

Mullets and Moes: Football, Masculinity and Nostalgia

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Football is many things to many people. It is tribal. Its visceral. It gives us hope in challenging times and joy in ways that seem boundless. It has its heroes and villains. It provides us with stories that make us weep and human drama that makes us gasp with incredulity. But, for me, at its core, the rudimentary essence of football is a celebration of the visual. Conjure if you can a soaring, freakish mark by Nicky Winmar. Or the 70-metre torp by Malcom Blight. A twisting Cyril Rioli contortion that defies any logic. If your memory is as old and biased as mine, Ken Hunter backing into a sweating masculine pack only to emerge on the other side with his socks down, loping laconically along towards the forward line. With Graham Miller's cheekily entitled exhibition, *Playing the Man*, we see a new interpretation of iconic images from the 70's on full display. It is a visual feast that enables us to see the world of football in a new and unabashed way. It is fuckin mint.

Using the quotidian and ubiquitous 70's Scanlens chewing gum footy cards, Miller has provided us with what can only be described as an exhibition that Bruce McAvaney would call 'delicious' - even if some of the flavours that were infused into the gum are now considered toxic and dangerous. Like Mercurochrome now is. Using both humour and nostalgia to great effect the initial response is laughter. Deep, gut busting, laughter. Miller unveils for us a strange and at times uncomfortable world of men. Very specific types of men whose masculinity is never in doubt (just look at the fuzz on their faces) and who carried our hopes in their hands every time they took to the field whether it was the MCG, Waverley or Leederville or Lathlain or wherever.

At times the exhibition borders on the absurd as Miller takes these memories and images of our childhood and pushes the boundaries to such an extent that he literally inhabits the players of the past. He does this with great care and consideration. It's homage 101. Just look at the detail that we see Tony Buhagiar reimagined. The likeness is uncanny. Even the rendering of Malcom Blight by Miller is exceptionally similar. A beguiling facsimile of what was once, and still is, our past. A past



that is never far behind. It is this temporal notion of the past that is juxtaposed with the present almost as if the binary is dialoguing with itself. Its where we can all walk back into a memory feeling relaxed that everything is as it should be but where it also smacks us across the face like a Malcolm Gregory Brown round arm rendering both the subject and the audience transfixed by a notion that all is not what it seems. But more of this in a minute.

Perhaps the two past players that are so freakishly real are that of Carlton's Mike Fitzpatrick and Claremont's previously mentioned Ken Hunter. Local Perth boys who made good in the east playing for Caaartlon at a time when the Blues only knew how to win. When Bob Hawke was running the whole shit show and the gendered roles of the Australian way of life were hardly ever questioned unless you were Germaine Greer. Miller doffs his cap to the local WAFL heroes Brad Hardie and Ron Alexander, players who also made huge impacts for their VFL sides playing for The Dishlickers and the Lions respectively. Both had a say in the writing of local footy history, they were actors in the theatre of the Sandgroper absurd – the festival of the boot – Alexander as the first coach of West Coast and Hardie as the first Sandgroper to win a Brownlow since Graham Moss, who all feature in this exhibition.

But even if this exhibition achieved what it has by using the classic Aussie piss-take with Miller looping it via a long droppy off the half back line of nostalgia to head home with the breeze to win the idealised Grand Final of our youthful, uncluttered minds it would be an unqualified success. But what Miller has done is more. Much more. What Miller has done has given us an insight into not just a time and a place but into that temporal and spatial consideration that framed him. That made him. By looking back Miller has been able to say what is happening now and in doing that we can see how far we have come. It is only now in the new world that we inhabit today can we understand the full gravity of what that means. It means record crowds in the AFL (because it means something). The commencement and rise of AFLW (thank god). The advent of Auskick (I would have played AFL if this was around in my day), the appreciation and standing of Indigenous footballers (hallelujah), the discussions of mental health and gambling (historical issues in Australian sport) and the constant stream of who we are and why we love this game that is only really played here.

The key to this exhibition is the great Cardinals rover Les Fong. I know it's so obvious, but the hint is also as soft as a Robbie Flower side-step. The key is in the nuance. Something that is too easily overlooked in Australian culture. It poses the question - is Les Fong the greatest player of Asian heritage we know? If so one thing is for certain Graham Miller was not. His life has been shaped by other factors, but the heritage Fong and Miller share is one of not just being of mixed Anglo-Asian descent but of being the Other. Speaking with Fong when I did my PhD on Jim and Phil Krakouer the abuse, he endured was truly ugly. One only has to see the statue of Nicky Winmar at Optus Stadium to appreciate what this type of abuse can elicit. A moment of reflection. A pause to process what it all means. Something football does not really allow when the whips are cracking –as John Kennedy said "Don't think. Do!" For Fong and any other number of players it counted on the scoreboard, it counted for great effort, application, and only through this could social capital be built. For Miller coming to Hale as a 'new Australian' meant new challenges. Challenges he rose to; he had no other choice. Boarding school was like a mix of Lord of the rings and Middle Earth, Guantanamo Bay and Wake in Fright. But it also gave him insight into what made Aussie boys tick in the 1970's – birds and sport – this is evidenced by the ghosting of the iconic shows Countdown and the Winners in this show. From here the insight required Miller to navigate the male psyche –

specifically the Australian male psyche – one that had very specific codes and conventions - ones you did not fuck around with. This was made all the more difficult because despite being Asian, small, different and Other he also played hockey – or *dickywhackers* as they were called. It was enough to ensure the torrent of abuse was constant and the ridicule ongoing. But due to this Miller employed another tactic that speaks to the Australian male psyche – humour – nothing like a funny bastard to make you laugh. With this exhibition Miller has achieved this feat again by filtering past negative experiences but unlike so many others it is Miller who has the last laugh – sometimes at his expense and sometimes at the expense of others. We should thank him for doing this but at the same time we should thank him for making us think and feel, something else football enables us to do whether we like it or not. In this round one thing is clear – Miller has the 3 Brownlow votes secured and is up and most definitely about.