*Sharks & Shamans* is a powerful and irreverent collection of works by the contemporary inter-disciplinary artists John ‘Prince’ Siddon and Wes Maselli at PSAS in Fremantle, WA. Opening in-between the state sanctioned “Australia Day” and Fremantle’s own “One Day In Fremantle”—held on the 28th of January and to equal measures of local support and frenzied conservative backlash—Siddon and Maselli’s mixed media works open up a space to question the ideological power of seriousness and sanctimoniousness in white Australian politics and culture. Put simply, Siddon and Maselli’s works move between playful vibrancy—embodied in the dazzling colour and pattern-work of their etchings, carvings, and painted found objects—and a caustic humour that threatens to disturb identity and complacency through the ricocheting laughter they invoke. Siddon’s painted wood carvings radiate and throb in the dim glow of PSAS, revealing the charisma of all manner of animal and human figures. Maselli’s tin etchings are provocative and hilarious, sending-up all manner of prominent white Australian figures—including Malcolm Turnbull, Steve Irwin, Shane Warne, and the “honorary aussies” Tim and Neil Finn. Two works by Maselli stand out as scathingly hilarious. Maselli’s etching “Eddie the Ape”—which presents the body of a Gorilla with the head of Eddie McGuire, replete with an ambivalent rictus somewhere between pleasure and pain—and his “2 Kartiya” diptych—showing a violent grapple between the two whitefellas, or Kartiya, Steve Irwin and Shane Warne—are transfixing and volatile in their comedic brilliance.

The question could be posed, however, as to whether now is the time for jokes and vibrancy since in Australia and the rest of the world, the march of nationalism, conservatism, and fascism appears to have only intensified. For many, acerbic wit and vibrant beauty can only serve as dangerous forms of catharsis in a time that demands something more—in a time when the Hansons, Trumps, Le Pens, and Farages of the world appear horrifically emboldened. Indeed, parody and vibrancy may seem for some to be mere distractions from a more vitriolic political art, one that might, on face value, seem more appropriate for our present political and cultural situation. However, what is arguably so important about the work of artists like Siddon and Maselli is its capacity to interrupt the political use of seriousness, and the disempowering injunction to be authentic that is so often utilised by the political establishment. Indeed, the playful and parodic elements of *Sharks & Shamans* speak equally to the importance of rejecting the strictures of imposed significance and seriousness, especially when it emerges from a hegemonic culture, such as that of white Australia. As the contemporary theorist Elizabeth Povinelli argues across her brilliant text *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*, indigenous Australians are almost intractably caught between the demands to accept a white vision of Australia’s future, and to embody a state sanctioned sense of tradition. The demand that indigenous people forget the past, and embrace a white neoliberal future, is combined with the expectation that indigenous people show themselves to be “proper” and “authentic” custodians of a culture overdetermined by white history and anthropology. Such a demand to be good contemporary consumers, whilst also making manifest the “authentic” pre-capitalism of indigenous culture is wonderfully exposed in Maselli’s “Bush Medicine” etchings—pieces that reveal the market underpinnings of the western embrace of indigenous knowledge as a means of finding lucrative “super foods.” Similarly, Siddon’s depictions of animals—and especially those of sharks, an animal with a precarious status in many parts of Australia—raise questions about the liberal fantasy of a “melting pot” of ideas by combing celebrated indigenous artistic traditions with totemic embodiments of western anxiety.

Indeed, if there is a principal target that is repeatedly questioned by Maselli and Siddon’s work it is that of the sentimentality and seriousness with which white hegemony promotes its own institutions. No matter the number of clownish white politicians the public—and especially indigenous Australians—have to endure, the injunction is one of needing to have respect, to take positions of office seriously, to tolerate the legal and political status quo without question. As the Beeliar Wetlands of WA move closer and closer to destruction, the public is told by politicians and the media alike that any who protest or dissent simply aren’t serious. Those that question the imposed vision of our country’s future “don’t live in the real world” and are simply unwilling to face the “realities” propagated by conservative media and government. To paraphrase the late great Niall Lucy, writing on the Chaser’s APEC stunt in Sydney in 2007, one of the things most feared by the establishment is that humour and parody might really capture the public’s attention enough to reveal the supposedly “necessary” tasks and identities that permeate our culture as being arbitrary, and, accordingly, changeable. When some protest the booing of Adam Goodes, the dismissal of indigenous culture and knowledge as a “lifestyle choice,” or the destruction of sacred indigenous sites, the answer from establishment politicians and media—and a great deal of the public—is “get real,” “be serious,” after all, there are economic interests and “real injustices” that need consideration.

What is so powerful about *Sharks and Shamans* is its dual capacity to beguile the viewer with its visual beauty, whilst also challenging the notions of authenticity and good taste that allow so much art to be accepted on totally apolitical terms. Gazing at a semi-naked Shane Warne held in a chokehold by Steve Irwin I couldn’t help but be struck by the how absurd white Australian culture so often is, and how absurd it is that we take white Australian culture so seriously. Indeed, as curator Emilia Galatis and guest speaker Glenn Iseger-Pilkington posed the question to the audience on the opening night, “what does Australia mean to us today?” I couldn’t help but feel directed towards the possibility that, perhaps, Australia is itself something of a joke. This isn’t to say that there are no serious stakes here—nothing could be further from the truth—but that, instead, Australia, like any good joke, is something that must be shared, something that can be used to dog-whistle racist sentiment as much as it can be used as a means for emancipation, and something that can be dangerous if it is taken too seriously.