

The Henson defence

A photograph of a naked 13-year-old girl is disturbing and compelling, but it is certainly not pornography, argues Roger Benjamin

AS luck would have it, I was one of the handful of people who saw Bill Henson's exhibition on May 22, just before the police intervention and confiscation of works of art.

It was an admirable showing, and in what follows I want to defend the work against the charge that his images comprise pornography, and second, that they lack (as the Prime Minister suggested) merit as art.

On the contrary, Henson's work has artistic merit in scads. I think you would have to say he is Australia's leading figurative artist in any visual medium. There is a reason his photographic tableaux sell for \$25,000 apiece: they are an accumulation of decades of professional skill and vision by one of the most acute sensibilities in the country.

Fellow photographers consider Henson a near-magician from a technical point of view. He has created a photographic language, vulgarisations of which I have observed in international fashion magazines, video clips and other artists' works for years now.

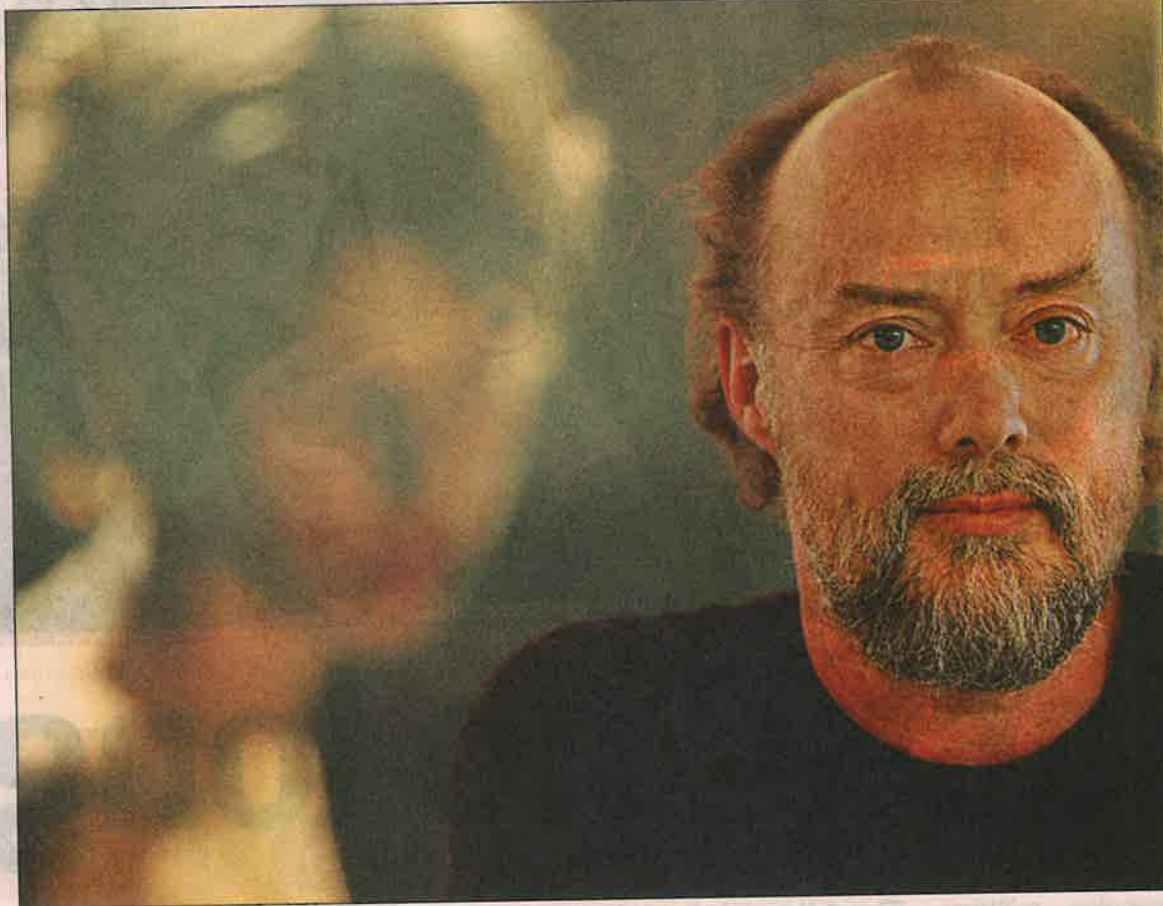
Photographs of naked or semi-clad young women are a dime a dozen and they are visible by the dozen, unpoliced, on magazine covers in every Australian newsagency.

Other images of young women, barely distinguishable in terms of visual language, are commercial in intent: that is, they are designed to sell clothes, jewellery, perfume, make-up, cars, music and films.

Henson's figures are neither pornographic nor commercial in this sense. In so far as they deal with sexuality at all, they tend to confuse, not to excite. This is because they project mixed signals.

Soft-core pornography thrives on a limited number of visual cues: the "come-hither" eyes, the artificial pout, the upthrust breasts, the hip shot, the striptease, the exposed and shaven genitals. You will find none of this language in Henson.

I can remember arguing with a female colleague back in 1985 at a Henson exhibition in Melbourne, where grave photographs of baroque palace interiors were paired with gangling adolescents whose naked limbs were at times smeared with mud. The bodies were disturbing, but we could not define them, as their



Controversy: Photographer Bill Henson, whose artworks featuring naked adolescents have been seized by police

Moral crusaders play to gallery

THERE was a long moment of disbelief among opponents of censorship last week after the NSW Police raided the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Paddington before the opening of a show of photographs by Australian Bill Henson. The police seized either 20 or 21 photographs out of 41 in the exhibition. They said all were photographs of the same 13-year-old girl.

For those old enough to remember the long-ago era in which NSW, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia prosecuted publishers and booksellers over Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, the sense of disbelief was followed by a sort of sinking feeling: not only had we been there before, we could scarcely believe we were being dragged there again, with a completely new chorus.

With a moral panic spreading,

movements did not correspond to any recognisable social action. The use Henson makes of young models' bodies is best paralleled with contemporary dance. Both revel in shaping the body at its extremes; both seek something not seen before. Henson defines the body by a still image, choreographers by movement.

For a trained art historian, the best Henson compositions have a whiff of

ACT Police seized some of the Henson photographs in the National Gallery of Australia's collection and were reportedly assessing all 70 or so works. NSW Police, for their part, have said they are considering charges of publishing an indecent article.

Solicitor Shane Simpson, author of the book *Visual Artists and the Law*, has been retained by the NGA. He points to the legal complexities of a case involving "two lots of police, with NSW and federal police each looking at different pieces of legislation".

"The mere fact that it's art is not a defence. It's whether it breaches the specific requirement of the law.

"In NSW, cases may also hinge on community standards, something that is always hard to define... and there's no doubt that the community standard is different for material

the ineffable, of sublime action. This is due to memories of the great works in European museums and churches: Hellenistic sculpture, the epic gestures of Giotto, the agonised nudes of Masaccio, the elegance of Donatello's bronze youths, Michelangelo's epebic profiles and Rembrandt's penumbra. Henson long ago absorbed this "gestuary" of human emotion, and it underpins his visual

exhibited in an art gallery than in many other circumstances," he says.

The photographs seized from the gallery are said to be worth \$25,000 apiece and some young artists — and commercial gallery owners — suggest that Henson is being most energetically defended by middle-class collectors, galleries and museums with an interest in maintaining the value of the works.

With the controversy still boiling by week's end, artist Simon Barney has made two badges. The blue and silver one says, "Hang the work, not the artist". The pink and silver one says, "Save the children". He says: "You can reveal the appropriate one depending on which group is chasing you with a machete at this particular moment."

Elisabeth Wynhausen

thinking. He has a rare capacity to refigure this kind of tradition and make it anew in language for today.

What set off the recent furore (web issues aside) was an ill-advised choice in the image published on the invitation card. This strange photograph is disturbing. We are compelled to look, and look again.

A tall-standing girl, not yet a woman, emerges unclad from the

darkness, her hair and shoulders crisply backlit. The power of the image comes from the striking beauty of her facial features, superb in definition, held against the abjection of her body.

She protects her private parts in a double-handed gesture of pudicity. The gesture seems at once instinctive in response to the camera and, as artefact, derived from classical sculpture such as the *Venus Felix* in the Vatican Museum. We witness her pale chest with its half-formed buds, the kind of breasts many girls wish to conceal from their families. Only the swelling line of her hip indicates the future force of womanhood.

The photograph does not show an underage person in a sexual context (as the Crimes Act requires). There is no sexual activity visible, nor on her part any complicit expression of the kind I have indicated.

The model is meditative, her eyes are downcast, she does not play with the camera (as in pornography). Perhaps the photo makes the girl seem to wish the camera away.

But the work is less an overt provocation than *Chloe*, the similarly pubescent and underage academic nude by Jules Lefebvre that made scandal here in the 1880s and (in Fred McCubbin's phrase) "encouraged young men to thoughts of matrimony". Lefebvre, I suggest, does come closer than Henson to the language of erotic intent.

Neither does the milieu of the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, in which I saw the uncensored exhibition, constitute a sexual context.

The considered and composed sequence of images was the result of hours of deliberation by the artist and the gallery team. In it, the standing girl was at the centre of a wall of landscapes and close-up, sleeping profiles of male and female models.

For two decades Henson has worked in pairs and triplets of images, coupling a landscape or architectural fragment with a figure piece. (Along the way he has created some of the most dramatic and best-composed naturalistic landscapes this country has seen.)

Each exhibition has this serial program, which the artist retains in the several large-scale books published about his work. It completely changes the message and impact of his nudes. Their pallor and his darkling industrial landscapes, curving roads and thunderhead cloudscapes create a mood that is elegiac and mysterious. Understanding is stretched, things do not add up and the viewer's senses are troubled. But this is art, not pornography. In the latter the senses are narrowly channelled and understanding, at a base level, is all too clear.

Roger Benjamin is research professor in the history of art at the University of Sydney.