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Demagogues and Megalomaniacs

Jay Younger

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Jay Younger, Demagogues and Megalomaniacs

The politics of deception have been a consistent theme in Jay Younger's diverse practice over a period of almost twenty years. Series such as *Ulterior* (2002) and *Spin Doctors' Mirage* (2004) can be considered as the prophetic forerunners to *Demagogues and Megalomaniacs*, which decisively embeds her new work in the era of 'post-truth'. While the woeful state of political debate, the deliberate falsifying of facts, and the blatant appeals to base emotion have long concerned Younger, it is unlikely she could have imagined just how bad it would become or how her earlier work would begin to construct a ghastly vision of the future. Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, nicknamed the 'Hillbilly Dictator' and leader of what was later shown to be an institutionally corrupt government (1968–1987), and the consequent Fitzgerald Inquiry (1987–1989) provided a wealth of source material for works that interrogated the brittle realities of Queensland's 'tropical perfection'. The glossy veneer barely concealed an autocratic regime of distraction, obfuscation and subjugation that is replicated by today's alt-right, neo-con cults. Smoke and mirrors literally made their appearance in 2004 when the in-camera montages of Younger's *Spin Doctors' Mirage* created poetic abstractions that were intended 'to evoke sensations rather than thoughts.'¹ The title and technique, however, carried clear political implications.

Thanks to the internet, popular culture and populism have become increasingly influential factors in global struggles for political power. When Younger produced satirical works targeting United States President Donald Trump and Dear Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un, Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea, their denuclearisation summit in Singapore had not yet taken place.



Extending upon *Ulterior*, Younger's four works from *Queensland* (2017) are based on lies. *Queensland #1* (2017), for example, takes a newspaper image of Bjelke-Petersen being carried through the mud by Torres Strait Islanders. On a trip north to secure Queensland's claim on the Torres Strait Islands, the Premier was keen to demonstrate his messianic status among the First Peoples, despite his vehement public opposition to their land rights. In this series, Younger's use of intense colour heightens the sense of explosive energy, effectively communicating the idea that 'where there is smoke, there is fire'. Her subversion of Queensland's branding as 'Beautiful one day, perfect the next' is perhaps most chilling in the image of a Dreamworld roller coaster, in *Queensland #4* (2017), which reignites painful memories of the Thunder River Rapids ride tragedy that was responsible for the deaths of four people in October 2017. All is never what it seems and, motivated by the desire to engage with the waves of cultural loss and political amnesia that Queensland has suffered, Younger's critique of the Sunshine States ambiguous messaging often implies an element of imminent danger lying beneath the surface of tourist propaganda.

Technically, Younger's works are varied and complex, and are the result of many years of experimentation. They document a photographic process using smoke and mirrors, a concept based on the magician's practice of distracting an audience with reflections and a burst of smoke.

¹ These non-digitally produced in-camera montages are created from multiple exposures on film. In this instance three different studio set ups are photographed over the top of each other on the same piece of film. The camera is used to capture an image that combines painting with light, high-speed flash and slow tungsten exposures incorporating projection. At times 20-30 exposures were incorporated onto one piece of film.

Using a combination of techniques, including printing, laser cutting and etching, smoke blows unpredictably, as the winds of change, through dot-like penetrations in Younger's 'mirrors of deception'. The precarious physicality of smoke and mirrors provide a solid foundation for statements that recognise the ephemerality of truth, while referencing the elements of spin, chance, deception, reflection, and obscuration through a foggy, enigmatic context. The photographs of 'events' Younger has created are tinted with variously coloured gels and lighting, which in *Demagogues and Megalomaniacs* are also digitally enhanced.

Thanks to the internet, popular culture and populism have become increasingly influential factors in global struggles for political power. When Younger produced satirical works targeting United States President Donald Trump and Dear Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un, Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea, their denuclearisation summit in Singapore had not yet taken place. Immediately following the meeting, international media were quick to describe any achievements, or outcomes, as all 'smoke and mirrors'. Arguably, Trump has perfected the art of duplicity; he is presented in *Demagogues and Megalomaniacs* as a tweeting buffoon. His cartoon-like face etched onto the mirror is surrounded by Twitter's ubiquitous logo and swirling pink, orange and blue smoke emanating from holes cut to represent bird droppings. Twitter is Trump's smokescreen, used as a personal propaganda channel to combat his paranoia of 'fake news'. In other words, his feed is a steady stream of fake news about fake news. Political cartoonists have often represented Trump as a president in nappies. Similarly, in *Kim Jong-un* (2018) Younger presents the Korean leader as an overfed child at play with nuclear toys. Her work reflects the views that the two leaders are not only immature, but also unpredictable and dangerous.

Demagogues and Megalomaniacs attempts to shed light on the absurd behaviours of neoliberal despots both in the national and international arenas. The substance of Younger's photomontages is drawn from popular culture with abundant references to the characteristic signifiers through which leaders have become recognised and will no doubt be remembered. Symbols of personal choice, or those imposed by commentators, however, are rarely flattering for the subject or the source – the relationship between Trump and Twitter birds, for example, serves neither particularly well.

Queensland's notorious mavericks Clive Palmer and Pauline Hanson emerge from the primordial swamp of politics in the guise of B-grade movie stars. Palmer, an unfortunate icon, noted for his reptile park at the Palmer Coolum Resort, rides a dinosaur in his steamy prehistoric world of volcanoes, antediluvian plants and pterodactyls. The obsolescence of extreme conservatism is also highlighted in the work about national fearmonger Pauline Hanson, who appears in a shower of swastikas, dancing in the arms of 'otherness' represented by a 1930s version of King Kong. Pioneer neocons Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan are also afforded facetious movie-star status, the latter having been a B-grade actor in many Westerns. In an environment inhabited by saguaro cacti and atomic bomb explosions, and dressed in cowboy attire, Thatcher rides Reagan into (or out of) an allegorical nuclear sunset – an irreverent take on their close relationship during the 1980s.

The success of Younger's works lies in her ability to diminish the overblown identities of these controversial giants of neoconservatism via a series of popular cultural symbols that represent their dubious achievements. These characteristic associations embraced by the subjects for political gain thus become the substance of Younger's critique. For example, when we think of Kim Jong-un and the tyrannies of his dynastic power we also think of gluttony and nuclear weapons. The humour that occupies all of these works is not based on the way that Younger views these figures, but on the way she introduces the emblems they have selected to distinguish their place in history. With this in mind, Younger is able to infuse an air of pathos into the mix of banal signifiers and outrageous colour schemes, which intensify her irreverence, suspicion and, ultimately, contempt for the machinations of modern power.

David Broker

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Jay Younger's first solo show in Brisbane for some years includes two series: *Demagogues and Megalomaniacs* (2018) and *Queensland* (2017).

These photographic series take politicians as their subject matter and are created from smoke and mirrors. The *Demagogues and Megalomaniacs* (D&M) series questions the absurdity of neoliberal and despotic political leaders in the national and global arenas. This series employs a satirical photomontage drawn from popular culture – with Bush (George W.), Reagan and Thatcher, Pauline Hanson, Clive Palmer, Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un as its abominable targets. Younger reflects on her surprise and dismay at the unprecedented and continually unfolding political ploys:

I had already completed the Trump image and I was finalising the Kim Jong-un shoot on the eve of the denuclearisation summit between Trump and Kim Jong-un. The next morning, I awoke to view the absurdly propagandistic film trailer created by the Trump team that comically reverses nuclear missiles launching. Obviously, the film was created by one crazed megalomaniac for another. Clearly insanity rules. And now, just as one thought *Clive* (Palmer) was done, he's back and billboarding us with 'Make Australia Great in preparation for his next political manoeuvre.

The *Demagogues and Megalomaniacs* images are photographs of a process that combines laser cut and etched mirrors with smoke, an uncontrollable element that literally takes form depending on the way the wind blows.

Jay uses 'smoke and mirrors' to comment on spin, chance, deception, reflection, and obscurity – albeit in a foggy, enigmatic context.

The motivation behind *Queensland* (2017) sprang from a desire to engage with the waves of cultural loss and political amnesia that Queenslanders have suffered. In the *Queensland* series, the ephemeral elements of smoke and reflection are combined with appropriated news photography and popular icons (such as a palm tree, or a Dreamworld roller coaster) to look back to the political foundations of contemporary Queensland.

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