

the dark arts

MILES BROWN is imposing in stature, yet when I sat down with him for this interview, what we found even more imposing was his talent, ambition and passion for his dark art.

FORTY-TWO

PHOTOGRAPH BY JES SMITH

Raised in the music scene in Hobart and graduating with a degree in fine arts, Miles Brown has continued to mix the two disciplines throughout his career. He's a maker of indefinable sculptures using vintage tees and found materials. Miles's philosophy: "I like the idea of taking old materials and making new objects, especially second-hand clothing things that people have worn on their body."

The first shift in Miles's development came when, shortly after leaving art school, he found himself sharing studio space with a crew of street artists. He noticed that the crew spent time instructing younger artists and each other; it was an atmosphere of community and amicable competition. "Their whole culture revolves around doing art... I think I lamented that there wasn't some shit-hot sculpture crew I could fall in with."

Miles began working with T-shirts soon after. "I had a show coming up and I wanted to get a new body of work. At the same time I'd started playing in a metal band again, dating a Goth girl... I thought being in (a pseudo-teen environment) was an interesting contrast with trying to be a hip young artist." This drew him to taking disparate parts of his life, trying to make them fit together and seeing what places they occupied in his psyche. At this time Miles also began to consider fashion and presented through clothing — though he was not convinced it wasn't all art and glamour.

The first pieces were pseudo-paintings: cut up and re-sewn T-shirts with graphics on the inside. These hang on the wall, black and intimidating in the multi-dimensionality that differentiates them from conventional painting. The aggression and menace of the bands portrayed on the shirts translates effectively when recontextualised as art. The next pieces, created for a group show, were three coffins — one for each of the participating artists — made entirely from second-hand heavy metal tees with the images on the outside. The garish imagery combined with the sombre subject matter began an exploration of human darkness that would be amplified in his following works — though Miles considered dropping the use of T-shirts, since at the time the Melbourne art and music scenes had come closer together. Even as a pioneer, he didn't want to tread over old ground, but instead of abandoning his ideas, he focused them.

Towering life size is an alley doorway — complete with steps, oil. Flecks of colour and fragments of words appear to be made of and rippled, when photographed it appears to be made of into another world as effectively as any functional doorway. The speakers in the room emit a harsh and disconcerting noise. "I went and pissed in the doorway, slowed it down and put it through the distortion pedals you'd use in a metal band."

The doorway spoke to Miles of real darkness in the world: the darkness of forgotten and misused places. "Everyone has places they walk past and I think, 'That freaks me out' for reasons they can't put their finger on." The doorway is a replica of one in a Melbourne alleyway, an out-of-the-way alcove most frequently used as a makeshift toilet. "So it's just this fetid and disgusting place... everyone walks past it really quickly; it's not the sort of place you want to linger. It really stuck in my mind."

Several other pieces followed, such as a presidential podium made from suits, with noise provided by the incidental sounds George W. Bush makes between words in his speeches. Though it often represents disturbing subject matter, there is no wonder then that Miles's work is both unique and beautiful. It is no T-shirt skull for their seven-year anniversary.

Suspended in mid-air, it's a celebration, albeit an odd one, of placement of various images and words on the surface of the skull — this is perhaps due to the fact that "14-year-old Miles would have loved nothing more than to build a giant tucking skull hanging from the ceiling" — part of the fun being the cutting up of vintage shirts, transforming the piece as really collaborative. "I really like the designs that SCHWITZE use, so you end up with a piece that's all these layers, it's a big skull but it's also all the shirts and all the designs." JW

