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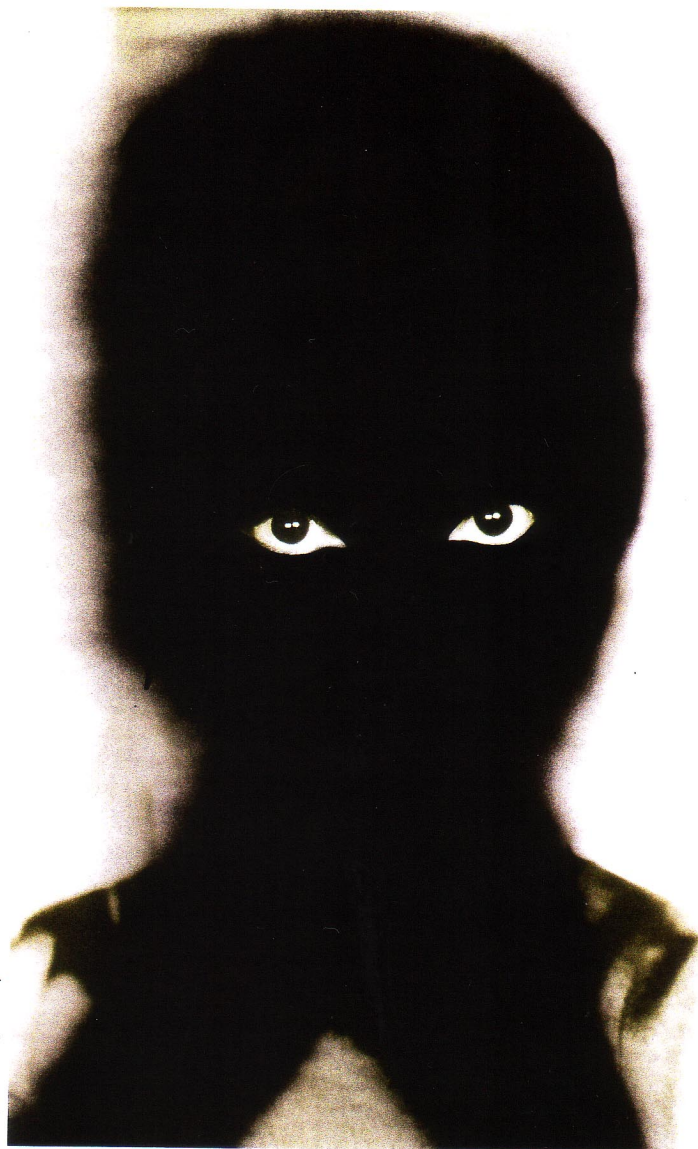


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YOKO ONO + MAX GIMBLETT + CALLUM MORTON + BEN CAUCHI + DAVID BAND + DEREK O'CONNOR + SAMUEL TUPOU
JUDE RAE + OPTIMISM + BEATRIZ MILHAZES + JUSTINE COOPER + GRADUATE EXHIBITIONS + TONY GARIFALAKIS

REVIEW



Courtesy the artist and Uplands Gallery

Tony Garifalakis, *cover ups* (2008), enamel paint on offset print, 103 x 71.5cm

*p140 Ricky Maynard p141 John McDonald's Art of Australia p142 Short cuts
p144 Graduate exhibitions p148 SCAPE p150 Half Light: Portraits from
Black Australia p152 Optimism p154 Tony Garifalakis*

Review Exhibitions



Tony Garifalakis

Cover Ups, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, 24 Oct – 15 Nov 2008

A New York residency marked a turning point for this Melbourne artist, as evidenced by his recent collection of haunting images

WORDS: Mark Feary

"Garifalakis's pictures bear essentially no relationship to the original source material, except for minor uncensored details – such as eyes and teeth... Viewers need only know that this may relate to you, or someone like you, but that's it."

Featuring the deliberate erasure of found pictorial elements, the works in Tony Garifalakis's most recent exhibition present as a subversive disruption of information. The project – the culmination of research undertaken while Garifalakis was resident at New York's International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) – signifies a dramatic shift in the artist's practice from rough mixed-media constructions to a collection of slick, dark works. Adopting formal installation techniques akin to those used in traditional museological presentations, the framed wall-based works and central sculptural element offer a stripped-back approach that on first consideration seems at odds with many of Garifalakis's previous installations. The works themselves are like vandalised posters, carefully preserved in archival box frames, with the images on each eradicated to such a degree that their intended representation and contained messages are all but dispensed with, providing only elusive traces of their source. They gleam with the multi-layered texture of black spray-paint, the result of a repetitious working (and reworking) of their surfaces.

The exhibition, titled *Cover Ups*, builds on Garifalakis's research of declassified FBI documents from security investigations. Invariably, when these documents are released into the wider public realm their content is almost entirely overrun by the thick, decisive strikes of censorship – be it in the name of state protectionism or accountability. The resulting documents are almost entirely devoid of coherence or meaning, like the offer of information without the burden of explanation or context. In their

declassified form they appear as black line drawings interspersed with occasional text elements. Garifalakis has adopted this process of censorship as a strategy for eliminating meaning and shifting the context of information, with diminishment adopted as an aesthetic and conceptual device. In a time of visual and psychological saturation, Garifalakis is almost suggesting that we see less – that we ought to eliminate what we know and understand – for we have most likely been led astray.

Black is not only a frequently appearing colour within the artist's practice, but a recurrent and permeating concept. So much so that even in the absence of black, these works are undeniably enveloped in darkness. While Garifalakis is frequently cited as a celebrant and advocate of *memento mori* (a latent awareness of the possibility of death), his practice builds on the Christian fear of death's inevitability, exalting it as a desired outcome. His work seems to support and celebrate mortality, acknowledging death's arrival and welcoming its reign. Garifalakis's practice proposes something almost Heaven's Gate-esque in its optimism towards the next phase. His concerns allude to a cultish and outlandish devotion to a perspective that is nearly incomprehensible. If life for members of the Heaven's Gate sect was made glorious by the suicide pact that would deliver their "vehicles" to the space ship that would provide eternal paradise [38 of the American cult's adherents killed themselves in 1997], so too the sinister in Garifalakis's work transposes us to a point of clarity, a celebratory disposition.

Previous projects by the artist have involved immersive environments

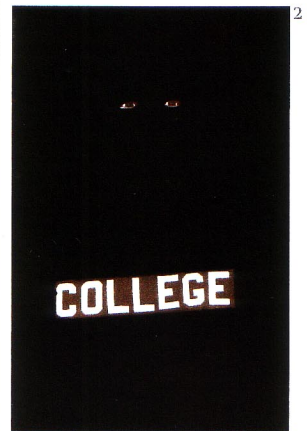
featuring elaborate wall drawings and delicately rendered watercolours depicting decidedly masochistic subject matter. The dead are always more prevalent in Garifalakis's work than what is comfortable – with finely coiffed skulls, the suicide notes of serial killers and Armageddon-focused prophecies all being offered a platform. His installations frequently resemble the aftermath of a birthday party for the Antichrist: colourful and celebratory, yet undeniably depraved.

Yet Garifalakis's latest offering indicates a change of tack, with an almost conservative elegance coming into play. The formalism in the exhibition's layout seems to nod to minimalism, yet posits – or rather, strangulates – this in the here and now. The reductionism seems no longer a reaction to the decorative and representational in art, but to the excesses of commercial advertising and identity-manufacturing endemic within contemporary culture. The process of eliminating the image to a point beyond recognition serves as a filtering device towards a non-specific end. Garifalakis's pictures bear essentially no relationship to the original source material, except for minor uncensored details – such as eyes and teeth – that have evaded the process of censorship. Viewers need only know that this may relate to you, or someone like you, but that's it. The works encourage us to see more through seeing less. They depict cities and individuals forgetting and losing themselves, erasing their own presence, or having that unavoidable fate determined by something else.

Cover Ups offers us documents of sorts, carefully contained, so that they may be viewed rather than fully read. This is perhaps best exemplified in Garifalakis's sculptural piece, which

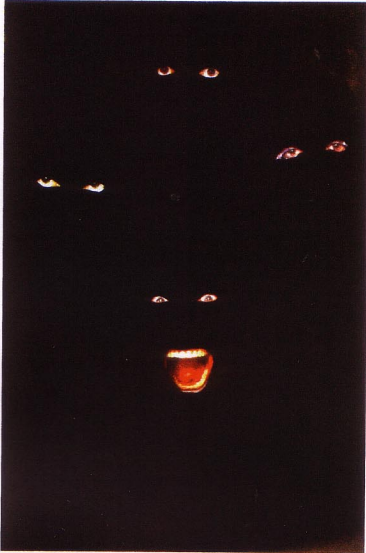
incorporates three "censored" texts on a trestle table. It suggests that the texts are there as proof of something; yet that "something" is undefined, as their contents remain off limits, painted closed. Given that these texts are in fact international art magazines, their closure could indicate them as coded publications that encrypt the industry around them. Yet meaning is evasive, with so much of the exhibition's information "covered up." The artist is making us paranoid.

Garifalakis's work exists at a point of post-fear of the post-apocalyptic. His pieces revel in that which is often unpalatable or distasteful, yet never through a strategy of shock. *Cover Ups* continues a determined trajectory of research into the unknown and the unfathomable while elucidating the artist's unyielding confidence to experiment and redefine his practice, dispensing with ubiquitous elements without compromising the idiosyncratic language he has so uncompromisingly developed over the past decade.



1 *Cover Ups*, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, installation view 2, 3, 4 & 5 cover ups (2008), enamel paint on offset print, 100 x 70cm
6 cover ups (2008), enamel paint on offset print, 67 x 98.5cm

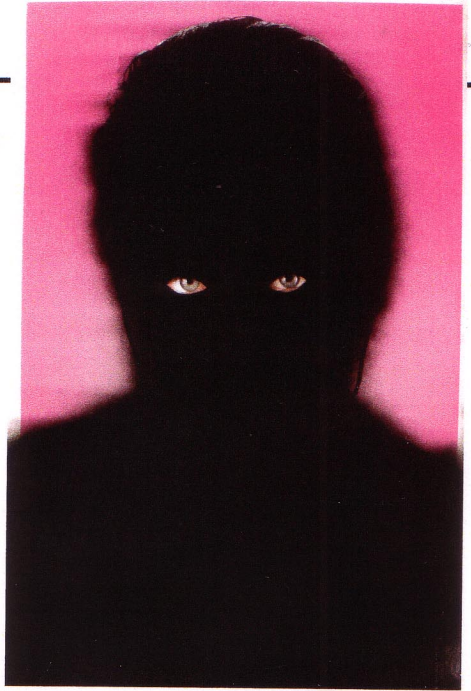
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