

# They Walk Amongst Us

John Burns

Praxis Artspace

08 7231 1974

praxis@praxisartspace.com

68-72 Gibson St,  
Bowden, SA, 5007



Is contemporary life about meaningful destinations or going around in circles? That's the question Raftopoulos asks with *They walk amongst us*. Modernity has produced innumerable forms of the dispossessed. Lost in an identity we use to make Utopia possible, we become ghosts of ourselves. "You're worth it" the advertisements say. Well might we be, but that doesn't prevent us from being fucked over 17 times a day by absolute morons. We carry on the journey, again and again. The destination always distant, the process remains the same.

Of course, you'd never call yourself a zombie, so someone else needs to. Enter one Mr George Raftopoulos and *They walk amongst us*. In *Skilled mariner never smooth seas* our journey is subverted Titanic style, abruptly halted mid-way. I am reminded of Peggy Lee's 1967 hit *Is that all there is?* stuck on board a ship of fools awaiting your doom as a two faced dude in a uniform placates you all the way to the bottom of the sea. This isn't the modern script of endless possibility when you are facing a strong possibility of the end. Life boat, liner, prison hulk we are all in the same boat. Comedian, hero, people smuggler, it's easy to wonder who's really in charge. Okay, the situation is grim, impossible even, but Raftopoulos never leaves you without hope. The figures on the ship are small but not inconsequential, there's more of us than the big guy. We can change course. For the record I'm one of the specks running around trying to raise the signal flag, what are you doing?



These works are a modern sublime, not so much Edmund Burke's awe of nature but a shared sense of compelling intensity. This is important stuff. A rollicking collection of unfinished story arcs, a choose your own adventure for grownups. They defy being "pretty", that is the pretty you might get served up by self-congratulatory AI. Instead the visuals leave the audience feeling moved in the same way a bushfire or raging sea might. Disturbing but with tender and beautiful flourish. *King Bungaree* is full of multiple narratives. I can't give Bungaree his historic due in a few lines, but in the context of this work he is the archetypical betrayed hero. A brilliant communicator and negotiator integral to Mathew Flinders' exploration of Australia's coast line, Bungaree's acknowledgment in Australian history is sub-par. Even Flinders' cat received a public monument; meanwhile Bungaree received improved annotation to his brass nameplate so his white peers could distinguish him from other "natives". Within the space of *King Bungaree*, Raftopoulos delivers more than just a history lesson. This is a wider story with many layers. Including the betrayal of Indigenous culture, we also have a very human betrayal understood by all. The gold yellow back ground and circular motif of *Bungaree* references religious iconography and martyred saints. Portrayed during the 19th century as a pantomime admiral, Bungaree with *King Bungaree* is freed from the Governor's op shop. The colonial aesthetics required to play a "part" disintegrate and the human is revealed. Despite an uncertain future Bungaree, like the audience is treading his own path on his own terms.



The works in *They walk amongst us* don't give you a compliment for being a dickhead. Instead you are reawakened to yourself, individuals are important, we are historic. Don't let the bastards drag you down with the ship. Raftopoulos offers redemptive and meditative pieces, albeit played through a megaphone. *They walk amongst us* gives the audience a choice to define your identity as opposed to accepting what others cast upon you. Images first seen as alien quickly become identifiable and relatable. The audience ceases looking in at the world of the canvas and starts looking back. We are ghosts no more.