

## VISUAL ARTS



Andrew  
Stephens

# Beneath the mask

During his 25 troubled years, Ned Kelly rewrote Australian history. In a new exhibition at Bendigo Art Gallery, man and myth come face to face.

Today, he'd be called a terrorist or a freedom fighter. Ned Kelly, after all, was the sort of person who caused people to take sides; even during his short lifetime, they insisted he was either a criminal or a hero. Whatever the case, this young man with the fashionably huge beard was only 25 when they hanged him.

All this time later, the very idea of Ned Kelly still divides us. When Tansy Curtin and Leanne Fitzgibbon announced they were curating an exhibition about him, the responses on social media were telling. "Why devote more time and space to a crim?" was the sentiment from one camp; "Great to find out more about this working-class hero" was another.

Their project, called *Imagining Ned*, is not to clear the air – history always keeps secrets, and countless historians, enthusiasts and writers before Curtin and Fitzgibbon have struggled to arrive at the "truth" about the Kelly phenomenon.

The real aim has been to investigate the influence of Kelly's story on Australian art, revealing how our artists – and even our retailers – have helped to embed his important place in our collective psyche. As they observe, Kelly has infiltrated our hearts and heads in many different ways – and was doing so on a significant and international scale even before his violent encounter with police at Glenrowan in 1880, which led to his capture and execution.

The exhibition Curtin and Fitzgibbon concocted shows off a selection of Sidney Nolan's famous Kelly paintings. While they are fascinating, and crucial to the overarching theme, what we learn is there are many other ways the Kelly story has manifested.

Apart from artworks, the two curators have fossicked about for ephemera and other paraphernalia related to the story, such as postcards and visiting cards produced even when Kelly was still alive, as well as weapons, books, newspaper clippings and photographs. There is also the famous Jerilderie letter, upon which Peter Carey based his novel *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), and the suit of armour Kelly made his last stand in before being shot in the legs.

Magazines from the day, says Curtin, portrayed him as either a villain or a hero, with some detective magazines and other media featuring him sometimes as a sort of chivalrous medieval knight or, at other times, as a brutal and uncaring character, an ironclad bushranger sought desperately by police.

"That duality is really interesting," she says. "The language came in very early on implying something beyond the human was going on with Ned – it was almost like a contagious disease out of control."

Take, for example, the fascinating cards produced by Hoadleys to accompany their packaged chocolates. The cards show beautifully painted significant scenes from the Kelly story and were made in the 1930s. And there are extracts from journals and newspapers showing how, shortly after his life ended, he was a phenomenon internationally as well as domestically. These include articles such as "A history of bandits in Australia" from 1883, published in France's *Journal of voyages and adventures of land and sea*, and another titled "Ned Kelly and his bushmen: A story of robber life in Australia" from 1892 published in the New York Detective Library.

More formal artwork in the exhibition comes from artists as diverse as the expressionistic Albert Tucker and Arthur Boyd, to the



(Clockwise from above) Detail of a work from Mars Drum's *Ned Kelly and Burka Woman* series, 2014; Liam Benson's *Ned Kelly Red Gum*, 2014; three cards produced by Hoadleys chocolates; Vipoo Srivilasa's *Networking*, 2013.



provocative Juan Davila and Adam Cullen, to lesser-known artists with non-Anglo heritage such as Guan Wei and Vipoo Srivilasa.

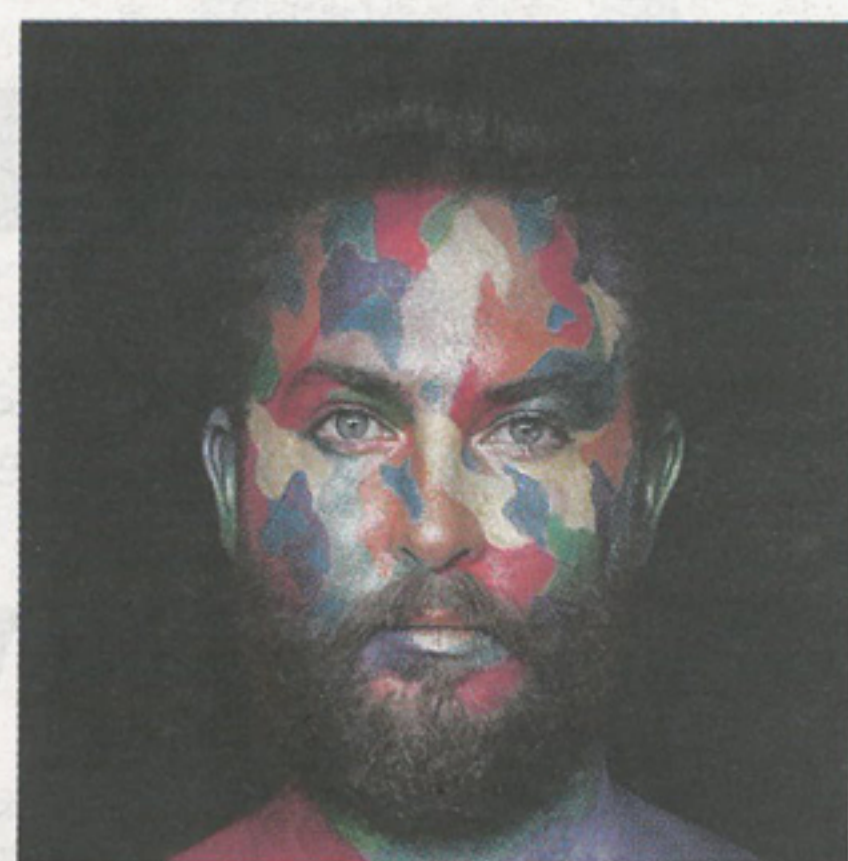
"We were intrigued by the idea of bushranging in Australia, a concept which is so alien to where we are in Australia now," Curtin says. "And yet the themes of the Kelly story are universal – love, loss, betrayal, poverty, oppression. That is what the artists are often engaging with."

Fitzgibbon says there are so many layers to the story of the Kelly gang there is no shortage of themes for artists to tease out and explore. "Everyone is intrigued regardless of their position on Ned," she says. "But there is no fundamental truth with Ned Kelly. I don't think we can be black and white and say 'criminal' or 'hero'. He was simply a product of his situation."

She says it is impossible not to feel compassion when reading about Kelly's early life of impoverishment in an immigrant Irish family beset with hard knocks in a harsh colonial environment. She and Curtin are open-minded about how to view him. "He made some really unfortunate choices and people died and we haven't lost sight of that in this exhibition," says Curtin. "Probably it would have been wiser for him at times to learn to back down. But he didn't."

Famously, the world's first feature-length film was *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906) directed by Charles Tait, which premiered at the Athenaeum and will be shown in part at *Imagining Ned*. It was hugely popular, spawning all sorts of related products, but it was banned in Kelly country because it was thought too salacious and might cause more bushranging outbreaks.

Fast forward many decades and the fascination with Kelly remains, from artists such as Mars Drum, who has portrayed the bushranger strolling romantically across the



pink salt lake at Dimboola arm-in-arm with a woman wearing Islamic headdress and full-length black robe. Both faces are concealed except for their eye-slits. Curtin is intrigued by ideas about how what we wear "protects" us. "But what is being protected here?"

Other works include Liam Benson's hypercolour portrait *Ned Kelly Red Gum*, which imagines how Ned might be perceived if he lived today: the portrait shows his face daubed with the colourful camouflage patterns found on a red gum tree trunk, starkly different to Davila's interpretation of the bushranger as a sexy muscleboy with a hard-on and Aboriginal-motif tattoos, having his torn pants stitched up by a white man who looks like a pit bull terrier.

As for Nolan, who tackled the Kelly subject repeatedly during his life, there are about a dozen works from the 1940s to '50s. Curtin says Nolan once declared his paintings to be autobiographical but would never elaborate on how this was so. People, she says, focus more on how Nolan painted landscape in these works. "But it is nothing like the landscape around where Ned lived," she says. "It is 'typical' Australian landscape. So Nolan took a myth and it became a reinvented myth."

And then there is Kelly's death mask. Borrowed from the State Library of Victoria, it does not look like the face of a 25-year-old. There is no beard or hair, no grief, pain or resilience – nothing like the strength and twinkle of spirit we might think we see in the Charles Nettleton photograph of Kelly taken the day before he was hanged.

The death mask is simply expressionless: he was, after all, dead – but it is a blank canvas onto which so many vastly different interpretations, versions and ideologies have been vigorously applied.

*Imagining Ned* is at Bendigo Art Gallery from March 28. [bendigoartgallery.com.au](http://bendigoartgallery.com.au)