

Heroes + Sinners
Alex Whitlam

Forward

Ashley Whamond

Batman, Dr. Manhattan, the Silver Surfer: if the characters used in Alex Whitlam's 'Heroes' series themselves are not immediately recognisable, their origins in comic book culture most certainly are. The use of imagery from popular cultural contexts especially that of comic books is by no means new in art history. From Pop Art's incorporation of the mediascape of American mid-century modernity through to the postmodernist pastiche and critical re-presentations of 80s late-capitalist visual culture, the use of existing imagery has become simply another tool for creative expression. The nuance occurs in the way particular artists put these images to work.

American artist Richard Prince has made a career out of presenting images from popular culture, minimally altered, as his own. In a 1977 essay, Prince wondered aloud why "certain records sound better when someone on the radio station plays them, than when we're home alone, and play the same records ourselves." This observation indicates that Prince's interests in the popular cultural object is less about authorship and originality as is often claimed, but more about the location of meaning.

The most personal relevance a listener takes from a popular song, may in fact be shared by any number of other listeners. Consumed collectively, the popular culture object is both the most

individual site of personally specific meaning, and the most generalised and public of all meaningful encounters.

Whitlam's use of the Silver Surfer, as an example, superimposes the iconic image of the Marvel hero over an image of a mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion, itself a still from footage of the Trinity nuclear test carried out by the US Army in 1945. The quote included in the Silver Surfer's speech bubble is taken from remarks made by theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer who worked on the nuclear weapon tested at the Trinity site. Oppenheimer himself was quoting the Hindu sacred text, the Bhagavad-Gita, as way of articulating the complexity of his feelings about being a part of the first successful nuclear weapons test. And they most certainly would have been complex feelings, Oppenheimer was tied to the obligations of the task he had been given but, at the same time, was keenly aware of the impact that the existence of such a weapon would have on the world in both its immediate and long term future.

Oppenheimer was not an adherent of Hinduism in any practical sense, he was, however, a devotee of literature. His interest in the Bhagavad-Gita was based as much on its literary qualities as its spiritual and moral qualities. Oppenheimer, then, is quoting the Bhagavad-Gita, the Silver

Surfer quotes both of them and Whitlam fuses them together in his own quotation of markedly different contexts that work to show how art, in all its forms, gives us access to the articulation of emotional and moral complexity out of the bounds or other forms of communication.

This kind of deferral to another text for the purposes of individual expression begins to elucidate Prince's experience of hearing music outside of his personal space and finding more, rather than less, meaning in it as a result. Whether it is a familiar song played by someone else, or another's words that convey an experience better than anything original we could say, or a public image that captures something uniquely personal, meaning is seen to be not as fixed as we might assume. Nor is it the exclusive property of the individual subject, meaning flows and mutates and is recast anew as passes through subject after subject. The words uttered by Frank Miller's character Dwight McCarthy expressing regret and a desire to make things better for himself in a high contrast frame from 'Sin City: A Dame to Kill For', are tied to that original graphic novel context but are simultaneously removed from it. They are McCarthy's words, they are Miller's words, they are Whitlam's words and they are your words. Who hasn't screwed up and yearned for the change "wipe the slate clean?"

[Why would Oppenheimer defer to an ancient text that served as a moral and spiritual foundation of a religion he was not an adherent of? Similarly, why would he draw inspiration for the code name of the test from the work of a 17th Century poet? The answer is much the same as that to the question we might ask of Whitlam: why use the comic book imagery to discuss such 'serious' issues as nuclear weapons, international relations, personal relationships, and the nihilistic pathos of existence? The reason is that art, in all its forms, from 17th Century poetry to 1980s comic books, explains the world to us. It communicates the complexities of human subjectivity in ways that other forms of communication cannot. How can somebody explain how it feels to both be responsible for one of the most technically complex achievements of modern physics, but also have an awareness of the thousands of lives it claimed. There are in fact no words for this, but there is art]

Ashley Whamond is an independent curator, artist, arts writer and researcher.

Preface

Alex Whitlam

I started this series of paintings and mixed media artworks around the middle of 2021, at the peak of Australia's COVID 19 pandemic scare. The second or third wave of the pandemic had hit, and we were in an increasingly tight lockdown affecting many aspects of our lives. I had initially wanted to produce a series of comic book and popular culture mashups, something like a pop-art meme, I guess. Since I was a kid, I have been a devotee of the comic book and graphic novel genres and had avidly sought out my favourite titles' treasured vintage editions and origin stories. I had always loved the ability of comic book imagery combined with text to tell a story and conjure emotion. Some texts stick with us and create memories. Hearing these again can ground us, move us, we identify with them, they become part of who we are.

I decided to reinterpret some of the iconic comic book imagery that has stuck with me and combine it with some phrases, texts, poetry, and prose that has done the same. The artwork in the first series of this collection, Heroes, comprises only five pieces, the last two of which are silent, no words, no speech bubble.

My eager undertaking into this adventure seemed to have stopped very short of my intended destination. As I sat and painted, watched the news and the horrors happening around the world, witnessed the descent into anti-intellectualism on

social media, the denial of science and expertise in any field, I began to spiral into my own existential dread. I no longer had the words, or they felt trite and of no value. The last two of the Heroes series are of a monochromatic, a limited palette, Batman. There are no words; the images say everything there is to say.

I was at a loss as to what to paint. I couldn't find the imagery or the words to express this mid-lockdown despair. The spark rekindled when I was going through some of the beautiful black and white work of Cristophe Chabouté and the high contrast work of Frank Miller. There was some fantastic classic comic book imagery that said it all visually and textually. Miller's images seemed to hold all of the angst, anger, seediness and violence required to express the moment adequately. This was the genesis of the second series of this collection, Sinners.

I hope you like the work. I hope this little homage pays proper respect to the origins of these works. I hope it speaks to you and expresses some of the sentiments you've had or are having.

Catalogue

Heroes	A series of paintings based on iconic Marvel and DC comic characters.	10-21
Sinners	A series of paintings sampled from the classic noir comic series, Sin City by Frank Miller.	24-39
Exhibit	Some photographs of the artworks installed in the studio gallery.	40-43
Detail	Detailed description of the presentation and finish of the stretched canvases.	44-45

Heroes



Dr Manhattan

Watchmen, 1987, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, reflected contemporary anxieties and deconstructed the superhero concept. The series features morally ambiguous heroes, shady government interference, and the personal struggles of the protagonists. The *Watchmen* series is "the moment comic books grew up".

In this mashup of panels from the series, the all-powerful hero of the *Watchmen*, Dr Manhattan, expresses his removal from the planet he was once a part of. It certainly reflects how this artist saw the world reflected in news and social media in his COVID lockdown bubble.

Dr Manhattan

2021

Acrylic on stretched canvas
85h x 55w x 2d cm



Silver Surfer Contemplates Humanity

The atomic age hero with 'the power cosmic', bestowed upon him by the cosmic entity Galactus, here the Silver Surfer contemplates the human race.

This piece is a classic frame from the original *Silver Surfer* #2, 1968, written by Stan Lee and illustrated by John Buscema. I have reframed the piece slightly but otherwise left the image and text alone. The Surfer's observations of humanity are captured perfectly in this simple frame.

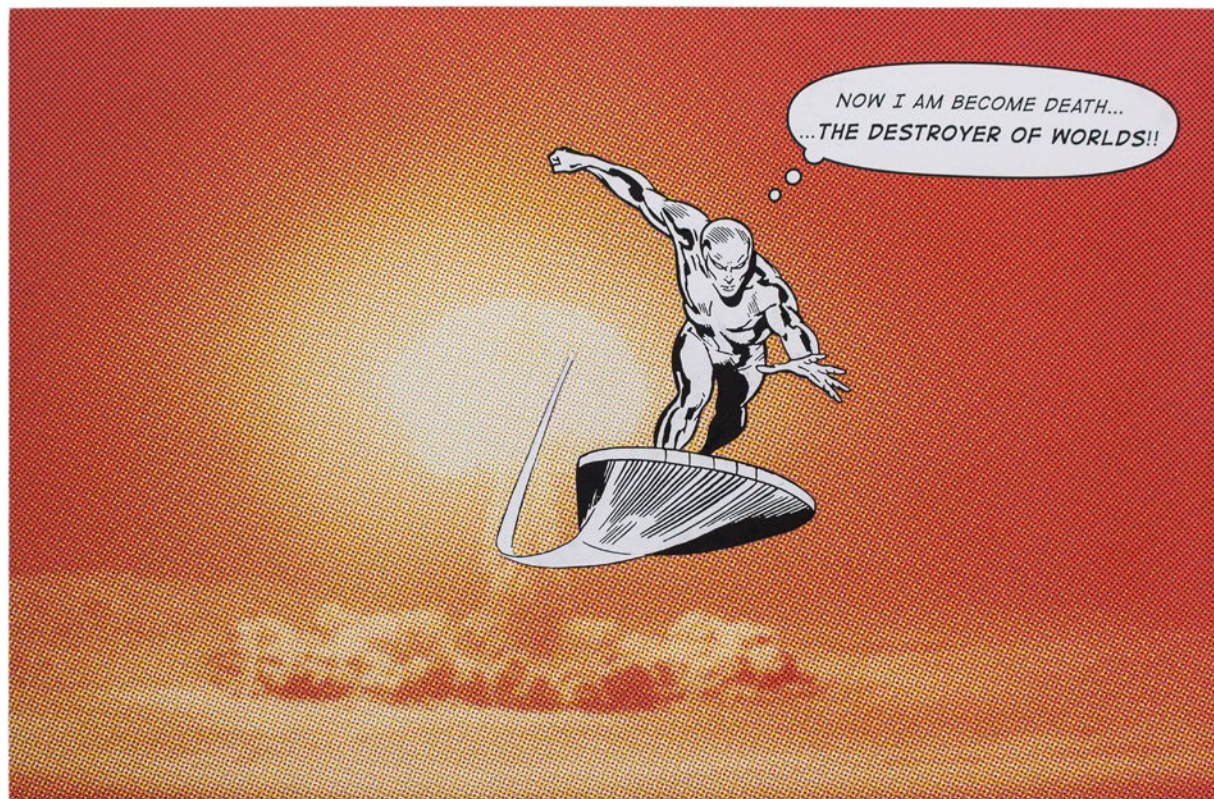
Silver Surfer
Contemplates Humanity

2021

Acrylic on stretched canvas
85h x 57w x 2d cm

NOW I AM BECOME DEATH...
...THE DESTROYER OF WORLDS!!





Destroyer of Worlds

Our favourite atomic age hero, the Silver Surfer, swoops low over an atomic bomb test, like the Trinity tests that were to change the course of history. Here, our hero quotes the lines from the *Bhagavad-Gita* made famous by the father of the atomic bomb, Robert Oppenheimer.



Batman I

Batman I reprises a classic frame from the DC Comics classic origin story revamp, *Batman: Year One* written by Frank Miller and illustrated by David Mazzucchelli.

Originally published in 1987, the 4 part series revamps the classic Batman origin story in the gritty noir style that Miller would become famous for.

Batman I

2021

Acrylic on stretched canvas
85h x 62w x 4d cm



Batman II

Batman II, is another frame from DC Comics *Batman: Year One*, which features the real protagonists of the story, Batman and Jim Gordon, the vigilante and the cop, who go on to forge an unlikely and uneasy friendship.

Batman II

2021

Acrylic on stretched canvas
85h x 62w x 4d cm

Sinners



Clean Slate

Frank Miller's characters live in a dark and unrelenting world of visceral emotion and violence. Here the character 'Dwight' from 'A Dame to Kill For' gives us an insight into his regrets and barely under-wraps desires. For what, we might ask? What deep, dark passion does he so want to embrace again?

Clean Slate

2021

Acrylic on stretched canvas
58h x 58w x 4d cm



Body + Soul

Here we see it, the protagonist of Frank Miller's 'A Dame to Kill For' losing himself to that desire he knows can ruin him. This image speaks to the darker, deeper emotions we experience when we're genuinely out on a limb, when we've quit skirting polite society, when we succumb to the primal animal urges within us.

Body + Soul

2021

Acrylic on stretched canvas
85h x 58w x 4d cm





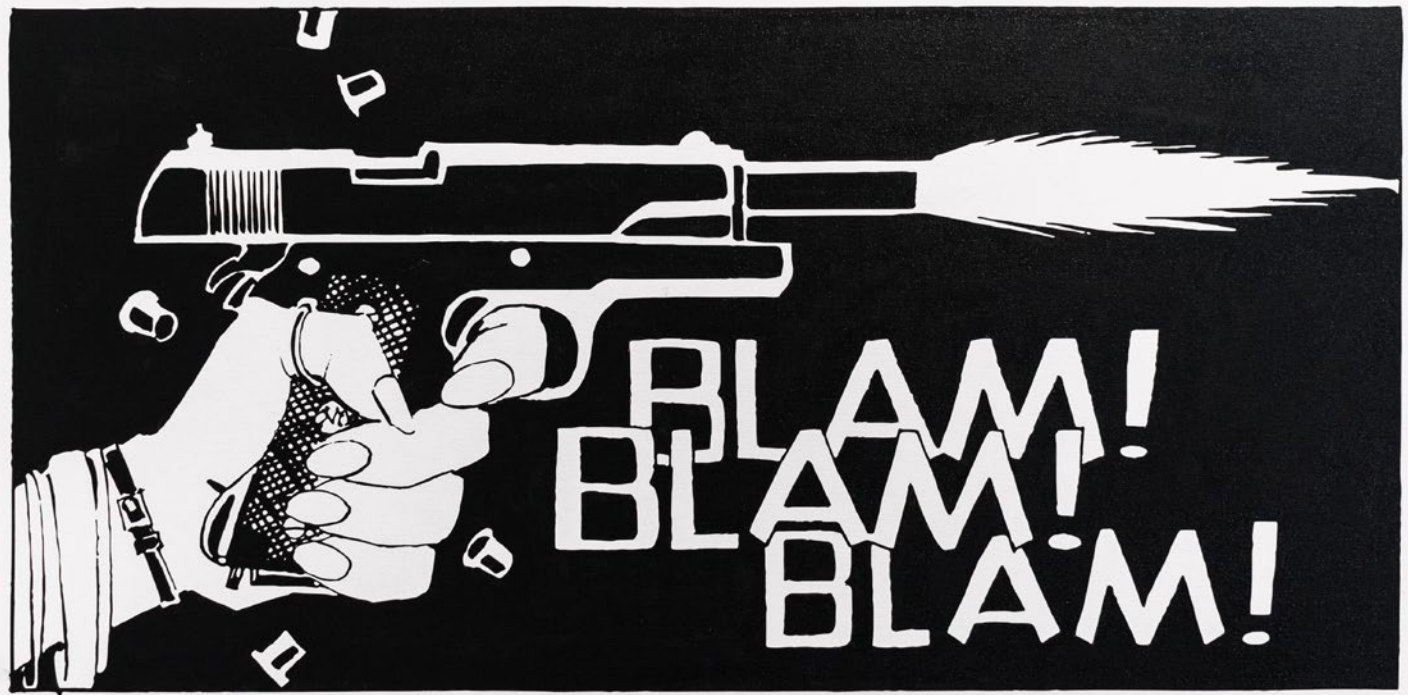
'Click'

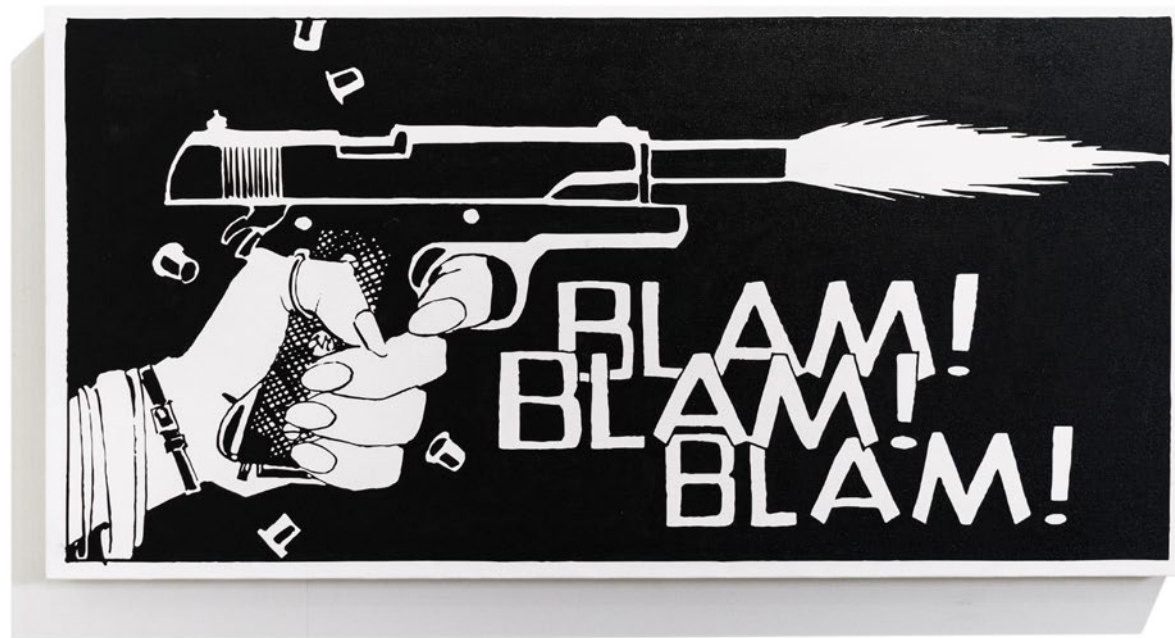
'Click' is the camera, the viewer, the voyeur, the 'male gaze', the paparazzi, the pornographer, the private eye, the selfie, consensual, non-consensual, seedy, stylish... all these things.

'Click'

2021

Acrylic on stretched canvas
33h x 85w x 4d cm





International Diplomacy I

This diptych is a visual representation of the 'diplomatic' back and forth we see on the news every day—the language of violence. Power-hungry officials, corrupt leaders, dictators and autocrats speak this language leaving the rest of us to look on in horror.

International Diplomacy I 2021

Acrylic on stretched canvas
50h x 100w x 4d cm



International Diplomacy II

This diptych is a visual representation of the 'diplomatic' back and forth we see on the news every day—the language of violence. Power-hungry officials, corrupt leaders, dictators and autocrats speak this language leaving the rest of us to look on in horror.

International Diplomacy II 2021

Acrylic on stretched canvas
50h x 77w x 4d cm

Successful Conclusion to Negotiations

This piece follows the theme of comic book imagery speaking for the real world. It sums up the violence and war we see happening in the world and the title alludes to the 'diplomatic negotiations' we hear about to conclude these struggles. Peace, in this case, is concluded at the point of a gun.

*Successful Conclusion to
Negotiations*

2021

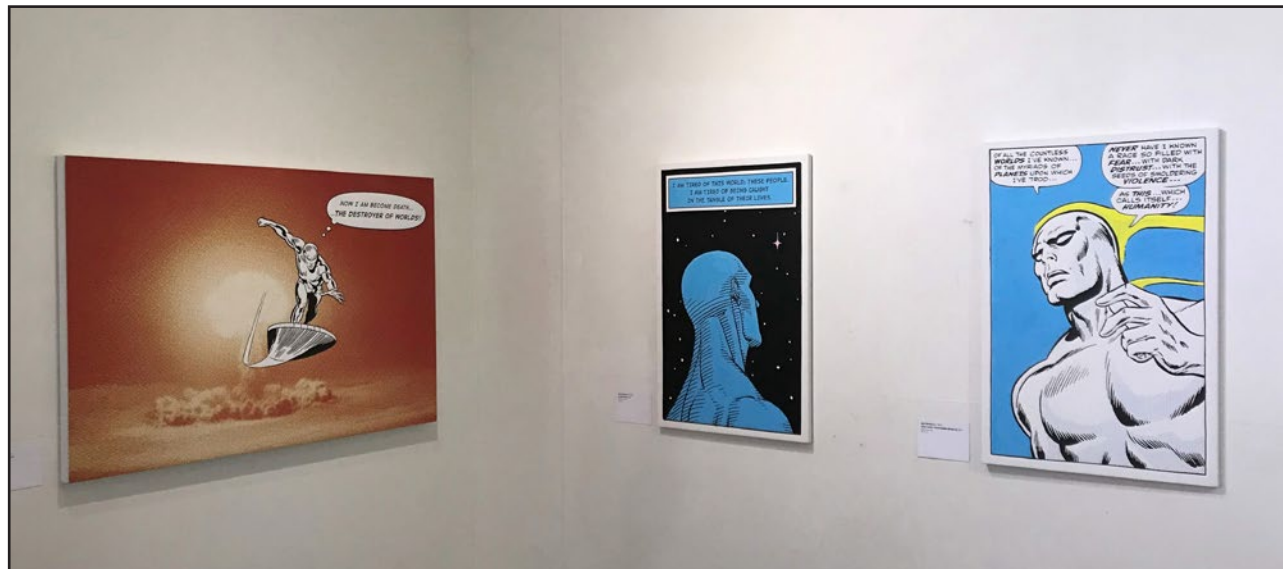
Acrylic on stretched canvas
85h x 63w x 4d cm



Exhibit

In late October of 2021, I installed the two series, Heroes and Sinners, in The Pleasure Lab, the gallery space at SCU in Lismore. The installation aimed to document the series and to see the pieces all together in-situ.

Here are a few images from that installation.





Detail

All of the paintings have been produced using acrylic paint on stretched canvas except for *Destroyer of Worlds* which is a mixed media piece combining digital print on canvas, acrylic, and canvas collage.



All of the pieces are stretched on a 'deep' 4cm stretcher except for the *Dr Manhattan* and the *Silver Surfer Contemplates Humanity* pieces which are on a 'shallower' 2cm stretcher.

The pieces are ready to hang and do not need framing. The stretchers are taped at the back and padded at the bottom edges so as not to damage the wall. If framing is preferred these pieces look great in a simple floating frame.