

Shadow Boxer

By Tony Magnusson

The Saturday paper, No. 353, 12-18 June 2021



An installation shot of Nigel Milsom's work, part of Shadow Boxer, at Maitland Regional Art Gallery.
CREDIT: CLAIRE HOPKINS

What do art and boxing have in common? Quite a lot, judging by the range of works on display in *Shadow Boxer* at Maitland Regional Art Gallery. This punchy exhibition, curated by gallery director Gerry Bobsien, surveys artists' responses to the "hurting business" from perspectives of race, class and gender. Yet it also identifies parallels between the act of making art and the art of fighting it out in the ring.

From the outset the show emphasises the history of Aboriginal involvement in boxing, in particular the tent-boxing troupes that traversed the country during the early- and mid-20th century. Addressing this in his catalogue essay, Wesley Enoch notes that before achievements were made in other fields of endeavour such as football, visual arts, film and television, music and politics, "boxing ... led the way for Aboriginal people to showcase their talents and build a greater acceptance and understanding for the plight of our people".

One such fighter was Dave Sands (1926-1952), whose internationally significant career was cut short when he died in a truck accident at 26. Born near Kempsey, he came from a family of boxers and lived and trained in Newcastle. An acrylic-on-ply mural of Sands by Dhungatti artist Blak Douglas adorns an external wall of the gallery's building for the duration of the exhibition. Sands was also a Dhungatti man, and the artist reclaims the boxer's heritage by including his totem, a praying mantis, in shadow form.

Wiradjuri woman Karla Dickens' photos, collages and sculpture celebrate the resilience of the Indigenous boxers who fought in the tents as well as the performers who worked in associated sideshows and circuses. In these raucous, anything-goes arenas, young Aboriginal men could earn money and gain respect and legitimacy for their physical prowess. Yet they were also exploited and victimised.

The large-format photograph *Ms Ready and Mr Willing* (2019) depicts a bare-chested, heavily tattooed fighter and a young woman in a sequined Australian-flag minidress, stockings and suspenders, facing the viewer as if ready to rumble. The latter figure references the "leg girls" who formed part of the

entertainment on offer in these carnivalesque attractions. He is stoic, she is tensely defiant, a flicker of vulnerability playing across her face.

Watching the collective energy expended in making the work, one begins to understand in an embodied sense what boxing and art really do have in common – preparation, stamina, concentration, flow. Meanwhile, in *Pound for Pound* (2019) six totemic assemblages punch at the sky. Mounted on a length of wood attached to a circular metal base, each comprises a silver-painted glove raised vertically, as if in victory, beneath which trails a variety of decorations and objects attached by leather cord: beads, feathers, bicycle chains, boomerangs. The title alludes to both boxing's weight divisions and the money for which contestants fought (decimal currency was introduced in 1966).

AFL Media chief photographer Michael Willson took the now iconic photograph of AFLW player Tayla Harris kicking an opening goal for Carlton in a 2019 match against the Western Bulldogs. Newcastle poet Keri Glastonbury writes in one of her two "Shadow Boxer Sonnets", included in the exhibition as wall vinyls: "Her high kick has the heft of a haiku". Harris is also a professional boxer, and a suite of black-and-white photos taken by Willson in 2019 captures the elite athlete in close quarters as she trains, fights and meditates. More than anything, these superbly composed images convey the mental preparation so crucial to success in this most physical of sports.

Fiona McMonagle's watercolour portraits of female boxers are accompanied by an animated short film, *The Ring*, which sews together a staggering 800 watercolours, each based on a still from video footage taken of women, including McMonagle herself, boxing. The Melbourne-based artist made the work in response to the introduction of women's boxing as an Olympic sport in 2012. Given her medium of choice, these works on paper evoke the fragility of the human body like no other – bruises bloom, cuts weep. Yet they also impart a sense of dignity and quiet resolve. These athletes have skin in the game and are standing their ground.

Newcastle-based artist Nigel Milsom's chiaroscuro paintings of the "Maitland Wonder", Les Darcy (1895-1917), and other early boxers, are a tour de force of action portraiture. In a series of subtly geometric canvases, which bear the traces of their construction like a palimpsest, each boxer's gloves, boots and shorts serve as pivot points around which the fighting body is structured in space. Shot through with a chalky luminosity, these monochromatic paintings, collectively titled *Judo-House part 9 (birdland)* (2021), hint at boxing's seductive duality: the lightning-swift use of focused physical force counterbalanced by a lighter-than-air choreography of ducks and dives and fleet footwork that verges on levitation.

Like McMonagle and Milsom, Melbourne-based artist Richard Lewer also boxes. In fact, he's head trainer at Northside Boxing Gym in Preston. His installation *Skill, Discipline, Training* (2021) re-creates a gym of sorts in the gallery: five punching bags hanging on chains and a wall of mirrors. But look closer and the bags are painted steel, while the mirrors are reversed with shadowy figures enamelled onto them.

A short video work projected onto an adjacent wall reveals the process by which the bags were created. Lewer instructed a handful of his boxers to strike five square sheets of steel repeatedly with hammers until the surfaces were mottled with the scars of battle. It's a noisy but beautifully lit sequence, in which the vertical sheets are transformed from Donald Judd-like planes of silvery perfection into pockmarked indices of brute force. Lewer then rolled each sheet into a cylinder, added a top and a bottom, and painted them in blocks of colour and brand logos: "Adidas"; "Dunns"; "Everlast"; "Morgan: Boxing & Fitness Equipment"; "TKO: Total Knock Out".

Watching the collective energy expended in making the work, one begins to understand in an embodied sense what boxing and art really do have in common – preparation, stamina, concentration, flow. Both require a willingness to push one's limits on a regular basis, to marry mind and body in a co-ordinated display of skill, discipline and training. To keep going.

The exhibition also weaves in the story of Maitland-born Les Darcy, who rose to world fame during World War I before dying of septicaemia in the United States at just 21. One of 10 children, Darcy came from a struggling Irish Catholic background and boxing was the means by which he pulled himself and

his family out of poverty. On display is archival footage of several of his most celebrated fights, including his victory over American boxing champion Eddie McGoorty in 1915, alongside personal effects and memorabilia.

The biographies of Darcy and Sands underscore boxing's historical function in Australia as a way for those deemed marginal to the mainstream to get ahead, make some money and earn respect. To a certain extent, this still holds. Boxing is a broad church that has attracted, and continues to attract, all comers, including artists. Perhaps more than any other sport boxing teaches us that – things being equal – we get out of life exactly what we put in. After all, shadow boxers are only fighting themselves.

Shadow Boxer is at Maitland Regional Art Gallery until August 8.

(This article was first published in the print edition of *The Saturday Paper* on Jun 12, 2021 as "Knockout Art".)