

EXTRA THE INTERVIEW

# Brand power

The artworks of Ben Frost provoke powerful reactions – including a desire to destroy them, writes RACHEL OLDING.



Capitalism writ large... artist Ben Frost at Worlds End, his Surry Hills studio. Photo: Jacky Ghossein

**N**umber 342 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, is covered in graffiti. There's not an inch of white space at the front door, in the poky antechamber, in the clunky lift or along the corridor leading to the sunlit open warehouse that is Worlds End Studio, home to a handful of young artists including Ben Frost.

The woman upstairs complains about the paint fumes, so when Frost and his colleagues use spray cans to slather canvases they board up the windows and wheel out industrial fans.

Frost's space is at the far end of the studio, a corner spattered with paint and cluttered with books, paint tins, buckets, spray cans and pin boards. The 34-year-old street artist-cum-pop artist sits in an old office chair swivelling diffidently, sucking on a cigarette, looking at four artworks ready to be taken to Boutwell Draper Gallery for his coming solo exhibition, *Lost in the Supermarket*.

He speaks quietly and occasionally lifts his New York Yankees cap to run a hand through his hair as he cogitates.

Hardly the "culturally confrontational and wildly irrepressible" artist described in the press release. Or the self-described pessimist who'd be happy to see the world burn. The creator of an

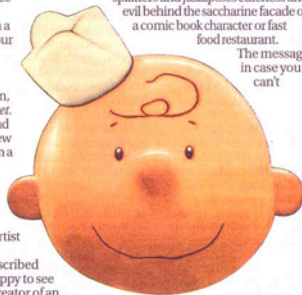
artwork that was slashed by an incensed, balaclava-clad viewer with a knife? The mastermind and subject of a bloody performance piece titled *Untitled Bleeding Man: Project to Give Birth to Robot Puppies?*

He's not quite the brash kid expected from his caustic and often controversial mash-up paintings featuring Pokémon orgies, cinematic paint drips, young girls shooting up heroin and the word "Die" written in the shiny font of the Disney brand name.

That's because Ben Frost lets his art, rather than his mouth, do the talking.

It's through his kaleidoscopic and chaotic artworks that he savagely critiques a society obsessed with and overstimulated by brands. He subverts instantly recognisable logos, slaps mutant morphing creatures and emotions on top of brightly coloured splatters and juxtaposes cuteness and evil behind the saccharine facade of a comic book character or fast food restaurant.

The message, in case you can't



decode the cartoon sticker saying "THIS IS ARMAGEDDON!" or the "roughly scrawled" "crapitalism", is that we're lost in the supermarket of Western consumerism and we don't even know it.

"I've always had a voice and the voice thought that art should be speaking in a personal and political way rather than just talking about a landscape or something pretty," Frost says. "When you make a statement that's based in a socio-political spectrum, if you can hit on the head, people really react to that."

Balaclava man certainly did, as did the police who requested the same artwork be removed when it was exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art as part of *Primavera: Young Artists Under 35* in 2002.

"I am reflecting a world in trouble, a heaving, dying fur seal of an earth that is being repeatedly clubbed with baton-sized television remote controls," he says in an artist statement.

Although confronting to some, Frost's art has been well received by many. These days a canvas sells for between \$8000 and \$9000. The slashed 13-metre mural – now repaired, of course – lives on the 15th floor of a skyscraper in the personal collection of television executive Kerry Stokes. From low-brow art rock star and stencil kid, Frost has grown into a subcultural, crossover success.

He doesn't eschew the commercial world completely.

"It was really to live true to form, I would have to live in the country and wear plastic bags on my feet," he says. But he believes in picking and choosing his clients the turned down a lucrative

offer to feature in a television commercial for a car company) and lives a reasonably austere life.

When one art student approached him after he spoke at the AG Ideas Festival in 2008 and riled him for wearing Nike shoes, Frost admits it was a "total mind-f---". "How do I respond to that? It's a total paradox but I'm not sure you can be so black and white."

His art offers no answers, just

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observations, "a violent kind of statement about the role of all these things" and, for him, a journey to find out more.

As a teen living in the Nimbin-esque hippie town of Maleny, 90 kilometres north of Brisbane, Frost spent his time alone doodling and having recurring nightmares about being inside the planet, only it was made entirely of wires and tubing and colossal tunnels and conduits sparking. In the dream, he is responsible for running the machine but has no idea how. The entire earth trembles as it begins to self-destruct and, with only moments to locate the malfunction among billions of cables, his own mind begins to self-destruct.

Frost moved to Brisbane to study at

Queensland College of Art and later to Melbourne to look for "some kind of new movement". But it wasn't until a two-year stint living in the hyper-reality that is Tokyo that the ethos of his art crystallised. He left Australia in 2003 to get a real job as an English teacher but came back with a fiery vision and a desire to move away from the stencilling and street art scene.

"Tokyo exacerbated this idea of living in a world you don't understand," he says. His art evolved, his fears played out on canvas rather than in his reveries, his career intensified. He began showing at galleries worldwide and his sense of responsibility set in. "I feel that street art has been the most vital and vibrant and interesting movement in art but as you get older it's not as exciting to be daring on the streets and getting caught by the absolutely suffocating city council," he says.

Instead, his daring is in the artificial images, the jarring colours, the mutated logos and the neo-pop violence that have, over 20 years, converged in his marvellous artworks.

"I'm still trying to say the same things," he says. "When I put a logo down, something in the back of my brain thinks: 'Will I get in trouble for this?' It's almost a dangerous activity. People are more fearful of corporations than they are of the police. I mean, is Mickey Mouse going to come over to my house with the Mickey Mouse Police?"

I'll bet stranger things have happened in his mind.

Lost in the Supermarket at Boutwell Draper Gallery runs until December 19. +

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