

Five on Five: Peter Waples-Crowe on David Wojnarowicz's *Bad Moon Rising*

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PETER WAPLES-CROWE [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]

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TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]

For this series of Five On Five, we're asking five artists to talk about a painting that has influenced or inspired them. In this episode, hear Peter Waples-Crowe, discuss 'Bad Moon Rising', painted by American artist David Wojnarowicz.

PWC

Hello, my name's Peter Waples-Crowe, and I'm a Ngarigo artist and I'm a performance and visual artist, and I work across a lot of mediums from ceramics, mostly painting. And I do a lot of collaborations with other artists.

I've picked a painting by one of my icon artists, David Wojnarowicz, who passed away in like 1992. But the painting I picked is called 'Bad Moon Rising' from 1989. Not only do I like the work, but I like who David was, and I think that's more important than even the style, content or anything else. I liked who he was as a gay man and an AIDS activist. When you look at this painting, it's full of symbolism and layers. It's something I use in my own work and it sort of references one of my favorite Aboriginal art practices is rock art. You know, some of the rock art caves that I've been to have layers and millennium of pictures over the top of each other, and it's been really influential in the way I work, putting layers of images over each other. David does that with a lot of different mixed media approaches.

That's why I really am attracted to his work. I first saw David's work in 1992, or in the 90s, but in a magazine called 'Art in America', which is probably still going, but it was just on the cover of the magazine in a bookshop in Wollongong. And I was a young, queer guy in a very homophobic town in Wollongong. And you know, I think I was really coming, trying to come to terms with my own sexuality and, uh, express it in positive ways. I was also, you know, um, had always done art as well, so I saw a cover of a magazine and then there was an article on David in that, and his work really just spoke to me. It was making the invisible visible. It was dealing with the on-going AIDS, hysteria and AIDS crisis of the time. You know, we weren't immune to it in Australia, but he was in the heart, a heartland of it in New York City. You know.

The work uses different media and has an image of a headless sort of Saint Sebastian in the middle, with trees growing up. And, you know, Saint Sebastian was a martyr, was persecuted as a Christian by the Romans. And I think that's the meaning about it. It's about persecution and at the time, gay men particularly, um, were getting persecuted by the American government. And you can see in the background, it's a background of dollar bills and sort of saying the American way. And there's this overlay of all these other images. There's a circle of, um, cells which looks like viral, the virus, the HIV virus, and another one where it's half a clock. And at that the time, AIDS was a bit of a death sentence. The drugs weren't very good and lots of men were dying. So I think all, there's all this urgency and vitality in the work that really spoke to me as a young artist. He uses gay pornography, images from that. One's in a negative, one's in a positive; is that about discordance and being in a negative and positive relationship? I'm not sure, but that, that's the feeling I sort of get. And it made gay sex something that came into the art world through his work. He was really out and proud and I really liked that 'no holds barred' approach and confronting and challenging what high art was as well.

His work's about activism as well. And being aboriginal and gay, my work, you can't help it but be political, you know, and I want to be visible. And so that's why I find such a great influence in his work. His work spoke to homophobia and about being out and proud. He hated how we were judged for being gay and that our bodies were political battle grounds at the time. I think there was a time when Ronald, Ronald Reagan wouldn't say the word AIDS, you know, it took him so long to actually admit

that word. So there was, you know, Act Up and other, um, activist groups were... How many bodies does it take to get something done in this crisis? And, you know, this crisis is affecting gay men. That's why you can let it slip under the radar. And we went on to know that it affected a lot of the minority populations, which made it a moral battleground as well. And, um, people call it the plague. The church used moral judgment around it as well, that homosexuality was a sin; so we deserve this. This was a sort of era that all this artwork was coming out of.

I guess I was living in Wollongong a bit away from the epicenters. And I guess his work spoke to me about the epicenter as well. I didn't come out till later. And HIV and AIDS really had a big impact on that, you know, the way I... You didn't come out then. You came out... If you came out, people were worried you were gonna die this new disease.

And you know, people said they should lock poofers away and yeah, it was just a really homophobic time. I just remember it. And I'm so glad we've moved away from that now. But David's work was all about that. David died while I was visiting New York City in the early 90s, and I still find his work really urgent and vital and it resonates deeply with me. I just find myself wanting to be more... my art to be more and visible. And I want that, that's why I'm inspired by artists like David. I want to be a proud Elder in the community as I merge into that state and just be a really good role model for young people to know that you can, um, it's okay to have queer Aboriginal people and to be queer.