



STEVE COX

Witch Hunt

Since graduating from the VCA in the late 70's Cox has held over twenty-six solo exhibitions and has been included in over forty group exhibitions. His primary interest is in the psychology of the human being in extreme states, first addressed in *Beyond Belief* (1987), on the British Moors murderers – a subject which was revisited to much acclaim for *True Crime: Murder and Misdemeanour in Australian Art* at the Geelong Art Gallery (2008) Other notable exhibitions include *Kinderspiel* (Child's Play) (1995); *Rave: Club Culture* (2000); *Ecstasy: a celebration* (2001) and *Confessions of a Raving Lunatic* (2002).

Cox has an MA in Fine Art (Deakin University) and is currently completing a PhD at Monash University. Widely recognised for his adept use of watercolour paint, his work is represented in major public and private collections throughout Australia. *Witch Hunt* is Steve Cox's first exhibition at John Buckley Gallery.

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Opening reception 6 – 8 pm Wednesday 19 August 2009

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Steve Cox's exhibition, *Witch Hunt*, springs from his abiding interest in the historical persecution of witches. Across Europe between 1500 and 1700 many hundreds of thousands of innocent people were charged with witchcraft and publicly executed. Being labelled a witch by a disgruntled neighbour or church official was an almost certain death sentence. It was often defenceless widows who were so charged. The household cat or dog was usually seen as her 'familiar' – proof that she had a supernatural link to the devil's realm. The wave of hysteria engendered by the fear of witches was like a juggernaut. The climate of fear and terror was insurmountable in a period where rigid conformity was expected and brutally controlled. There was no room for anything but strict convention.

In a broader sense, the idea of a witch hunt has parallels to our own time and culture. Today, waves of panic regularly arise to do with a fear of 'the other', or anyone not living the way society wants them to. These 'others' may be asylum seekers, non-conformists, people with different religious beliefs, people with different sexual preferences etc. In such a climate, where certain people are marginalised as 'different', we need to guard against slipping into vigilante mode. History instructs us that we have a very short memory. The mentality of the ranting mob is never far from the surface.

In this exhibition of exquisitely crafted watercolours and other works on paper, Cox has worked with a mixture of fictional and actual historical figures. One work features Matthew Hopkins, a real witch hunter who was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent, mainly elderly, women. A large triptych features the three witches from *Macbeth*.

Cox's sympathies lie with the witches. They are the metaphoric victims of a society strangled by its own rigid conformity. The orchestrators of the carnage fair less well in the exhibition. They are: the hate-filled witch-hunters; the bureaucratic coordinators for whom correct paper-work takes precedence over human dignity; the self-righteous puritans, and all those whose agenda is to make everybody exactly the same as themselves.

Cover:

Macbeth's Witches, 2007, watercolour, ink and gouache, 100 x 220 cm, triptych

left to right:

The Devil Finds Work for Idle Hands, 2009, acrylic and coloured pencil on digital print (unique state), 30 x 20 cm

Witch Hunt, 2009, ink, watercolour, gouache, oil pastel and collage on paper, 100 x 71 cm

Wasteland Hag, 2009, watercolour, gouache and collage on paper, 39 x 29 cm

Matthew Hopkins: Witchfinder General, 2009, watercolour, gouache and coloured pencil on paper, 39 x 29 cm

Puritan, 2009, ink, watercolour and gouache on paper, 75 x 56 cm

Judge, 2009, ink, watercolour and gouache on paper, 75 x 56 cm

Venus Loon, 2009, ink, watercolour and gouache on paper, 100 x 70 cm

The Coordinator, 2009, ink, watercolour and gouache on paper, 100 x 70 cm

