



Artist Shaun Gladwell lets go of control in latest exhibition, shows skill and breadth of interests

By Rachel Robinson

Updated 3 Dec 2015, 3:24am



PHOTO: Severed Heads (A Caelo Usque Ad Centrum), 2015 from Shaun Gladwell's exhibition The Inspector of Tides. (Supplied: Shaun Gladwell and Anna Schwartz Gallery. Photograph by Dean Tirkot.)

Shaun Gladwell's latest exhibition sees him collaborating with some of his contemporaries in the art world and returning to an old friend, the skateboard, Rachel Robinson writes.

In both cases, there is a conscious attempt to be open to forces outside of his control. "I'm not above anything, I'm a purveyor of trash, I love it," Shaun Gladwell confesses. One of Australia's most well-known video artists, Gladwell is walking and talking with me in the Anna Schwartz gallery at Sydney's Carriageworks.

The gallery, an outpost of the Melbourne-based company, will close its Sydney doors at the end of the year with Gladwell's latest exhibition, The Inspector of Tides, its last hurrah. We are here to discuss that exhibition, as well as Gladwell's upcoming large-scale video installation for the Sydney Festival, and yet somehow we have digressed onto The Archibald Prize — Australia's most popular, and therefore slightly uncool, event on the arts calendar. "I love the Archibald, a lot of my friends in the experimental camp are like, they think the Archibald's are hell, but for me I like it because it has the biggest amount of audience members coming through than any other show at the Art Gallery of NSW," Gladwell said. "It's entry level stuff, but that entry level is where I really think the work needs to be done."

Gladwell is a thoughtful artist; well-travelled and well-versed in art history and theory. He was dubbed the most successful video artist in Australia after the [2007 record-breaking sale of his work Storm Sequence, 2000](#), a hypnotic loop of Gladwell skateboarding as the rain approaches Bondi Beach behind him. Two years later, he was tapped on the shoulder to represent Australia at the 2009 Venice Biennale.

Gladwell is now London-based but, as a self-described boy from the suburbs of Sydney, remains conscious of his roots. Recurring themes in his work include a grappling with national identity and a fascination with appropriating public space through activities such as skateboarding and breakdancing. "Because, say I work with a popular subject matter like skateboarding, I extend my audience automatically.

"Or BMX riding or snowboarding or whatever it is, that subject matter might get to audience members maybe, even more importantly, younger audience members who don't have the connection to art. "Not that I want to lead them back into the museum, it's not like I'm trying to convert people into the cult of contemporary art, it's just that it's nice to know that people might be able to get into your work based on what the performance is about and not even think about it as art."

Gladwell's latest exhibition, *The Inspector of Tides*, is a collection of paintings, photographs video and installation, tied together by the theme of collaboration. For the show, Gladwell invited various artists to create works with him, including Fiona Lowry, Daniel Boyd and Matthys Gerber. This willingness to open up his artistic practice to transformation by another hand points to a deliberate move by Gladwell "to try different things in the spirit of experimentation".

So it is perhaps slightly ironic that, while *The Inspector of Tides* does showcase the range of Gladwell's skill and the breadth of his interests, the work that stands out is yet again a video work featuring skateboarding — *Self Portrait Spinning and Falling in Paris, 2015*. Based on a fifteen-year-old series of photos taken of Gladwell skateboarding in various sites around Paris, for the artist the work is "a conversation with my own past".

There is something almost childlike about the piece; watching Gladwell spinning on his skateboard in front of historical and cultural Parisian landmarks like The Louvre and The Bastille feels like a joyous indulgence, a little bit like mucking up. That sense of play is counteracted by the meditative, hypnotic sensation of watching a grown man slowly spin, arms open, embracing the inevitability of falling.

"This is a pretty obvious metaphor for a cycle," Gladwell says about the video. "This idea of releasing is quite powerful as well, it certainly felt like a release." When Gladwell does fall and hit the ground, you can feel the physical impact, but you can also sense the liberation that comes from loosening the grip of control. It is not something that is easy to do — switching off of the voice that tells you to self-protect, to keep holding on.

Reflecting on the process of letting himself fall, Gladwell says: "Some of them [the falls] are good and they hurt and I feel pretty proud about them, and others are really pathetic, like I look at them and go wow, I was really chicken, I was trying to break my fall before I even fell." Opening up to the creativity that is so often born from making mistakes, and actively seeking a broadening of perspective by inviting others to collaborate in his work is "more interesting for me than being stuck in the studio on my own just producing work in way that I would've been known for twenty years ago I guess," Gladwell says.

"I think that freedom is what attracted me to this game anyway. So when it becomes very formulaic and when it becomes so consistent that someone can identify your work from one show to the next, that for me is maybe a little bit of a problem." Shaun Gladwell's *Inspector of Tides* is at the Anna Schwarz Gallery in Sydney until Saturday December 19, 2015.

His next project will be a [large scale video work, Skateboarders vs Minimalism, for the Sydney Festival in January 2016.](#)

Ref: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-03/shaun-gladwell-lets-go-of-control-in-latest-exhibition/6998686>