

# UQ ART MUSEUM

## SHAUN GLADWELL

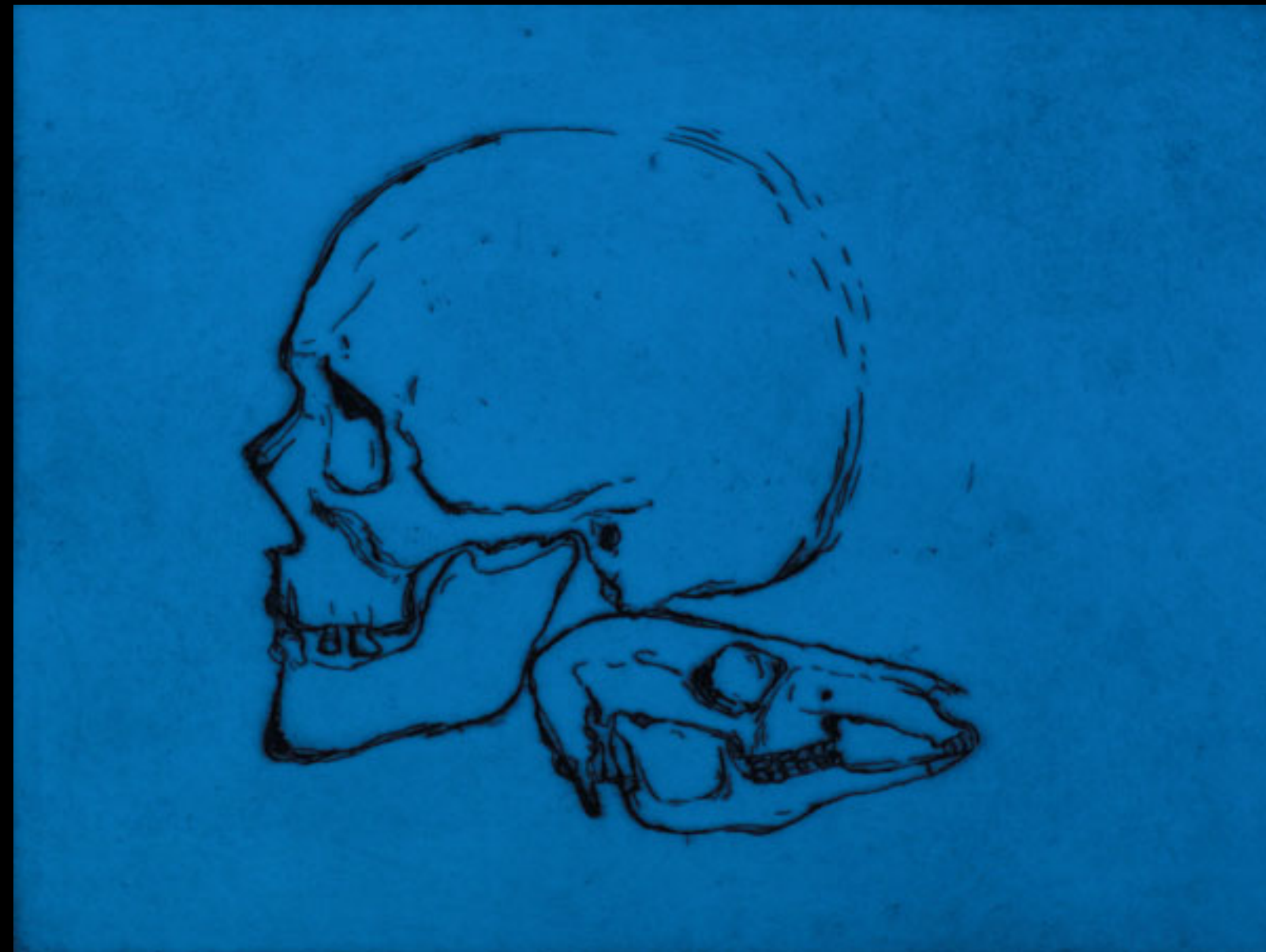


The University of Queensland  
Art Museum  
University Drive, St Lucia  
[www.artmuseum.uq.edu.au](http://www.artmuseum.uq.edu.au)  
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FREE ENTRY

**Cover image:**  
Shaun Gladwell  
*Double vanitas* 2007  
etching on paper  
sheet 38.0 x 57.0 cm / image 33.0 x 44.0 cm  
Collection of The University of Queensland,  
purchased 2008. Courtesy of the artist and  
Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

JULIUS CRICUS / PROVIDER NUMBER 000028



INTERPRETIVE GUIDE



# SHAUN GLADWELL

Born 1972, Sydney. Lives and works in Sydney

Shaun Gladwell makes works of art inspired by extraordinary feats of physical skill. His subjects often push their bodies to extreme limits and sometimes narrowly skirt death. His current work, *Maddest Maximus*, explores the art of motorcycle riding using various media, including video, photography, drawing and printmaking. Set in and around Broken Hill in far-west New South Wales, Gladwell stages a mythic encounter in the desert between a bike rider (played by his brother) and the Australian landscape. Recalling the accounts of hardship, heroism and tragedy littered throughout Australia's early history – the most popular of which include the legends of Ned Kelly and Burke and Wills – Gladwell also references the iconic trilogy of *Mad Max* films set in a post-apocalyptic outback.

*Helmet reflection / inversion 2007* is a hand-coloured etching from the larger *Maddest Maximus* series. The image of a bike helmet – from which a large waratah flower grows – is doubled by its reflection in a body of water. Gladwell's references in this artwork are characteristically diverse. The reflected image recalls the Greek tale of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Gladwell has in fact titled a work from this series *Maximus as Narcissus: broken field of reflection*. In the Greek myth, Narcissus, unable to embrace his own image, wasted away and was turned by the Gods into a flower (the name Narcissus is given to a flower which grows beside rivers and streams). The tale of Narcissus

provides the semantic origin of the psychological condition 'narcissism', which is characterised by extreme self-love. Together, these references recall Salvador Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* 1937, an important artwork from the 20<sup>th</sup> century Surrealist art movement, and one of Dali's celebrated double images. In Dali's painting, Narcissus appears twice, once as a young man gazing at his own reflection and again transformed into a hand holding an egg which sprouts a narcissus flower. Dali's technique was inspired by Sigmund Freud's theories of paranoia.

Another Freudian theory – that of the 'death wish' – could be relevant in an analysis of Gladwell's *Maddest Maximus* series. The figure of the rider, dressed in black like the grim reaper or Darth Vader, seems bent on self-destruction. The bike helmet, in its uncanny skull-like appearance, prefigures death and can be read as a reminder of death or *memento mori*. Gladwell's work also offers up another reading as a challenge to death. Figure-eight symbols of eternity adorn each helmet. With no beginning and no end, this symbol of eternity appears in several of Gladwell's video works as an identifying symbol (or tag) on his skateboard. Like the skulls frequently seen on bikers' clothing and accessories, this symbol helps the biker to cheat death. The eternity symbol is also associated with Arthur Stace, known as Mr Eternity, who for over thirty years wrote the word 'eternity' in white chalk on footpaths across Sydney.

## Activities

- List all of the extreme sports that you can think of. Discuss with a friend which ones you would be willing to try yourself. What is it about these types of sports or actions that Gladwell finds a subject worthy for his art making?
- Think about making a video inspired by a physical act. You could alter the speed of the video and shoot from an unusual angle to render the familiar strange.
- Research the infinity symbol, finding out as much as you can about its history and other names. Speculate on other reasons why Gladwell uses this symbol in his work.
- Locate other artworks from Australian art history where the figure experiences a dramatic or Gothic encounter in either an urban or bush environment. Compare these representations with Gladwell's *Maddest Maximus* series.
- Discuss Gladwell's broad choice of media. Why do you think he works across video, photography, drawing and printmaking? *Helmet reflection / inversion 2007* is a hand-coloured etching. Gladwell's *Reflected double vase 2007* represents this same composition and subject in a photograph. Discuss the impact and success of Gladwell's artwork in different media. Which do you prefer and why?

Shaun Gladwell  
*Helmet reflection / inversion 2007*  
hand-coloured etching on paper  
sheet 57.0 x 38.0 cm image 44.0 x 34.0 cm  
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2008.  
Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne