

Gateway by SIMON BERNHARDT

But is cannabis really a “gateway” drug?

In this collection of photographs by Sydney based advertising and fine art photographer, Simon Bernhardt is asking us to contemplate that simple statement, and all the hyperbole, hysteria and brouhaha that attends it.

“Gateway” is a new work from Bernhardt that seeks to address this issue in a contemporary context, well away from the hysteria that has characterised past decades and given the growing support for the decriminalisation of cannabis for medical and recreational purposes, it is a timely review.

These images are obviously very striking. But what do we know about these people other than what we presume? The images are large, unavoidable, and stark. The lighting is harsh, deliberately so, and unflattering. We are not being romanced here. Clearly, the objective is not the creation of “wallpaper art”. Instead this is about art engaging with society in a debate of some significance.

The people who agreed to be a part of this exhibition and limited edition book come from a range of backgrounds. There are labourers, students, blue collar workers and skilled professionals. They live in the inner west, the eastern suburbs, the western suburbs, the northern beaches, and they live in houses like yours. They are someone’s brother, sister, husband, wife, son and daughter. Some have been using marijuana for all of their adult life, and some have just begun. They may smoke daily, or nightly, on weekends, or on holidays.

Sometimes alone. With their partner. Before sex, or sleep. They smoke to relax. To relieve the boredom perhaps or for medical reasons, or for reasons unknown. But to group them all together, as “pot smokers” is to ignore the many real differences between them.

The debate will go on, of course, as it has been going on for as long as I can remember.

Art is part of the debate, and Bernhardt is bravely participating in it. Better known for his strangely beautiful depictions of urban environments, this work constitutes a departure from his usual motifs. Beautiful things have their place, of course, and Lord knows the world needs more beauty. But truth and freedom are beautiful too.

The 16 participates Bernhardt has interviewed and photographed demonstrate their personal use of cannabis and is not the sole domain of one group within our society. However it is clear by many of their answers, that they all feel the same social stigma if they reveal their cannabis use to the many facets of society. The studies suggest that most Australians have tried cannabis at least once. Surely overall attitudes to cannabis would reflect this; unfortunately this is not the case. A common response from virtually all respondents is that cannabis is a relaxant, which has been interpreted as lazy, de-motivated or attracts the common “stoner” tag. Obviously relaxation is one of the effects of consuming cannabis - the

effects are short lasting, and the language used to describe it could reflect the temporary state experienced by users.

Also another common theme amongst all subjects was the enhancement of creativity. This ability to tap areas of the brain that are otherwise in equilibrium with rational thought, is exactly the same reason cannabis was used in ancient cultures. It seems from the answers that users are quite specific regarding the enjoyment experienced from cannabis. Both auditory and visual senses are generally targeted. Music is a recurring theme and it must be acknowledged that many musicians use cannabis during the creative composition process. The same can be said of contemporary visual artists.

Cannabis does not necessarily enhance these senses but rather may give an entirely new experience to the subject. This in turn could have the consequence of allowing our brain, when in a non-intoxicated state, to integrate those experiences and help increase the creative process.

From the answers given it is apparent that cannabis intake can be regulated on a personal level with most respondents aware when overuse was becoming detrimental and therefore adjusted their intake accordingly. Addiction does not seem apparent in any of the subjects.

The personal sacrifice all participants have made in contributing to this project must be acknowledged. Agreeing to be photographed and interviewed about cannabis is still viewed, at least on the surface, as “stoners trying to legitimise their illegal activities”. Hopefully, through their participation, stereotypes will be questioned and the emotion, prevalent on both sides of the debate, will be tempered so a meaningful intellectual discussion can occur.

I've been blessed to have worked with Simon on his other projects and books, and this certainly continues his development as an artist. It's a welcome development, and one that I applaud. It is also wonderful to have the participation of Black Eye Gallery as a partner in this exhibition, and to see the role of a gallery being redefined, to an extent, to include this kind of social advocacy.

After all, what is a Gateway but an opportunity to improve ourselves?

Artworks # 1 -16 are Untitled, 2014 Framed \$2000, unframed \$1350

Editions of 4 + 1 A/P 135cm x 110cm

Archival inkjet pigment print

Limited edition publication - edition of 50 \$135



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