

Australian photographer Bill Henson—scapegoat for a wider assault on democratic rights

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Australian police, encouraged by ongoing denunciations of artist/photographer Bill Henson by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, New South Wales (NSW) Premier Morris Iemma and a small group of right-wing commentators, have ramped up their witch-hunt of the internationally-acclaimed artist following the seizure of 20 of his photographs from a Sydney art gallery last week.

NSW police are currently threatening Henson and the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery owners with prosecution under a recently introduced section of the NSW Crimes Act, which covers the production, dissemination and possession of child pornography. If found guilty, the artist could be jailed for a maximum of 10 years and the gallery owners for five years. The accusation of child pornography against Henson, who is represented in major galleries around the world, is ludicrous.

Henson has more than 250 photographs in state-funded Australian galleries. However, since Prime Minister Rudd's declaration on national television that the artist/photographer's work was "absolutely revolting", the police have begun visiting local venues to intimidate curators and dictate what they can or cannot display.

NSW police officers told the Albury Regional Gallery that unless it took down several Henson photographs and removed images from its web site, it could be prosecuted. Three days later police raided Newcastle Regional Art Gallery and "advised" management to take down some Henson photographs—one of which was in a staff room and not even on public display.

Police have also visited Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria and the National Gallery of

Australia in Canberra. Although no photos were removed from these prestigious galleries, the purpose of the visit was clear. National Gallery of Australia director Ron Radford was questioned by police over the gallery's collection of 79 Henson photographs, despite the fact that the pictures were all in storage.

"If we determine there are offences disclosed, then we will go through the process of seizing whatever needs to be seized in order to prove the offence," a police spokesperson told the media. "If you're in possession of child pornography, whether you have it on your computer and whether you view it or not, that's an offence."

Online media outlets reporting the witch-hunt and using digital versions of Henson's photographs could also be prosecuted after they were referred this week to the federal censorship authorities by the Australian Communications and Media Authority, which investigates complaints about internet content. In this coercive atmosphere, the publishers of *Art World*, a new art magazine, were forced to pulp 25,000 copies of its June-July issue. The magazine featured a cover story on Henson and contained photos of the naked girl that prompted the police raid of the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. The survival of the bimonthly magazine, which only began publishing three months ago, has been jeopardised by the additional \$100,000 required to reprint the edition.

Not a single elected Labor politician—state or federal—has opposed this escalating assault. On the contrary, appeals by leading members of the artistic community—many of whom had been recent supporters of Rudd—have been arrogantly rejected by the Labor government and attacked by radio shock-jocks and a

collection of thuggish media commentators.

On May 27, for example, actor Cate Blanchett and 42 other leading writers, dramatists, filmmakers, musicians and artists issued an open letter to the prime minister. The letter rejected allegations that Henson's work was child pornography and called on Rudd and Premier Iemma to "rethink" their previous comments.

The courts, the letter declared, were not the "proper place" to debate the merit of Henson's work. If those demanding charges against the artist were not pushed back there would be further attacks, which would, in turn, "encourage a repressive climate of hysterical condemnation, backed by the threat of prosecution."

"We are already seeing troubling signs in the preemptive self-censorship of some galleries," it continued. "This is not the hallmark of an open democracy nor of a decent or civilised society. We should remember that an important index of social freedom, in earlier times or in repressive regimes elsewhere in the world, is how artists and art are treated by the state."

The letter called on the Minister for Arts and former Midnight Oil rock singer Peter Garrett to "stand up for artists" against the "encroaching censorship, which has resulted in the closure of this and other exhibitions".

Rudd arrogantly dismissed the appeal a day after it was published and told the media that his opinion about Henson's photographs was "unchanged". The issue, he continued, would be decided through "the legal processes of the land".

Not surprisingly, arts minister Garrett simply ignored the open letter. On the same day, NSW Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione, echoing Rudd, told a Sydney radio station that Henson's photographs were "offensive" and "objectionable" and fully endorsed their seizure by his officers. And on May 29, Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper published a letter from so-called child protection activist Hetty Johnson, declaring that she was "committed" to bringing Henson and the gallery owners to trial.

Right-wing commentators are now celebrating Rudd's denunciations of Henson and fulminating against anyone who comes forward to defend freedom of artistic expression. Those challenging the censorship are accused of supporting or providing sustenance to pedophiles.

This was spelled out in an op-ed piece in the *Sydney*

Morning Herald, by columnist Paul Sheehan on May 26. Under the headline, "Artists crying out for martyrdom," he declared that Australia's artistic community was the equivalent of a "claustrophobic, reactionary one-party state," which was providing sustenance to "pederasts and child sex exploiters".

Sheehan suggested, however, that the issue was broader and that the real problem was Australia's "privacy laws, artistic licence, freedom of expression, and Aboriginal rights", which, he said, were helping to "mask, exacerbate or even rationalize, child sex abuse". He concluded with a threat: while "the Bill Henson exhibition may be the wrong time and wrong place for this particular battle ... it is the right time and right place to reinvigorate this particular war".

In other words, the war on fundamental democratic rights should not be confined to Henson.

Sheehan's rhetoric is chillingly reminiscent of the language and anti-democratic measures that led to the Nazi book burnings and the Nazis' characterisation of virtually all modernist art as *Entartete Kunst* or Degenerate Art. The fact that it is published unchallenged in what passes as Sydney's "small l"-liberal daily, and encouraged by the Rudd government's endorsement of the current witch-hunt, should be taken a serious warning to artists, intellectuals and all working people.

Rudd and the rest of the Labor leadership have seized on the Henson issue as a diversion from mounting social tensions resulting from the rapid rise in the cost of living and growing hostility—just six months after its election—to the Labor government. Like the Howard government before it, Rudd Labor is trying to develop a political constituency among the extreme right, Christian fundamentalists and other disoriented layers to use as a means of intimidating and suppressing critical thought, as it ramps up its assault on the social conditions of the working class.



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