

New Work 3 - Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts
CHRISTOPHER BENNIE – The Alien's Back

Nicola Chatham 2007

Christopher Bennie's video work *The Alien's Back*, focuses on a tightly cropped section of the artist's back. In it we see his muscles contort and flex, producing images within his body not unlike Rorschach's famous inkblot tests. Contrary to how it may appear, this disquieting and seemingly unnatural feat has been achieved without employing digital manipulation.

The video work is captivating through its exploration of a human body's physicality, presented in an unfamiliar form. As viewers, we are given the opportunity to unleash our imaginations, transfixed by the abstracted shapes shifting within and under his skin. The muscular contours trigger mental associations, as they take on what appear to be a life of their own and produce images that seem, well, alien.

Perhaps the success of *The Alien's Back* is the slippage that occurs approximately thirty seconds after we begin watching the work, when we are drawn into a type of mesmerising daydream. In this moment we find ourselves looking at something magical that began as something familiar.

The dichotomous nature of existence has been the general theme in Bennie's practice for some time now. "From early on, I've always been interested in how the meanings associated with cultural objects can be considered in two distinct ways," Bennie says. "Such as painting for example. It is at once loaded with cultural, social and even political significance, whilst, if considered from a naive and immediate phenomenological viewpoint - it is merely paint on canvas, a picture. One method relies on preconceived meaning generated through history, social constructs and institutions, he continues, while the other celebrates the seemingly ordinary and unremarkable."

While discussing *The Alien's Back*, Bennie speculates that his motivation for making the work may stem from his desire to explore this concept. He is interested in isolating and paying specific attention to things that can seem ordinary, in this case his own body, that however under close observation, reveal something utterly extraordinary. The video work is at once a depiction of a male's upper torso, made simply of flesh and bone, yet simultaneously it acts as a gateway (stimulating/triggering?) our imagination.

In this way, *The Alien's Back* fits within Bennie's milieu of video works produced over recent years which revolve around, as he says, his desire "to revisit the unremarkable to give it a quality of meaning it so rightly deserves."