

‘Rust Belt’ by Will Bennett

No art is apolitical. Ever since the red problematic arose regarding an audience in the production of artworks, art has been irrevocably entangled in the political: "for whom does one make art?" Evidently, the proletariat. Only the bourgeois creative claims their art is for everybody, anybody, or nobody. This has become an even more immediate problem with the culture industry set on the BDS crosshair. But the division between "us" and "them" must be based on class if it is to avoid the fascistic determination of 'friends' and 'enemies'.

Jah's work here at Bus is a response to the film 'Blue Collar' (1978) which depicts three workers - each of the actors were told by the director they were the main character - struggling economically, disrespected by their boss and let down by their union, who decide to rob the union office safe where they discover its been running like a loan shark with member's dues. The film defies the realist principles in its portrayal of union representatives as caricatures of corrupt bureaucratic hypocrites, rather than the conditions under which such greedy opportunists came to gain control of the unions. It fails to see the totality of the real conditions of experience, and suffices on the surface with the appearance of things. The three workers are essentially self-interested, and their destinies are determined by their own selfish intentions - one of the workers can't afford to pay for his daughters braces, so she makes her own and cuts her lips all up (The Simpsons spun this in the 'dental plan-Lisa needs braces' episode). Unions aren't intrinsically red, and left to their own spontaneous ideology they end up in anarcho-syndicalism, at best. They are concerned primarily with economic problems, but require the supplement of dialectical materialism for a political spine.

A giant inflatable rat is still set out front of workplaces in the States that employ scab labour during a strike. Jah's rat trap is big enough for Scabby to pop under its jaws. There's something deeply entrenched in the Australian settler psyche with big things, like the oversized monuments of regional produce that litter the east coast, there's something dumb and obvious which operates as a continuation of the bad joke upon which this peculiar capitalist federation was founded.

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The giant rat trap feels as if it's going to go off, like you gotta tip toe around it, and it feels like the thing would splinter into a million pieces if it did.

Aesthetically Jah's stuff is clearly aligned with the ideals of Arte Povera with the set of Ratsak works. Rat's have also served metaphorically as a way to dehumanise one's political enemy, in lieu of any real substantial political deal to stand by it resorts to shit slinging. Ratsak also conjures ideas of domestic homogeneity, the packaging of the poison and its industrial production highlights ways that violence is commercialised within the broader military industrial complex. The blue of the poison is analogical with the brutal death of one of the workers when he's locked in the spray paint booth oy a forklift over the front door, and the panic is visceral, like the idea of a rat dehydrating to death, so fucken thirsty you could fucken die.

Jah Maskell 'Rust Belt'

'Rust Belt' draws upon a scene from a movie that really stuck with me. Paul Schrader's 1978 masterclass, 'Blue Collar', sees Richard Pryor, Harvey Keitel and Yaphet Koto as checker-cab manufacturers trying to improve their working conditions through union action in the Northeast and Midwest of the United States, now in its deindustrialised state is known as the 'Rust Belt'. Finding their union as useless and self-invested as their workplace management, they snare themselves in a plot to bend the union to their will, ultimately backfiring. There is a moment in the film in which one of the characters asphyxiates after being locked in a spray booth. Murder by spray booth, pretty wild.

I became fixated on this scene, as he winces and convulses choking on the paint fumes gasping for air, which drags on for an uncomfortable three minutes. I started to draw parallels between the imagery of factory life, factory farming, unionisation and scabs, suffocation of industry and pest management. It got me thinking of Ratsak - a second generation rodenticide introduced in the 1970s and 1980s, the same period in which the film is set. Throughout their production, Ratsak uses the chemicals Brodifacoum, Bromadiolone and Difenacoum, all of which inhibit the rodent's desire to take on water. This inevitably leads to forced dehydration, brain swelling and forms of coagulopathy. Again, just wild and really grim shit.

I think what I'm finding interesting in unpacking these points of interest are the comparisons that could be drawn between the factory line in 'Blue Collar' and the baiting of rodents. There's a weird synchronicity between the mass destruction of life, the suffocation of industry and corruption, and how it all fits this hierarchical model of how life is valued? Weirdly referential at times to Heidegger's "being-towards-death," which is incredibly rogue, but someone smarter than me could probably explain that a lot better. The works reference geographical locations along the 'Rust Belt', as the industrial and pitch

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of the American Dream suffocates to its death.

Jah Maskell is a sculpture and video based artist living and working in Naarm/Melbourne. He completed his Bachelor of Fine Art (Honours) in 2021, at the Victorian College of the Arts. Selected exhibitions include Undoing at George Paton Gallery (2018), No it Aint World War 4 at Discordia (2020), Away at COMA Gallery (2020), and Paris Will Survive at Blindside (2023). Maskell was also commissioned by The University of Melbourne to contribute work to the 757 Art Project, and in 2021 was awarded the NGVWA Award.

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