in his eyes that seemingly allowed him to touch on some darker truths... about the human condition and, that as Australians, we kind of had a stone in our shoe when it came to race relations...we couldn't always walk evenly. [...] Starting with a large roll of blank canvas he simply cut and made the works to fit the actual wall spaces of the studio gallery. It was a beautifully simple installation. Archie worked effortlessly in a very practical way with longer or shorter 'comic book' compositions that all had mysterious punch lines. Were they jokes, or? [...] As graphic sequences they took another turn and appeared hauntingly real and present as each joke landed with a direct punch to Archie's real life story.

1. Archie Moore in interview with Paris Lettau, *Archie Moore: Dwelling (Victorian Issue)*, exh. text. Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, 2022
 2. Archie Moore, artist statement in *SOUTH: Contemporary Art from Australia, Mexico & South Africa*, exh. cat. Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre, Sydney, 2014, pp. 60-63.
 3. interview with Paris Lettau. In this interview Moore speaks about his uncle in more detail.
 4. Included in his mid-career survey exhibition at Griffith University Art Museum in 2018
 5. Moore has used Hansards in numerous artworks since 2017 when he was given the discarded hardbound volumes by the curators at Australian Parliament House in Canberra. He has turned their pages into origami, screwed up balls, burned piles, pulped and repurposed as handmade paper to replicate government issue blankets.

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26.08.23 — 30.09.23



installation view: Archie Moore — *Comic Paintings* (2005), The Commercial, Sydney, 2023

It is with great pleasure that The Commercial presents an exhibition of Archie Moore's *Comic Paintings* (2005). On loan from a private collection, the *Comic Paintings* have not been seen for almost 20 years. They are an important body of work in the context of Moore's wider practice, dealing with the same themes though in a distinctly different format to anything he has done since.

In 2005, aged 34, Archie Moore undertook a five-week NEWflames residency for emerging First Nations artists, an initiative of the Campfire Group, downstairs at FireWorks Gallery in Brisbane. The outcome was a series of seven very large, unstretched paintings on canvas and one of Moore's earliest solo exhibitions. The paintings, in comic book format, containing short narratives that play upon the coincidence of Moore's name and that of the central protagonist of the American Archie Comics series, parodying differences in life experiences between the central character of Moore's paintings, an Aboriginal boy, and that of the middle-class, white American teen. The painting chapters each deal with a range of subjects:

bullying, poverty, shame, low self-esteem, interrupted romance, abuse of power and other confusing adult messes that the intelligent young Archie had to make sense of.

Moore works across media in research-based portrayals of self and national histories. His ongoing interests include key signifiers of identity (skin, language, smell, home, genealogy, flags), the borders of intercultural understanding and misunderstanding and the wider concerns of racism. Moore has been represented by The Commercial since 2012.

Archie Moore's next solo exhibition will be in the Australia Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale 20.04.24 — 24.11.24, with the exhibition to be curated by Ellie Buttrose, Curator of Contemporary Australian Art at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art. The Venice project will be exhibited at QAGOMA on its return to Australia.

The Commercial would like to thank Michael Eather for his assistance with the Comic Paintings exhibition.

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