

Teelah George: Meatworks Mens Qrtrs

Shortly after entering her current studio at the Fremantle Arts Centre, Teelah George handed me a photograph of four men standing in a line dressed in tuxedos and each posing with fully flared grins and a painted 'black face'. The word Jacko was scrawled on the back of the photograph in pencil; the name of George's grandfather (although it is unknown which of the men he is).

When George returned to Perth in 2012 after living in Belfast for three years, she came across a number of photographs and a memoir titled *Wyndham – with a ton of salt* by Ken Mellowship, each providing mysterious connections to Jacko's life in Wyndham. He is mentioned as one of the many men up there in their twenties working at the town's meatworks station during the early to mid 1900s. Written in 2004, the memoir is largely a revision of the diary entries written by Mellowship at the time. It is a brutal story set in a town and a time where one is a brother, caretaker, co-worker, nurse and counselor to each other. The men such as 'The Hygienic Butcher (Ted Scot), 'Len (The Horse) Philips' and 'Jacko George' each deal with the processes of coming together with other strangers in attempt cope with severely isolating conditions. Mellowship does so through a melody of old yarns and local in-jokes to reassure the reader that we are outsiders to this coming of age story.

The meatworks station itself is also inaccessible today. In Jacko's time, the station was a self-sufficient centre for 1600-2000 workers processing meat in the station's abattoir, cannery, freezer, tallow, and tannery. However, since its demolition in 1986 nothing has been erected in its place and so the imprint of the station stands as a reminder of a past industrial centre. For George, rather than connecting readers to this space, the memoir reads more as a lamentation to the lives and memories that have since dispersed and faded. George's tactile gestures in '*Meatworks ran the town then (dry) and (wet)*', responds to this disconnection by suggesting that archives bring attention to how there are times where we are unable to connect with the past.

The sculptures, portraits and prints that George has created for *Meatworks Mens Qrtrs* gives insight to the way in which documentation can at times provide a sense of alienation, disconnection and reinterpretation. Working from archival photographs and Mellowship's text, George invites us to engage with a process of celebrating the fissures in memory that build over time and the opportunities presented to recreate and mythologise them. Through her portraiture George underlines how Mellowship obstructs a desire to represent the forms of these men by describing them in abstract clichés and alluding to unexplained pasts such as 'The Python', 'Whispering Smith or the Darwin Terror', and 'Brutal' and invites us to embrace this obstruction. The absurdity of this dialect is further highlighted by George's sculptural work *Shit on a stick, piss in a cup*, which gives form to an old family description of dinner in Wyndham. For George, fictive interpretation and abstraction become mechanisms for emphasising voids produced in memory as well as providing new avenues to connect with the memories that are still alive.

Christina Chau, 2013.