

WHEN IT COMES TO DISCRIMINATION JOHN BROOKES NO ARGUMENT

Artist John Brookes chats to BMA Bossman Allan Sko about his new exhibition that examines modern anti-disability propaganda

MENTAL HEALTH SUFFERERS ARE TWICE AS LIKELY TO BE ON BENEFITS



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MINISTRY FOR COST-EFFECTIVE DISABILITY

Combining artistry with lived experience disability, England-born Canberra artist John Brookes has created a propaganda poster-inspired series, cleverly subverting the call-to-action form to create a forceful examination of our attitude towards fellow humans.

If you think you "don't have an ableist bone in your body" and that the media portrays those living with disability evenly and fairly, this exhibition is for you...

The exhibition! Did a specific moment inspire its creation? What fuelled you to do this?

There was no one incident, but my anger at general media and the cancel culture of social media keyboard warriors fuelled it. If you mean, have I felt judged in certain media for being a white expat British guy with a disability? Then yes, I have, but many have it much, much worse.

But my motivation? I reject (and I could have used a stronger word there) ANY discrimination against anyone - be it based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability... anything. Who am I to judge others? I'm just me, with all my faults, like everyone else.

The title, DISCRIMINATE, just came to me, and I went with it. We're too quick to judge. It's toxic and stifling. I have enough confidence in my beliefs to engage with others and not go on the attack though inevitably, some will see the exhibition as an attack.

It isn't; it's satire and my clumsy attempt at compassion for all.

What led to the use of old-school war propaganda?

I was inspired by the German Dadaist John Heartfield, who created photomontages of Nazi propaganda to subvert it. My two main art inspirations are Wassily

Kandinsky and Professor John Hyatt - without John, the idea of propaganda posters may never have happened! He did a paper on how propaganda was used subversively against the Nazis in the 1930s.

I utilised the style and design of early 20th-century propaganda posters from the two world wars, Communist China and the Cold War, to highlight and expose the prejudice people with physical and mental disabilities face.

I wanted to make people think about old-school propaganda in a modern context. It still exists; it's more insidious these

days. Social media, the internet; it's not just posters anymore.

What do you hope the outcome will be?

To make people THINK, to challenge and inspire critical thinking. The ACT arts scene has become complacent. People go to an exhibition and think they are 'woke'. Whatever the hell woke is.

I'm not trying to be controversial, but if you care about an issue, DO something; don't just visit an exhibition. I don't even go to my opening nights anymore.

What sort of effort goes into an exhibition like this?

Mainly funding! I have been lucky enough to get a grant from CAPO (Canberra Arts Patrons Organisation) and to find a gallery full of helpful and lovely individuals in Belco Arts. It helps so much that I can concentrate on getting my work done.

The heavy lifting is done by others, though. Sure, coming up with and developing ideas costs me sleepless nights. I must get something out of it, or I wouldn't do it!

More generally, what do you explore through your art?

Being nice to others, why people choose to do otherwise appals me but also morbidly fascinates me. People in these times will say, 'Oh, they must have past trauma'. We all have that; it's no reason to be a sh*t to others. It's something I try to express.

I also express my hope and belief in the silent majority who don't hate to be stirred into being not-so-silent!

I'm also interested in many different art forms, oils, photography, and watercolour, but NOT AI-type art; it's not art as far as I can see. It's like using Wikipedia to write an exam... it's not just cheating, it's soulless.

What about the local scene? Would you change it?

There is too much insular back-slapping; anything anyone creates is 'great'. I'd rather people tell me if my stuff was rubbish (and some have, ha!). Posters are on the streets: social media, TV, and the internet these days - they are in our homes and minds... I can't help feeling that's dangerous.

DISCRIMINATE by John Brookes is on now until 11 February 2024 at the Belco Arts Centre. Opening hours are Tuesday - Sunday, 9 am - 5 pm

