

## Introduction: Beyond the Great Divide

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I first came across Luke Roberts in 2004 on the first day of my undergraduate fine art degree. Roberts had been asked to give a brief presentation on his work and its themes, which at the time included UFOs, hidden histories and documentation of several performances, each more bizarre than the last, in his trademark deadpan. Once the talk was over, half of us left, scales falling from our eyes, wondering over the suddenly expanded possibilities of art-making outside of traditional media. The other half were more convinced than ever of their convictions. For me, Roberts' talk was a vindication in the power of ideas. His work didn't speak to me in terms of content per se, but rather in terms of being a sincere and complete commitment to a life of art. I knew I was in the right place.

Two decades on and Roberts is a kind of elder statesman of several strands of contemporary Queensland art, after blazing a trail that many contemporary artists take for granted. At a time where Queensland was rapidly transitioning from a parochial off-grid for a few punks, Queers and artistic renegades to the bustling, 'contemporary' city it is today (and all of the pros and cons for both states that this implies), Roberts (often with the help of Pope Alice) was pushing boundaries of taste, class, identity and media, newness personified. Today, Roberts' influence can be seen in the work of many emerging established artists, so much so that it can sometimes be difficult to imagine just how radical the artist's work was in the Brisbane of three and four decades ago. Roberts' first solo exhibition at Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art 'was in great contrast to other exhibitions around Australia at the time with its use of kitsch objects, camp references, humour, foregrounding gender and celebrating place and the parochial via installations, assemblages and wall works. As it was 'off-Broadway', being in Brisbane, it took some time for the audacity of this exhibition to be recognised and understood'.<sup>i</sup>

Certainly, many Central Queenslanders are already familiar with Roberts' work, the artist hailing from Alpha, and maintaining close links to the region. Roberts is living proof of the artistic fecundity of the non-metropolitan upbringing, taking with him an artistic hunger and imagination almost too big for a city like Brisbane, or even a country as vast as Australia. There are ideas enough in Roberts' oeuvre to fuel projects for decades to come, without even getting started with that of Pope Alice. Like many artists who were raised in regional Queensland, Roberts is not afraid to dream, to be weird, to play, and certainly these aspects are key tenets of a practice that has extended across the years. The term 'oeuvre' seems especially appropriate in describing Roberts' vast body of work. With the word's French (*oeuvre*, 'work') and Latin (*opera*, meaning 'work, effort,' the root *op-* meaning 'to produce in abundance'), could there be a better descriptor?

In Paolo Sorrentino's television series, *The Young Pope* (2016) and its sequel series *The New Pope* (2018), audiences are treated to something not often seen: a satire that is both sincere and irreverent, scathing and affectionate. It is true high camp created for the screen. Camp has always been a slippery notion, often misunderstood as simply parodic, or a form of visually overcooked kitsch, but it is often far more complex, and frequently unnoticed. Perhaps, even decades later, Susan Sontag's essay *Notes on Camp* is still the best description of camp available not because it nails down a precise definition, but because it accounts for its complexity and nuance. For example— and this is a key concept— the *pure* camp is unaware that it *is* camp, exempt from the very self-awareness that is so often crucial in the construction of camp. 'Pure camp is always naïve. Camp that knows itself to be Camp ("camping") is usually less satisfying.'<sup>ii</sup>

Camp has formed an important cornerstone of the artist's work since at least the early 1980s. 'My 1982 solo show at the IMA was unofficially titled – "*IMA* [read: I am a] *Kitsch Exhibition*",' the artist explains. 'I was very much elevating the kitsch objects and assemblages that were part of my early experiences. We didn't have an art gallery [in Alpha], only the Church, the cemetery and the movies. The way people decorated and painted their homes and the exuberance of Catholic expression in Church rituals and ceremonies provided a richness that isn't as present today.' Certainly, the sense of ritual and ceremony has had a profound influence upon Roberts' work, particularly performance pieces, as anybody who has witnessed Pope Alice's recent *Dark Mofo* appearances can attest. 'Now we have more museums, art galleries and passive participation in television shows, I feel people are, or at least seem, more inhibited or self-conscious perhaps, in expressing a truly personal style in their own environments'. Camp is, of course, easily found in the regions. I would argue that the bull statues found around Rockhampton are a wonderful example of high camp, to say nothing of the local Western Outfitters shop called 'The Cowboy's Closet'. The Western mythos is one of the great sources of camp mythology: consider the hit TV series *Yellowstone* (2018—) in its self-serious machismo and simultaneous histrionics, what I like to refer to as *Grey's Anatomy for blokes*. Camp is a useful tool for playful satire, and subversion, but it also allows an understanding of the different subtleties and variations of meaning that signs and symbols can take on.

To Sorrentino, a director long enthralled by the paradoxical beauty and vulgarity of wealth, and a fondness for the Vatican in all of its poise and aesthetic affectations, would seem the perfect subject. The dovetailing of contemporary concerns (social media, terrorism, gender politics, suicide, famine) are filtered through the insular, Machiavellian world Vatican City. The titular Young Pope, Pius XIII (played with bristling intensity by Jude Law), reveals himself as a radical, even tyrannical, reformer. He's American, a smoker, and possibly even a bona fide saint. In the sequel series, while Pius XIII is in a coma, he is replaced by John Malkovich's John Paul III, a depressive, intellectual and liberal successor who is ultimately revealed as a fraud, a heroin addict, and definitely not a saint. Nonetheless, he manages to win over the masses through a deep and sincere emotional core. Unlike the monumental zero-sum pronouncements of Pius XIII, John Paul III allows himself to be vulnerable.

I like to imagine a third season featuring Pope Alice, tending to her flock in her own unique, performative and spectacular way, offering communion to the isolated and the alienated, appearing like a vision in shopping centres, bus stops and pubs across Australia. Pope Alice would heal Pope John Malkovich of his addiction and relieve Pope Jude Law of his vanity, tying the three series up with a dreamlike sequence within the Vatican underneath Michealangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, before leaving forever. Roll credits.

Like Sorrentino, Luke Roberts has a keen interest in the structures, rites and imagery of Catholicism, and organised religion more broadly, but his involvement— more specifically, his own systems of belief— remain obscured through the many processes of artistic practices that Roberts embraces. Unlike many of the Christ-based faiths, Catholicism has a very particular and developed aesthetic that extends far outside of the more restrained vibes of many Lutheran-based variations. Roberts' work, like Catholicism, is by Sontag's definition the epitome of pure camp. What may appear on the surface as frivolous, esoteric or baffling is often far more interconnected than it may appear with a cosmology linking together not one but two vast oeuvres of work, and within these oeuvres, mysteries and contradictions. Without violating any particularities around identity, artistic process or personage, it must be noted that, while this is a Luke Roberts exhibition, the work of Pope Alice must be contended with. Rather than reducing Pope Alice to a winking Postmodern alter-ego or an extended exercise into farcical satire, which I think would be the easy way out, I prefer to view Pope Alice as an entirely separate entity with perspectives all their own. Here, they/them is used to signify

resistance to binary language, but is a simultaneous reinstatement of the collective they/them, for here we are not speaking of a singular artist-person, but rather an artist-person and an artist-entity. What better way to explore concepts, ideas and schemes than to explore them through the eyes, imagination and practice of another?

‘Luke Roberts: Beyond the Great Divide’ brings together a grand selection of Roberts’ work, using the artist’s own life, and specifically his childhood, as a prism through which to view it. While this publication dovetails with the exhibition, it should be understood as a complementary, rather than reflective, document, with many different and additional works included, broadening our understanding of the artist’s work. I would like to thank the many lenders to this exhibition, both private and public, without whom the exhibition would not be possible. Thank you to Josh Milani and the Milani Gallery team for their detective work, administrative assistance, troubleshooting, and for their tireless support of this project. Thank you to Arts Queensland and Creative Australia for their support of the artist and this exhibition, and to the Gordon Darling Foundation and Haymans Electrical, whose support made this beautiful and timely publication possible. Nick, Luke, Amelia, Michele, thank you for your invaluable contributions to this publication. Thank you Nick, for your perspicacity and commitment as curator. And a most emphatic and congratulatory thank you to the artist himself, Luke Roberts, on this remarkable achievement, for daring and persevering.

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<sup>i</sup> All Luke Roberts, in conversation with Jonathan McBurnie, in preparation of the exhibition, 2024.

<sup>ii</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on Camp,’ *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (London: Penguin, 1961), 282.