

Uber male gets the chop

There is a new take on an age-old symbol of potent male aggression, writes Rosemary Sorensen

WHEN you paint or write about bulls, you are thinking about sex, the cliché goes. Male potency, sexual aggression: such are the simple connotations, which is why bulls' heads and horns adorn so many logos and the word is employed for all kinds of product names for everything from sugary drinks to heavy machinery.

So what are we to make of artist Angus McDonald's meticulous renderings of patient bulls, the expression of their eyes ambiguous (is it in pain?), their massive heads contrasting with their comical pointed ears, the humiliating ring through their nostrils an odd adornment, an imposition of punk ugliness at odds (or the reason for) the sad stillness of the beast?

These bulls, part of a show he calls *Snort!* may well be images of potency tethered and emasculated, but McDonald's bulls are very beautiful, too. And alongside these realistic depictions on canvas, he's showing strange objects, such as a slip-on high-heel shoe, covered in the rough hide of a bull, and a bikini from the same fabric. A rawhide rocking chair and a chaise longue, attractively repulsive pieces of furniture, push the bull metaphor even further into murky territory: is this the domestication of the artist's heroic beast?

McDonald is keen, his own commentary makes clear, to connect his artwork to that of ultra-masculine artists before him: the two big bull-boys, Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso. As an art student, McDonald says, he wanted to "paint the same way that Hemingway wrote, brief and direct".

According to McDonald, when Hemingway wrote about bullfighting, he was talking as much about the "nature of existence" as he was about the "bloody reality" of matadors and baying crowds. The reference to Picasso in McDonald's show at Tim Olsen Gallery in Sydney is even clearer: a driftwood bull reminiscent of Picasso's wicker bull-face mask, and a bronze too, a much bulkier reminder of Picasso's sleek wall-mounted bull's head. Picasso said his bulls were just bulls — not projections of himself, or symbols of Spain or whatever other interpretations have been found. But he wasn't convincing, and the identification of the bullish artist with his meaty subject is fixed now within the lingo of Picasso-speak.

When a Picasso show came to Melbourne a couple of years back, cartoonist Michael Leunig furiously denounced the way the art world and an increasingly avid public trembles before the stylish arrogance of the Spanish painter, whom he called a "hot horny beast, a rampaging, muscular bull with a thick neck, a lavishly pink, meaty tongue and a massive Mediterranean penis which has a paintbrush lashed on to it with cruel straps of Spanish leather".

Leunig's anger was aimed at the creation of this "macho man" artist, an image fired by Picasso himself with his identification as a minotaur. The posters enticing patrons to come and see the exhibition, "slapped up all over the city", wrote Leunig (as though even the city was subjected to aggression in the wake of the arrival of this monstrous male), showed a "classical minotaur whose large pendulous testicles, complete with cleverly fitted castanets, hang out of his bathing costume like two great rustic cheeses, casting their hypnotic spell on matadors and innocent bystanders".

Phew! A cheese casting a spell is not a metaphor that is easily digested, but Leunig was letting his anger hang out like those bullish testicles, pushing his language to the limit to match in print the fury that, paradoxically, we call that of the "raging bull": potent but self-destructive. (*Raging Bull* was the 1980 Martin Scorsese boxing film starring Robert de Niro, and based on the memoir of a boxer who beat up his wife out of uncontrollable jealousy.)



Tethered and emasculated: Angus McDonald's *Buffet* is a soft, ambiguous rendering of a powerful sexua symbol



Domesticated: A slip on high-heel covered in rough bull hide

Picasso's minotaurs and bulls are aggressive, snorting creatures, often suffering, but certainly not in silence. If they were, as art criticism has it, images of himself as the ultimate, doing battle with the pesky but essential and always-present female, they were also distillations of form.

The venerable American art historian, Irving Lavin, once wrote a lecture on "Picasso's Bull" in which he described the bull lithographs created at the end of 1945 as the artist's search for "an elemental disembodied, quintessential bulliness". In those lithographs, Lavin observed, "the progressive diminution in the relative size of the head and the genitalia, (which are) surely metaphors for rationality and brutishness. Picasso's bull

was headed toward a preternatural state of illuminated absent-mindedness and incorporeality, before it had acquired the bulky accretions of sophisticated European culture." Lavin's own prose, in such an example, seems "headed toward a preternatural state of illuminated absent-mindedness", bold, but lush to the point of absurdity. What he went on to say in that essay was that Picasso's increasingly stylised lithographs of bulls transformed from a lifelike drawing to a fluid line, as simple and strong as the cave paintings of bulls at Lascaux in France.

We could add that they are as mysterious and haunting: not so much bulls as the artistic embodiment of an idea or, rather, a belief. If the ancient people of Europe revered bulls,

Picasso might have been saying, then so ought we, and for the same reasons. The idea of a bull, simply, is a belief in the potent primacy of the male, the belief that nature's power is embedded in the brute when the biggest bulls.

It's this admiration for the simple, the rejection of the feminine curlicue and trivialising adornment, that appears to have drawn McDonald to the prose of he-man huntin'-shootin'-fishin' Hemingway. But even Hemingway (who, after all, liked cats) found ambiguity in the bull when it was subjected to that most vulgar of spectacles, the bullfight.

To those who, like Hemingway and Picasso, see in the bullfight a glorious struggle between man and beast, noble in its suffering and uplifting in its ritualistic violence, it seems obvious to point out that, for every matador skewered and slain, thousands of bulls are slaughtered.

When he wrote *Death in the Afternoon*, in 1932, Hemingway justified his interest in bullfighting by saying that he was "trying to learn to write, commencing with the simplest things, and one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental is violent death".

Why violent death should be termed "simple" is puzzling, as is Hemingway's insistence in that book that a matador must use honest skills to kill the beast, not his cunning. It's interesting to go back to one of the first reviews of *Death in the Afternoon*, in *The New York Times* in September 1932, to hear the reviewer, R.L. Duffus, suggesting that the "famous Hemingway style" suffers a fit of the vapours in his bull-fighting treatise, comparing it to "the later stages of Henry James" (which must have been peculiarly cruel criticism for the likes of

Hemingway). Duffus says that the book is "at least vigorous and healthy. He is no more vulgar than life and shows as much good taste as death".

Hemingway's premise was that bullfighting is a tragedy, and it's the matador's duty to make this tragedy graceful and therefore "beautiful to watch". There is an echo of the way the death of the bull is, in a slightly convoluted way, seen as a path to redemption for a man in a quote from a book that McDonald says he was reading as he was working on his *Snort!* exhibition.

Published in 1952, the book, by Vincente Marrero, is about Picasso's bull imagery. Marrero writes: "The greatest art will be that which, taking anguish as its point of departure, will triumph over it and give humanity confidence in its power and salvation. This is also the basis of all classical mythology and its dawn, it has been said, rose from the blood of a dead bull."

Off we go to our mythologies, which are, indeed, replete with bull-slayings and blood-lettings, men defying animal-shaped gods and fertility rituals full of violence. McDonald's appealingly bovine subjects — at least the ones he depicts alive and before flaying — look at us not, surely, as images of anguish, but they are confronting.

Maybe any animal, or any thing, becomes both beautiful and confronting when an artist pours into their representation as much awe and care as McDonald has lavished on his bulls in *Snort!*

Would this show work just as well, have the same kind of memorable impact, with a few cows thrown in?

Snort! Works by Angus McDonald, at Tim Olsen Gallery, Woollahra, Sydney, March 11-29.