

## Michael Newall

I was very happy to be paired as a writer with Will Nolan. I've been away from Adelaide/Tarntanya, for the most part, since the early 2000s. I didn't know Will, and barely knew his practice. Nolan has established himself as an artist since then, part of a generation that now defines the art world here. His work can look disconcertingly new. Stylish in colour and design, cool in attitude, almost aggressively hip. But for those who like to feel out the connections, Nolan is part of an Adelaide lineage, one that began with the classic postmodern moves of Mark Kimber. Kimber was a teacher of Nolan's at UniSA in the 2000s, and now Nolan is himself influential, teaching at Adelaide College of the Arts.

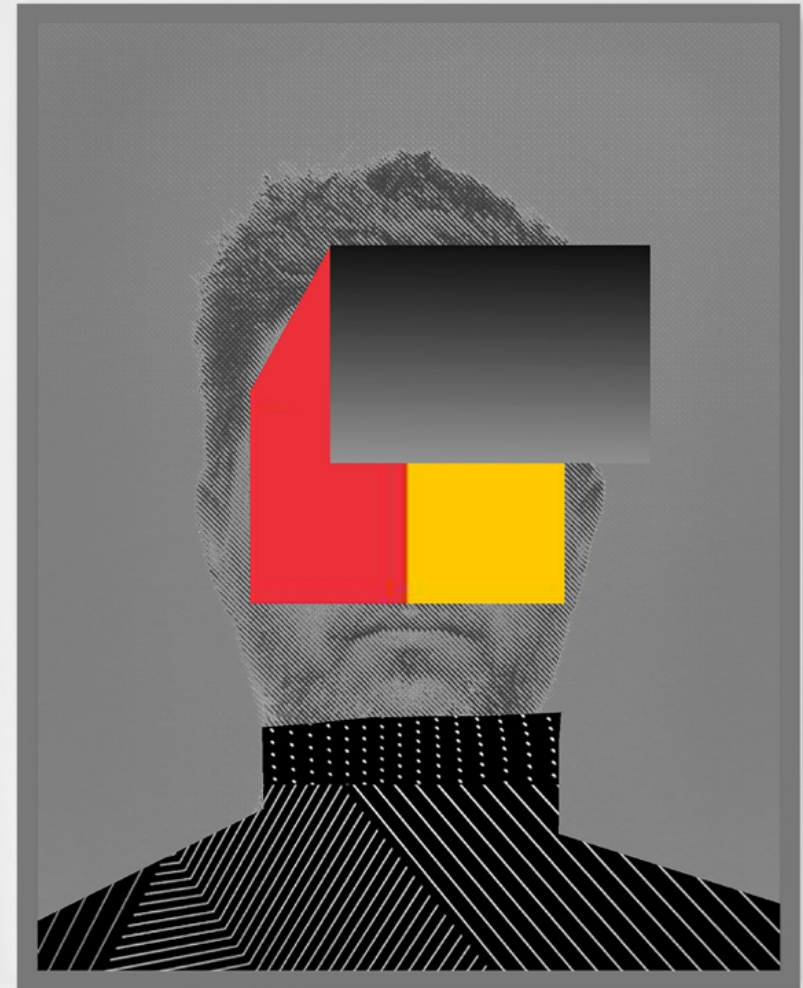
Currently conspicuous in Nolan's practice are his self-portraits: large-scale photographs showing digitally collaged elements. They begin with what appears to be the same photographic image, of Nolan's face, pasting over it images of objects—sunnies, 3-D glasses, a popsicle, on-trend beanies, a pipe—plus bold, zinging graphic elements—colour blocks, grids and other geometric elements. Where's the artist in all this? Under the mass of colour, pattern and imagery—hiding, effaced, stand-offish—the visual antics a mask, maybe. That thought is encouraged by some of his earlier works. His photographs of melted popsicles, *Everything is Melting* (2010), sweet *memento mori*—too attractive for their own good. Or another series, *You're Not Worth a Thing* (2011), showing filled black garbage bags, their folds gleaming like obsidian.

As I've said, Nolan's self-portraits are collages of a kind. I wonder, what are the syntax and semantics of this practice? How do its components, its elements combine, and what do these combinations express? Pop, Cubism, and Surrealism have their own broad logics. Talking with Nolan, I got the sense that he found tiresome any mention of Peter Blake-ish Pop, ready as it is for assimilation back into popular culture. Fair enough. What about Cubist collage then? After all, there's something in Nolan's work of the qualities that Clement Greenberg admired in Synthetic Cubism—its formal satisfactions. And there's facingness too—the orientation of form to the picture plane—as that other formalist, Michael Fried calls it—which is about all that's left of Nolan's own face in his self-portrait works. But perhaps the Surrealist logic makes most sense. Surrealist collage or assemblage is an outlet for the expression of the unconscious: desires and anxieties that we bundle up and repress. That repressed psychic energy, however we might describe it, is the opposite of the public face. I wonder if, for Nolan, that's what lies behind the zany act. It's what fills his black garbage bags. It's the darkness and entropy behind the *luxe, calme et volupté*.

Nolan's plans for Neoteric show a variety of characteristic works, positioned together with sculptural and installational elements. The plan, at the time of writing, is to show (1) a number of the self-portraits, (2) a series of pairs of wall-mounted red and green light bulbs, and (3) a yellow scuba tank placed on a plinth.

The pairs of red and green lights are part of a series of works likely to have titles such as 'sweat-touch', 'bored-horny', and 'wink-focus'. These are among a series of terms and concepts that have a long presence in Nolan's work, ordering the physical and emotional into binary categories—and here into binary code. Each pair of lights blinks in a sequence encoding its title. The red and green lights are drawn from the navigation lights on ships—sidelights indicating port and starboard, and mastlights used to send coded messages. Taken out of that context, these lights also become polysemic, suggesting stop/go, danger/safety, *etcetera*. Nolan transmutes these (literally and figuratively) 'floating' signifiers into a syncopated play of sensation, colour and beauty for viewers to navigate in their own ways. As Nolan says, the lights are, 'to do with navigation and how the viewer interacts with the works prompted by the title.'

Nolan's sculptural works sometimes have the feel of visual jokes. The yellow scuba tank will have vinyl text on one side reading 'TICK', and on the other, 'TOCK'—luring the viewer into close quarters, only to find it ticking like a bomb (and recalling also a certain social media platform). Nolan's strategy here is 'activating objects through pairing of objects', as he puts it—the text here counting as an object. I think it will feel darkly comic—and be one more instance, in Nolan's work, of binary code and telling juxtaposition channelling the larger powers of sensuous form, the unconscious, and the id of popular culture.



Will Nolan