

Tongue

against

teeth

Iain Dean

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians and rightful owners of the land on which we are situated, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation. We acknowledge all First Nation elders past, present and emerging. This land was never ceded and we work in the spirit of reconciliation.

For Tongue against teeth, Iain Dean presents an entropic approach to painting and ceramics based practice. The exhibition operates as a follow-up to Dean's 2023 solo exhibition Boo Boo Ragout (mistake stew), an expression of self-deprecating pathos and sardonic humility via twenty-four tightly packed paintings in a bright green gallery.

Exploring the cosmic implications of his mistake stew, Tongue against teeth delivers an equally high impact presentation, albeit through just a handful of artworks: an unstretched painting traversing most of the gallery wall; an unfired ceramic pot; and sculptural aggregates of cropped canvas, packing material, and fleeting studio ephemera. The heat stress of the mistake stew has inevitably given way to a release of Boo Boo tensions. Tongue against teeth is a submission to this rupture where precarity, indifference, and inevitability are refashioned into opportunity.



Photography by Adam Kenna
for Art Guide Australia

List of Works:

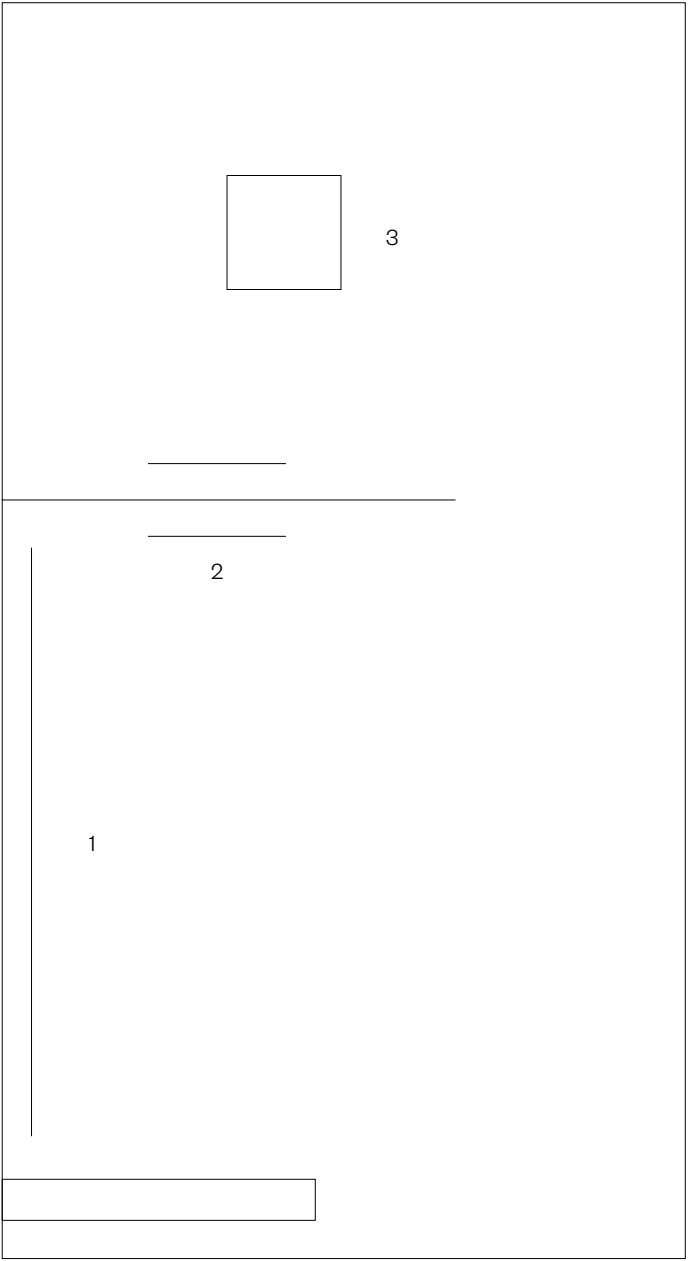
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Iain Dean is a Boorloo based artist whose work applies a distinct vocabulary of colour, shape, text and symbol to paintings, prints and sculptures. His work tends to share a cartoon-bright palette and seemingly casual and intuitive approach to form and mark-making, offset by self-deprecating pathos and deadpan references to modernist formalism.

For *Dean*, life's uncertainties serve as a central inspiration for his work's exploration of interplay between inner and outer worlds and the complexities and inconsistencies inherent in human existence. Through playful existentialism and borrowing from art historical tropes, he employs irony to deconstruct common clichés. This extends to mental health issues, wherein humour serves as both a coping mechanism and a means of connecting individuals who share similar experiences and navigating the universal aspects of being human through simple gestures and paint.

Forming a soupy interrogation of the dynamics between internal and external realities, receded and bombastic truths, *Dean* aims to create 'non-hierarchical, non-judgemental images' that 'free-associate' between the culturally familiar and privately meaningful, operating simultaneously as a joke and an homage.

Iain Dean



1	<i>You don't even live once</i> 2026	Mixed media 632 x 256 cm
2	<i>No exhale, exhale</i> 2026	Mixed media Dimensions variable
3	<i>A body that won't soften</i> 2026	Mixed media Dimensions variable

Sitting in the pocket of hope

Lulu Oehlers

Tongue against teeth asks us to look further. Between the layers, notice the push, the binding, the building, and how we can find the release. If you placed a grain of sand on your fingertip, and pressed your thumb firmly against it, and rub. You would find that the grain is warm. And your skin is tingling. The sand sits between, in tension, accepting the closeness, the magnetisation. The tension is building as you press harder. On Grit. On Tension. Between layers. Look further. Between two parts. There are two sides. Of the wall. Of the chair. Of the mouth. Of the canvas. Of the stairs. And, Of the grain.

Iain's works speak to the breaking point (rupture) where two sides meet. He asks us to remain open to the possibilities that could arise from the collision. Where resistance is transformed, and the layers unearth themselves seamlessly, revealing a pocket of hope we didn't know existed.

Susan Sontag writes in Notes On 'Camp': "56. Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character'...camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. Camp is a *tender* feeling."

When we talk about camp we cannot dismiss the prevalence of irony. In a way, it must exist to soften the seriousness. It acts as the place in the middle where tension subsides, so that neither side carries the burden alone. *Tongue against teeth* somehow finds the balance of seriousness and indifference that gives way to a tender feeling, and relishes in the human nature. It is this 'character' that shines through most prominently through the symbols, marks, spaces, and layers between where play is celebrated.

*

my little pony

smiley face sticker

horseshoe

watering can

sticky note.

A few objects in Iain's studio. While I pondered what this all meant I lingered in a comforting feeling which I couldn't quite place. There was a nostalgia that breathed into the room, a child-like wonder. Each object a symbol of hope, of something more, an action in waiting. I found myself in a state where the small things drew lines to each other and pulled me in with them. It was the pull that led me notice the duality that Iain so naturally celebrates. He asks us to sit in discomfort, even rest in it, while the space around us unfurls. To sit the pocket of hope.

Lulani (Lulu) Oehlers is an artist practicing in Boorloo/Perth. Their work is held together by kinship, vulnerability, grief, and of course, humour. They are drawn to the ethics of human testing/ experiments and what it means to be 'watched'. After completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts at Curtin University, Lulu now works as a gallery assistant at AVA Gallery and as an art educator at School of Early Learning.

Entropic Disclosure: An Essay on Iain Dean's Tongue against teeth

Samuel Beilby

*All those beauties in solid motion,
All those beauties, they're gonna swallow you up*
– David Byrne/Talking Heads, "Swamp" (1983).

In 1964, American physicist Arno Penzias and radio astronomer Robert Wilson set out to study faint radio waves bouncing between echo balloon satellites using a 6-metre long supersensitive horn antenna. Going to lengths to mitigate any interference that might occlude the clarity of these feeble radiowave signals, they removed radar effects, radiobroadcasting, and even cooled their instrument to -269 °C with liquid helium to write off any chance of thermal interference. Despite their thorough attempt, a low and steady noise persisted. After checking their equipment multiple times, and even clearing out pigeon droppings from the antenna, the noise remained. Unbeknownst to them til months later, they had accidentally discovered the cosmic microwave background (CMB), a form of microwave radiation, tending towards near uniformity, engulfing the entirety of the cosmos – a 13.8 billion year old echo of our universe's birth, an arche-fossil of the big bang. ⁽¹⁾

However endless the cosmic echo of the CMB might seem, Penzias and Wilson's discovery marked an important turning point in mid-century discourse on the origins of the universe and its supposed cosmic stability. Prior to this, the scientific community was split between those that championed a steady-state theory of the universe, holding that matter has, and forever will be, consistently regenerated at the same density and uniformity across spacetime versus those that believed in a hot early universe and a cosmic timeline bookended by catastrophic events. Crucially, the CMB corroborates the now widely accepted understanding that our universe had an eruptive beginning (where matter explodes outwards, spreads out horizontally, and slowly progresses towards near-uniformity) and will eventuate in an eruptive end (an inevitable, all-consuming heat death).

For Penzias and Wilson, what was first suspected to be nothing more than literal bird shit turned out to be a historical moment of scientific enlightenment – the implications of which exacerbated an existential questioning that had already been snowballing for decades. I've come to see Iain Dean's thinking and making as inheriting this same enlightenment dynamic, where knowledge is acquired at the cost of coping some harsh truths and ego-destructive insinuations. Like the movement from the outdated hypotheses of immortal cosmic homogeneity to a rationalist theorising of matter's heterogeneous dispersion and its celestial impermanence, *Tongue against teeth* arrives at a similar inflection of humility through the same caustic vehicle of entropy. Physically understood as the gradual distribution of particle matter across a geospatial surface area, entropy (the second law of thermodynamics) has had an underlying conceptual purchase in Iain's work for a number of years. For this latest body of work however, entropy (often referred to as "the arrow of time") now becomes Iain's modus-operandi not only for pieces such as *You don't even live once*, whereby the artist pushes around soupy paint mixtures across a canvas laid out flat on his studio floor, but as a device for apprehending his recent fixation on the inevitability and indifference of material collapse.

Running off the logic of Freud’s theory of the three humiliations of humankind, (Copernicus’ disproving of geocentrism, Darwin’s theory of evolution, and Freud’s own shattering of the illusion of psychological self-control), *Tongue against teeth* takes cosmic entropy as a fourth and final humiliation. This further blow to human narcissism sees the passage from any stable narrative of progress to the postmodern abandonment of pre-given truths reaching an impasse in the inevitability of heat death.⁽²⁾ In other words, Iain’s latest body of work is borne of a creative practice that, in its steadfast certainty of one thing (a sort of realism of indifference), opens the floodgates to an overwhelming uncertainty of all other things (one’s investment in the status of certain cultural values, social protocols, the sacred fidelity of canonised aesthetics, and so on). Following philosopher Ray Brassier, this line of thought bears the mark of a form of nihilism that is “not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity.”⁽³⁾ I’m convinced that the subtext of Brassier’s nihilism can be applied to Iain’s work: that negativity, even in its most casual, lowbrow and self-deprecating form, is a worthy tool for thinking and making our way through challenging ideas and implications. Not only is it from Iain’s backlog of work that one is reminded of this negativity, but also through the prefix of “un” that gives form to the works in the show (the un-fired ceramic pot, the un-stretched canvas), as well as the negation present in their titles (*NO exhale*, *exhale*, *You DON’T even live once*, and *A body that WON’T soften*).⁽⁴⁾ Rendered through the lens of Freud’s theory of humiliation, Iain’s works speak to the fact that progress, whether scientific or artistic, necessarily emerges from the context of previously established truths but comes at the cost of their inevitable disillusionment. At Iain’s studio, he spoke about this as a definitive part of his practice, a continuous struggle between affirmation and disillusionment, the difference of which sits on a knife’s edge, straddling a fine line between being too beautiful and too ugly, too conceptual and too didactic, too confident and too reserved, until they become more or less indistinguishable – a necessary growing pain of sorts.

We can see the fruits of this struggle, as well as their development, by comparing Iain’s previous show, *Boo Boo Ragout (mistake stew)* (2023), to this latest studio effort. Both outcomes follow a trajectory whereby inevitable collapse is rendered through the lens of telic causality. *Tongue against teeth*, however, marks a fissure in Iain’s approach towards mistakes, sincerity, and truth. Namely, the works that comprise this show make the move from building tension through asking questions to releasing tension through arriving at inevitable (albeit muddy) answers. Considering the cosmic implications of the central motif of collapse, we arrive at materially complex and spatiotemporally elongated truth; that everything will inevitably return to the ground and irreversibly spread outwards. If *Boo Boo Ragout* was an ad hoc pot of bubbling stew, *Tongue against teeth* is the moment someone dropped it. If *Boo Boo Ragout* was the concocted outcome of mistake-assembledge, *Tongue against teeth* signals an abandonment of any normative understanding of what a mistake is altogether. We’re post-mistake now. The stew’s hit the floor and there’s steam coming off the cheap kitchen laminate. Hockey-straps operating as towels to cut the spill off at the pass but it’s too late, it’s already gotten onto the staircase and the anvil. Turning towards the studio artefacts that have somehow survived this entropic humiliation, the treasured Princess Di plate (a resolute symbol loss) and the upside-down horseshoe (an open vessel believed to be indicative of showering blessings and good fortune) emerge as unscathed motifs of hope.

In thermodynamics, uncertainty denotes a maximum freedom of choice of particle distribution in high-entropy states (a stew, for example). Psychologically, however, uncertainty functions as a necessary pre-condition for hope. Hope emerges as a form of desire, a vehicle for plotting a rough and imprecise orientation towards an ideal future from a ground of instability. To put your tongue against your teeth is to press an enormous amount of nerve endings against a surface that has the best

chance for fossilisation – before it too eventually disintegrates. As such, *Tongue against teeth* indexes the decisive moment that *Boo Boo* tensions give way: an explosive moment of rupture that grants a level of resolution to our material circumstances and in doing so, renders certain normative values and narratives of progress as flawed concoctions of our own making, leaving us with the deceptively simple yet indispensable tool of hope – an auspicious instrument of disclosure, a navigational device for moving forward.

References:

1	Cecile Malaspina, <i>An Epistemology of Noise</i> (Bloomsbury: 2018), 109-110
2	Sigmund Freud, “A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis”, <i>Imago</i> 5, no. 1 (1917), 5.
3	Ray Brassier, <i>Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction</i> (Palgrave Macmillan: 2007), xi.
4	Capitalisation added by the author for emphasis.

Samuel Beilby is an artist and writer based in Boorloo. He is interested in processes of extraction, labour, noise, and paranoia, and often uses diagrammatics and amplification to plot exchanges and between these things. Samuel is the co-founder/co-director of ____g.s (aka Underscore Gallery & Studio, est. 2025), Gallery Associate at AVA Gallery, a sessional teacher at the University of Western Australia’s School of Design’ Fine Art department, and an irritant member of the Boorloo-based art collective mg (aka mgmgmgmg).

AVA is a gallery located at *58 Pier Street* in *Boorloo* on *Noongar Boodjar*
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