

RICHARD LEWER

Can you tell me about the *Redheads* show presented by Sullivan+Strumpf at Auckland Art Fair?

I've always wanted to do a *Redheads* show. Whenever I meet fellow redheads, there is a bond, a connection. One of the first paintings that I made at Elam Fine Arts School was called *Redhead with freckles*, which was a self-portrait of sorts. This body of work is a continuation from 30 years ago. It is a collection of a group of friends who all have red hair. One of them dyes their head, admittedly, but I think it's quite nice that she really wants to be a redhead. It's not meant to be too serious, it's about what identifies people. Even though my hair has pretty much all gone now, I'm still a ranga [Australian slang for red-haired person]. Everyone knows a long-suffering ranga, so I trust people will connect with the paintings in some way.

In *The History of Australia*, presented earlier this year at Hugo Michell Gallery in Adelaide, you showed a suite of works on copper, steel, brass and even an enormous Australian flag. In other series you have chosen to work on sandpaper or billboard cloth. Can you explain your choice of medium for this *Redheads* series?

The choice of materials comes about from making the work. With *The History of Australia*, there is a real conceptual idea behind the material that is linked to the mining history in Australia. With this body of work, I really wanted to focus on the portraiture. I didn't want to complicate it with medium, so I stripped it back and used canvas. Although I find canvas incredibly hard, there is something quite immediate about it for me. There is also no background detail in any of the portraits. The background consists of a single colour, so I could really focus of the personality of the subject – the way that they stand, a smile or a non-smile, a hand gesture or the eyes. That was the focus. Canvas is inescapable. Steel is forgiving as you can scrub the paint off. I like to be challenged by medium; to be set up for failure, which is another idea that I am interested in. You can read that back into the ranga thing.

Sports has featured heavily in your art and is a big part of your life. Do you see parallels in your art practice and boxing?

I coach boxing five days a week, after painting or teaching at VCA in Melbourne. It's a really



nice routine and there are many parallels between boxing and art making. For both boxers and artists, the idea of never being satisfied or happy with your performance is what compels you to keep getting better. I like looking at those connections, that routine, that discipline and the mental toughness that is required. You use the same language in boxing and art, which is quite bizarre. There is also a similar community in boxing as there is with the art world. It is so many people's home.

I'm interested in the contrast between *Redheads* at Auckland Art Fair and *Better to burn out than to fade away* currently showing at {Suite} in Wellington, in which drawings of your mother's funeral sit alongside paintings of the coastal landscape of Raglan, New Zealand.

There was a lot of emotion and sadness in the

{Suite} works, so it's great to have the *Redheads* – which is quite light and humorous. That's what I do. I focus on exactly what is happening so each body of work is self-contained.

It's my job to tell the story every time a family member dies. My family knows me well enough to know that it is a mode of healing, and a celebration of my mother's life. Alongside depictions of my mother's funeral, hopefully the Raglan landscapes bring beauty. It is the place I used to surf after school, a place with a great spiritual energy, and hopefully the place I will end up painting in my final days.

Emma O'Neill

» SULLIVAN+STRUMPF, SYDNEY AND SINGAPORE, PRESENTS WORK BY RICHARD LEWER AT AAF 2018, STAND D8.

“EVERYONE KNOWS A LONG-SUFFERING RANGA, SO I TRUST PEOPLE WILL CONNECT WITH THE PAINTINGS IN SOME WAY.” RICHARD LEWER

1. // Richard Lewer, *Leigh*. Oil on canvas, 51 x 51cm.

2. // Lewer, *Nell*. Oil on canvas, 51 x 51cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN+STRUMPF, SYDNEY AND SINGAPORE

