



Source: Ian Black, 'Violence won't work: how author of 'jihadists' bible' stirred up a storm', *Guardian Unlimited*, 27/07/07.

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Looking in the mirror at that vision of modernity triggered B's compulsive passion. These days you'd probably say it was his tipping point. All the dark picturesque wood panelling had been junked for chromium plate and a double line of mirrors, making everything pale and hygienic under a bleak electric light. The new barber was not a man for the mystery of shadows. Now there was no way of avoiding the endless accordion of self-images, exposing all sorts of unseen angles. B was no narcissist but was very struck by the spectacle it presented, the surgical display of anonymous intimacies when one man combs, strokes and pats another's head. It was, after all, the 1950s. He made his first shop painting in two-tone formaldehyde greens putting him self in the chair shrouded in a white sheet and dressing his father-in-law in the barber's white coat, scissors and comb in the breast pocket, armed with a pair of clippers. For anyone who knew them, it lent a certain subdued psychodrama to the painting.

I thought that was the end of the story, until he mentioned Mr W's small business, where he'd been paying rent for years on the first Saturday of every month. One morning when the receptionist was away he was taken into the inner sanctum, an airless unremarkable office, exposed light bulb, a single typewriter, two chairs and three small reproductions hung high on the wall above eyeline, so you didn't have to look at them. That was it, a small man in a small business there for 50 years, the kind of scene straight out of Beckett. He went home and turned it into a painting. I should say that at the time he was acutely aware that Jackson Pollock and all his followers were expressing themselves on the floor in large painted flings of energy, while perversely he found himself gripped, with a certain fascinated revulsion, by the world of the street and its shopkeepers—the butchers, the bank teller, the bacon cutters shop, the bar, the slicing machine shop, the fishmonger and menswear. In fact the menswear shop was a breakthrough. He came to it via Seurat's precise and abstract architecture, of seeing like a visitor from outer space, gazing with a penetrating exactness, vacant of all direct understanding. B used a similar framework, repeating a few simple forms in his grim parade of the new season's fashion. All is precise and ordered on the narrow stage—neat layers of folded pullovers, perfectly arrayed strips of bright geometric ties on a two tier rack, double-breasted, double-wafted suits on dummies, lined up in a row staring out, fixed grins, all buttoned up, going nowhere. Their aging doppelganger, the salesman, stands on guard in shirt sleeves and a pin-stripe waist coat, matching trousers, loud tie, meeting the eye of all who pass his lair. At the centre a long mirror reflects a silhouette hovering on the threshold, possibly the artist, a customer or the viewer caught looking.

When Pop art appeared on the horizon, B withdrew from retail, leaving it to window dressers like Warhol who knew it from the inside. I guess he reasoned only Americans could truly succeed in an art glorifying late capitalist commodity fetishism. Then when he started working at the art school, he changed his mind, maybe it was partly a reaction to being in the thick of art students and art politics, as the next shop series neatly dovetails with his time of teaching. His subject was now quite specialised, not any old retail business but one selling orthopaedic equipment with displays of artery forceps, invalid foundation garments, rosettes of surgical scissors, artificial legs, sun lamps, invalid chairs, an arc of syringes, signs for elastic stockings and one that promised 'walking sticks make a good companion'. That was when I became his accomplice. He asked me to photograph a shop one Sunday morning. I initially balked at the grotesque material and distinctly remember his reply: 'This is genuine. Somebody loves them, loves them dearly and has put them into patterns, as if they were cosmetics, almost as if they hope that a passer-by will be attracted by the window display and say 'Ah I must buy one of those pairs of artery forceps.' The following weekend when we met in the deserted streets of Melbourne we found to our horror a council vehicle parked opposite the shop flashing blinding red lights.

B incorporated those strange light effects into the series creating a fan of luminous explosions across the glass. He became completely entangled within these display window paintings, juggling his face, and sometimes his feet into the fittings of mirrors and glass, so you'd see a disembodied head along side a menacing set of veterinary instruments or surgical scissors. The spectator enters that unstable space in the company of a smiling boy in orthopaedic gear riding the wheelchair or an amputated Venus modelling the corset.

Just recently I heard a young art historian describing his shop windows as 'spectacles of mass ornament' and claiming 'his phantasmagoria of middle-sized small goods as an allegory about the artist's pose of genius.' Maybe she has a point. In that last one he painted of the kitchen equipment shop called 'Inside and Outside' he places himself as a vast blown up shadow looming on the glass in business suit and tie with a pin head. And if you look very closely in the distorted reflections of pots and pans and ice creams scoops he's also painted seventeen of the strangest little self-portraits, tiny shrunken creatures—like dried grasshoppers, cockroaches and miniature bats in suits and ties.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ann Stephen.*