

# Something something video-film-paint something (1)

Steve McQueen crossed over in 2008 with *Hunger*. Gillian Wearing did it in 2010 with her doco/art film *Self made*, which got neither a major release or a spot in a film festival in Melbourne. On 17 March, at LongPlay in North Fitzroy, Doc(c)o Club returned with a screening of Wearing's film.

A couple of friends-slash-film-making-colleagues have recently started this film club. Modeled on the reading-group-cum-book-club phenomenon, [Kim Munro](#) and Amanda Kerley began Doc(c)o Club with the idea of screening seminal, rare and innovative films that could generate discussion and dialogue. While Doc(c)o Club centres around screening and discussion, Amanda and Kim's other project, [Camera Buff Movie Makers](#), brings together makers interested in the production of short, essayistic films that question the limitations of documentary making. With funding for documentary film-making becoming harder to get, these projects have provided a way for Amanda and Kim to focus attention and help grow divergent ways of thinking about and telling non-fiction stories.

Amanda and Kim have both engaged in documentary practice. Kim began her foray into the field with the short musical documentary, [The rise of Leatherman](#) (2008), following this with [Nerve](#) (2011), a made-for-television (in particular the ABC) documentary about the London-based Australian artist, Paul Knight, and his project to find two strangers interested in having sex upon meeting. Together, Amanda and Kim have worked on the short campaign documentary [Save the Hope Street bus \(Keep our hope alive\)](#), made last year following State Government funding cuts which saw the axing of the shortest bus route in Melbourne. The 'economically irrational' cuts to the service meant some 150 elderly citizens could no longer be self-sufficient.

Gillian Wearing's [Self made](#) is a cross-over film. By utilizing processes and approaches not unlike her previous works, Wearing made a documentary film that not only traverses a kind of self-help, cathartic-reality TV genre but also a film that, in the end, tends to the dramatic theatrical. Wearing's doco becomes drama as she weaves together scenarios determined by the film's own participants and the workshops they have participated in with Sam Rumbelow, a method acting

teacher. Scenarios involve a man who has planned his own death and identifies with Mussolini as his on-screen alter ego, a depressed and repressed middle-aged woman who becomes the heroine of a 1940s love story (this reminded me somewhat of Claude Chabrol's 1970 film *Le boucher*), and the complicated relationship between a daughter and father, which is replayed via the restaging of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The process of fictionizing self-emanated facts highlights the difficulty of representation—in particular, Wearing's participants' complex relationships with themselves and the world.

The participants' privilege of being able to cathartically engage with their past or present internal conflicts and then reshape that conflict via method acting reminded me of Slavoj Žižek's 2011 article '[Shoplifters of the world unite](#)', published in the *London Review of Books*. The text examines the sloganless actions of the London rioters reacting to the shooting of Mark Duggan and their relationship to the European debt crisis through Žižek's typical Marxist-Hegelian lens—those outside organized social space express discontent through 'irrational' outbursts of destructive violence. The rioters' unspeakable and unrepresentable conflict with the present eventuated in several days of violence and looting; this was a space between rational and irrational, the representable and the unrepresentable, tentative and potentially volatile.

Unrepresentable.

If Wearing's film can be considered a fictional cinematic portrait of the lives of seven Londoners, I see a parallel with Colleen Ahern's exhibition [Cortez the Killer](#) at Neon Parc this month (previously written about by Hannah Mathews for [Stamm](#)). This two-year project has seen the production of more than thirty portraits of a man based on the [Neil Young song](#) of the same name, a man Colleen can only imagine. The song references Hernán Cortez, a Spanish conquistador who conquered Mexico for Spain in the sixteenth century. The song utilizes a historical narrative and then shifts to what seems like a personal first-person narrative. Colleen has painted the image of this man she cannot see and of whom there is no photographic portrait in existence.

Oil paint can be a slippery, manipulative medium. Sometimes the portrait is a collaged mash-up of faces, another is clearly a painting of someone (whom I am privileged enough to know is Colleen's daughter) masked with a taped-on moustache and goatee. In the exhibition, we are presented with thirty questions

of what a portrait is, what it can and what it can't be, whether finely glazed and reminiscent of a Velázquez or loosely painted, facial features rendered awkward. I can't help but think of the Shroud of Turin, or Robin Williams's character Harry in Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry*, a man who literally slips out of focus: portraits, pictures and leaps of faith.

In the end, through these works Colleen forces us to make our own assumptions as to who is being depicted and we name them accordingly: the Dave Grohl one, the Alex Vivian one, the Tony Abbott one. What we are left with, perhaps, is the melancholic loss embedded within an endless project. Painting a portrait is difficult at the best of times, but painting the portrait of someone whom one has to imagine, building the face, the structure, the tonality, the touch, is surely near impossible. Colleen gives us thirty paintings about the impossibility of portraiture and representation and the challenge of historical memorialization. Her serialized, fictional portrait of one person becomes a collection of individual portraits of a faceless many.

Note: Kim and Colleen are both very good friends of the writer. Gillian is not.

Colleen Ahern, *Cortex the Killer*, [Neon Parc](#), Melbourne, 13 March - 6 April 2013.

(1) *Something something video something* was an exhibition curated by Blair Trethowan and Jarrod Rawlins and presented at [Artspace](#), Sydney, in 2003 and [Uplands Gallery](#), Melbourne, in 2002.



Screen shot of online image search results for 'Gillian Wearing "Self made"'.  
made''.



Amanda Kerley and Kim Munro, 'Save the Hope Street bus (Keep our hope alive)', 2012, production still



Amanda Kerley and Kim Munro, 'Save the Hope Street bus (Keep our hope alive)', 2012, production still



Colleen Ahern, 'Cortez the Killer', 2012



Colleen Ahern, 'Cortez the Killer',  
2012



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2012

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## Colleen Ahern—'Cortez the killer'

I recently had the pleasure of a studio visit with Melbourne artist [Colleen Ahern](#). Ahern is a talented painter, best known for her domestic-scale paintings that portray popular musicians of the 1970s and onwards. The works are skilful and filled with love: there is a tender thrum of fandom in their composition and a nostalgia in her chosen palette.

The last time we met, Ahern was working on a series of paintings based on photos she had taken of musicians performing on TV, on shows like *rage* and various music docs. The portraits captured her beloved musicians within the physical

frames of the visual media through which we access music culture: a trippy colour burst; a line of static caused by the pausing of a VHS recording; a vague reflection of the viewer on the screen. Each portrait foregrounds a particular technological glitch. The series referenced the platforms through which we engage with our musical heroes and also the distance between us and them; the distance that allows them to remain accessible but untouchable, out of physical reach but close enough to gaze upon and listen to with adoration.

Ahern's latest series began with the Neil Young song, 'Cortez the killer', which appears on the 1975 album *Zuma*. The song tells the story of Hernan Cortez, a conquistador who conquered Mexico for Spain in the sixteenth century. The song got Ahern thinking about what Cortez might look like and she began working on a number of paintings and drawings that depict her vision of the conquistador and elements of his escapades. These works continue Ahern's desire to connect with musicians and make concrete and tangible her particular personal relationship to the music itself.

Where these new works get particularly interesting, and I think elusive in their purpose for Ahern herself, is that they have been the motivation for an extended series of drawings and paintings that depict numerous men, like Cortez, whom Ahern has never actually seen. These portraits are generated from Ahern's imagination—they are not based on source images or narratives that she has created around them. The portraits themselves are as clearly depicted as if sketched from life and are motivated by her desire to create a series of faces that exercise her skill with various facial features. Each portrait embraces a different style: colonial, post-war Europe, contemporary. Each one is unique.

This series strikes me as particularly ambitious and challenging for a portrait painter. Ahern's only source material exists in the slippery space of the mind and yet she is able to return to it, time and again, over a period of months. The works left me enthused, impressed and excited. But most significantly they left me wondering when was the last time that I could imagine, let alone capture the likeness of someone I had never laid eyes on before.

Ahern's latest series is the stuff of true imagination matched by equal skill. Somehow, for me, it bridges the fandom of her earlier paintings with the anonymous characters of her favourite songs.



Colleen Ahern, 'Feelin' inside', 2010, oil on paper



Colleen Ahern, 'We love you', 2011, oil on paper