

David Attwood

*We all do poo, we all look at  
it, but we don't look at it to-  
gether.*

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Attwood and Winata discuss Attwood's exhibition *A Decadent Defecation* at Bus Projects.

In conversation:  
David Attwood and  
Amelia Winata  
*A Decadent Defecation*  
04.07.18—18.07.18

Amelia Winata: So the first time we met, I knew of your work and had just listened to a Dan Savage podcast about a woman who had uncovered her partner's hard drive full of scat-porn. She thought 'what the hell does this mean, I'm not into this,' and Dan Savage was talking about how it was really indicative of some deeply repressed feelings ... and so I felt a bit ashamed to talk to you about your work, but it is also really what your work is all about, this kind of consideration of taboos and how shit is literally the final taboo.

David Attwood: Yes I think it is telling that since that incident of you relaying that story to me about scat-porn, we've since built a relationship around trading poo stories, which is something you can only really do with a familiar.

AM: Yes and I guess it's a bit, well it's so familiar, and maybe we can talk about this through the lens of some past work. It's interesting that there is an absolute familiarity that needs to be established when looking at such a complex subject like shit, and how even with our partners or family we might be happy to fart in front of them, or be naked and so on, but shit is the final frontier. For instance, in *My Beloved's Shit*, your billboard in North Melbourne –that was so fucking confronting for me. But I think you've made so many good points about how you can share an entire existence with someone, and yet shit is something that might not ever be broached.

DA: Sure, I mean that work was really an attempt to use shit to talk about intimacy and adoration. I was thinking about how generically we are repulsed by poo, we are disgusted by poo, and yet there are certain contexts in which our relationship to poo is bound up in love and care and nurturance. If we think about parents and kin, or an incontinent parent or a beloved pet –there are these instances where our natural aversion to shit is overcome, or at least negotiated through love. So that was in part what the work was about, but maybe I'll go back to the idea of shit as taboo and my interest in that. So, I think my work is more generally concerned with looking at things that are culturally considered worthy of reverence, and I'm interested in looking at those things and perhaps trying to agitate them or re-examine their status –so things like hard work, or wealth, or originality, or in the case of this last series of projects, decorum. I think there is an interesting relationship between shit and morality, and so *My Beloved's Shit* was tapping in to that idea of morality –that shit is something to be done in private and not spoken about, despite the fact that it's the most common 'thing'.

AM: Well you've said, and I quote 'We all do poo, we all look at it', and then I thought 'we all do poo, we all look at it, but we don't look at it together'. It's so referenced, everything in this exhibition,

for instance, in some way points to poo. Or even in advertising there are so many clever models that make defecation and waste disposal so attractive. ‘Who gives a crap’ toilet paper is a good example. It’s beautifully packaged, and there are so many examples like where even shitting, one the most taboo subjects in society, has been commodified.

DA: Yes I’m really interested in that, the commodification of these inherently human aspects that one might presume or even hope might be immune to commercialisation, but of course this is not the case. My Beloved’s Shit was tapping into that by taking an inherently commercial tool —the billboard — and presenting something that’s not for sale, presenting something disgusting.

AM: Yes and this is in many ways a discussion of art’s function and how it operates within a larger system, and how everything operates within neoliberalism –it’s impossible to escape. Perhaps that brings around us to your work in Kyneton, and the poo emoji.

DA: Yes, so I sourced a bootleg mascot costume of the character Mr Poop from ‘The Emoji Movie’

AM: Right so first it was an emoji than it was a character in a movie?

DA: Yes, I think it’s actually regarded as one of the most commonly used emojis internationally. But I was interested in the way that it is personified, like it’s not just a coiled poo, it’s a coiled poo with eyes and a smile –and I was thinking about that as a form of kitsch, and how kitsch is our way of dealing with the obscenities of being human. And so I was thinking about the mascot costume as exacerbating that or furthering that, and that a waving, walking, hi-fiving, selfie taking shit, with all these people really very happy to pose with it, was a way of talking about the complexities of our relationship with shit. The actual thing, the picture of the thing is repulsive and hard to look at, the commodified, commercialised ideogram

poo is much easier to negotiate.

AM: Yes and I mean thinking about the poo emoji –who’s shit looks like that? It’s so cute, particularly in comparison to real shit.

DA: Yes, so the emoji poo is obviously personified with eyes and a smile, but the coffin emoji isn’t. Despite the fact that death is similarly a grand theme...

AM: We all shit we all die.

DA: And yet that’s not personified, or made kitsch, and the poo is... I don’t know what that means, I just thought that was telling.

AM: It’s funny that shitting, and discussing shitting still confuses us. Even you are saying ‘I don’t know what this means’ –there’s so much that is still very unclear about why we are fascinated by it. And of course, there is a lineage of artists who have looked at similar things. You’ve spoken about [Piero] Manzoni’s canned shit, [Maurizio] Cattelan’s toilet...

DA: Yes I’ve looked a lot at this lineage of artists who have worked with shit and particularly the relationship of shit to the commodity. And this is really how I arrived at the luxury bathroom; in thinking about this lineage and how one might continue these discussions, luxury and decadence emerged as key terms, and I was thinking about how really the function of the bathroom is to provide us with a sanctuary to shit in. The smallest room in the house, the most private room is used to perform this thing that is so common. And I saw an inherent paradox in the luxury bathroom, in that its function is to provide a means to shit in private, and yet it is adorned in expensive commodities, things that publicly perform wealth.

AM: There seems to be a tension there between elimination and possession –

DA: Yes I was thinking about the term aspiration, and how the aspirations of the luxury bathroom are to provide the most comfortable way for the user to distance themselves from this thing that is abhorrent or shameful, and yet so much a part of their human-ness.

AM: I recall doing a studio visit with you and thinking about how all of these works are quite spoilt – I was so upset that you cut this Missoni towel, and the glass [points to An Oak Tree] is Waterford Crystal, but is completely inaccessible and at a height that makes it functionless.

DA: Yes it is interesting that you say spoilt, I was thinking about these gestures, like cutting the Missoni towel, as gestures of irreverence for these expensive items that are held aloft.

AM: ‘The Design Files’ have a rule that they never photograph a toilet. So whenever they do a house visit they will feature the bathroom and go ‘oh my god wow here’s a double basin’, but there is this rule that they will never include the toilet. Which seems to completely encapsulate at least an aspect of what you’re talking about. What I understand of your practice is this intimacy/taboo binary going on, which are quiet irreconcilable elements that you yourself are attempting to understand through your work.

*A Decadent Defecation*  
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