



# Azlan McLennan

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Article by Michael Ascroft

'Political art' has been a niche genre in international art practice, particularly since the 1960s. From stalwarts like Hans Haacke and Barbara Kruger to more recent stars like Santiago Sierra and Kendall Geers, artists have sought to open a space to the political left of the (frequently bland) model of 'institutional critique' by directly engaging with struggles for political power. Azlan McLennan's work uses the techniques of these already established artists while responding to a different political situation.

*Art in Capitalist Society* is a four metre high banner by McLennan of Melbourne gallerist Anna Schwartz. Superimposed over the portrait is an excerpt from Karl Marx's *Capital*, giving a general account of capitalist-labour relations. This piece was exhibited at the VCA graduate show in December 2005. Contributing to the work's authoritarian air was the incidental fascist-sounding orchestral music, which was part of an adjacent work, and the banner's placement on the landing in the Margaret Lawrence gallery, framed beautifully by large windows, steel supports and the grand staircase. Sure, it was amusing (for many) to equate Anna Schwartz's position in the Melbourne art world with that of a dictator, but it was also telling who didn't find it so funny; who missed the point and who took the bait. Essentially the temptation to reject the work based on it being overly simplistic, reductive

propaganda – despite the clear implication of 'taking sides' with art world nobility – was too much for some. A self-consciously 'left leaning' Melbourne art world was revealed to operate like any other establishment institution.

The function of propaganda is to spread ideas, not only to subvert or distort information. *Art in Capitalist Society* reveals as much as a government-sponsored TV campaign, it shows how propaganda effectively plays on real divisions. A case in point might be: 'Melbourne gallerist Anna Schwartz is rich and powerful, meanwhile you are oppressed and exploited'. Propaganda can also incite social division, for example, 'All Muslims are potential terrorists' or 'refugees will take your jobs'. What matters is the degree to which propaganda can be popularised and help to shape opinion.

The media have played a major role in framing the reception of McLennan's work so far. By word count, he may be Melbourne's most talked-about artist, even if the majority of that talk has been negative, or has at least distorted the work's intent. The instance of *Fifty-Six*<sup>1</sup> was symptomatic, where a highly reproduced photograph of the work was cropped so that the Israeli flag that the work actually depicted instead appeared as a Star of David, giving substance to the otherwise false accusations of anti-Semitism.



**Across:** Azlan McLennan  
*Art in Capitalist Society*, 2005  
 Print on vinyl banner  
 100 x 400cm  
 Image courtesy the artist

**Above:** Azlan McLennan  
*Mind the Gap*, 2004  
 Video still  
 Image courtesy the artist

In another recent work, *Mind the Gap*, McLennan engages a different tactic. This two minute video uses footage posted on the internet of the execution of British hostage Kenneth Bigley in Iraq from October 2004. It begins with the hostage takers reading out a statement, overlaid with scrolling quotes from Tony Blair, news reports of racist violence in Britain and statistics of Iraqi civilian deaths from the beginning of the war. The video's horrifying ending is the execution of Bigley by the captors. *Mind the Gap* ties together Blair's foreign and domestic policy with the Bigley killing, positing a murderous link between them. Scheduled to exhibit at the Monash University Drawing symposium in October 2005, the University pulled the video from the show on the day of the symposium. McLennan did actually exhibit a work at Monash University, which was a scaled-down version of *Canberra's 18*; a work that was ironically due to be exhibited at Platform gallery in September 2005 before it was preemptively banned by Melbourne City Council.

Apart from the similarities in aesthetic and delivery, one consistent device that runs through the different works is McLennan's utilitarian approach to confrontation and, in relation to several pieces, the cold formality with which graphic violence is depicted. Such brutality sends affective shocks across the political spectrum, yet particularly targets conservatives and small-L liberals in the art world. The dilemma for those receptive to left-wing politics within the liberal ideological framework is that nice, agreeable liberal

humanism tends to get torn down by the use (and depiction) of violence. To those who are unreceptive, it reveals the primary contradiction of blasé, postmodern liberalism – 'indifference to politics really means passive acceptance of capitalist politics'.<sup>2</sup>

On a purely practical level then, McLennan's use of violence and his willingness to test censorship restrictions is based upon political necessity rather than shock-for-shock's-sake. A positive side effect of this is that the media love a scandal and this can massively increase the visibility of the work. With the arrival of the new sedition laws we face the prospect of being criminalised for displaying even the vaguest anti-government sentiment. In this context we need to consider how federal politics of sedition may already have a comfortable ally in certain fears of subversion within the Australian art scene.

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<sup>1</sup> *Fifty-Six* is a work first shown at 24seven, an artist-run gallery in Melbourne in May 2004. The work was removed from exhibition 48 hours after the opening by order of the Melbourne City Council; the Council had received numerous complaints about the work's alleged anti-Semitism.

<sup>2</sup> *Program of the DSP* (1994), New Course Publications, Sydney, pg77.

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