

left Richard Harding, *UR SO GAY*, 2012, acrylic mirror strips, 200 x 755 cm. right, *Wardrobe: Act I - Hoodie* (installation view), 2012, screenprinted gouache with glitter.

## Richard Harding: Gayness and Masculinity

by Jonas Ropponen, artist and printmaking lecturer at RMIT University and Monash University, Melbourne

For the past eight years of his PhD research, Richard Harding has surrounded himself with hundreds of men. He has singled out the most desirable ones, dressed them up and down, marked their skin, put words in their mouths and hung them up on walls. His project was spurred by his experience of online, male-to-male dating websites in the mid 2000s and the phrase 'straight acting' that was banded about these forums in a way that equated it with the term 'masculine'. The art of this long-time printmaker and RMIT academic shows off a love of sensually rich blacks, tender layering of media and intimate hand-touches. However, Harding's work doesn't explicitly go down the track of sexual confession or pornography, rather it is enmeshed firmly in a discourse of identity politics. Through the artistic manipulation of photographic images of men derived from online forums and Melbourne-based magazines and newspapers, Harding has explored masculinities and their relationship to the 'closet'.

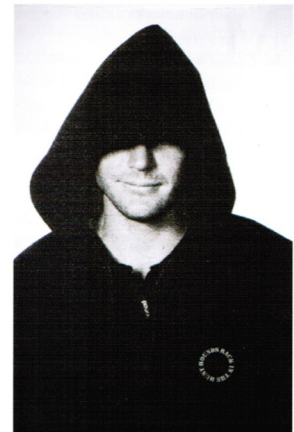
Harding's last exhibition before his final PhD presentation was held this June at RMIT's First Site Gallery in Melbourne.<sup>1</sup> In *this is not a drill*, Harding presented an installation, *Wardrobe: Act 1*, in which a male figure in a black 'hoodie' was repeated ten times in near-to-life proportions over

closely spaced screenprints. From a distance, this work easily brought to mind a wall of mass-produced posters. The repetition of the cloned, cloaked form drew the viewer in closer to inspect each print for possible variation within the composition — a hunt for difference within sameness. On each hooded figure, Harding applied screenprinted rings of text derived from newspaper headlines and embellished them with glitter. Placed over the heart, like embroidered fashion labels or political badges, these textual additions included such statements as: 'Wild Colonial Boy Bold As', 'Man of Steel Lays Down Law', 'Operatic and Over the Top' and 'Bear Goes on the Prowl'. This playful way of incorporating text was partly homage to queer William Burroughs and David Bowie with their use of cut-up text in the generation of their works. By queering mass-produced printed text from populist newspapers, Harding also emphasised the performative aspects of masculinities that are mass-generated and commodified by the media and enacted by men.

Harding's interest in immersing the viewer in a heightened consciousness of their own gaze was further borne out by the way the prints in *this is not a drill* were placed opposite a wall of mirrored acrylic sheets that, when viewed together, resembled a large

barcode. Harding commissioned a street artist to spray-paint a large expletive (best not mention it here) near the entrance to the gallery, hoping it would bounce the viewer into his 'hall of mirrors' through aversion. Entrapped and multiplied, the viewer, together with the reflected hooded figure, became actors within an art piece that activated notions of difference, sameness, repetition, reversal and collaboration. These are all terms that any printmaker would be familiar with and also poke at the heart of what it means to be queer in today's world. By enmeshing the viewer so, Harding sought to implicate all in the construction of gay identities and masculinities. He shows that any identity is a social phenomenon that involves others and othering.

'So, are you a gay artist or an artist that just happens to be gay?' Harding was once asked by a colleague. 'Both', he responded and re-joined with: 'Does it really matter? Are you a heterosexual artist or an artist that happens to be heterosexual?'<sup>2</sup> Harding likes to remind viewers that to be an openly gay male is still a political act today that is deeply entwined with notions of masculinity. Being 'out' can often feel like a tiresome performance of identity that seemingly never ends in a planet-sized theatre managed by straight people for straight people. It is this



Richard Harding, *Wardrobe: Act I - Hoodie* (detail), 2012, screenprinted gouache with glitter, 105 x 750 cm.

experience of difference within the matrix of heteronormativity that Harding has consistently chosen to meet head-on in his art practice through an exploration of masculinities mediated by printed image and text. •

### References

1. Richard Harding showed *this is not a drill* digitally as a finalist in the 87th Annual International Print Competition at the Print Center, Philadelphia. [www.printcenter.org/87th/](http://www.printcenter.org/87th/)
2. Anecdote from interview with the artist by author 23/07/2013.