

# Veronica Bull

## MEMETIC ABSTRACTION

Series of seven paintings  
Acrylic, aerosol, oil pastel, marker on canvas

*Memetic abstraction*<sup>1</sup> is a cultural process where memes, after becoming reappropriated again and again, eventually exceed the boundaries of comprehension (at least is the case for ‘normies’).<sup>2</sup> This process allows for its original content to remain elusive to outsiders as it progressively lies within a deep web of intertextual references that only a committed meme consumer could understand. Now the idea of a ‘committed meme consumer’ may seem stupid, but as the lines between the virtual and physical world become increasingly blurred, and the pandemic speeding this process two-fold, memes have progressed beyond being a ‘light pastime’ and now function as a social lens that grants us new, unorthodox perceptions of reality. These visions range from the satirical and absurd, to the more sinister and hateful—under the cover of ‘dankness’<sup>3</sup>.

Almost nowhere has this phenomenon become so obvious and pervasive apart from the social media imageboard sites 4chan (4Chan.org) and its even more extreme spin off, 8chan (which has now been taken offline). In these sites, memes function almost as a separate, underground language that facilitates what has been described as a “*hub of facisism, white supremacism, and violent misogyny*”.<sup>4</sup> This language has been taken

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<sup>1</sup> Term defined by Tuters, M., & Hagen, S. (2020). (((They))) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering on 4chan. *New Media & Society*, 22(12), 2218–2237

<sup>2</sup> ‘Normies’ is a popular Internet term to denote ‘regular’ people, that is, those not up to speed with current Internet culture.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Dankness’ or ‘dank’ is a popular internet term referring to a ‘high quality’ meme.

<sup>4</sup> Quote from Fathallah, J. M. “‘Getting by’ on 4chan: Feminine Self-Presentation and Capital-Claiming in Antifeminist Web Space”. *First Monday*, vol. 26, no. 7, May 2021

to vast extremes, with harrowing implications. For instance, in the racially charged massacres that occurred in Christchurch NZ (2019), El Paso USA (2019) and Buffalo USA (2022), each of their perpetrators created their own manifestos that were interlaid with memetic language and theory sourced from 4chan or 8chan.<sup>5 6 7</sup> Combined together, these massacres alone are responsible for the deaths of 84 innocent lives.

Much like the “*conspiracy theorists, white nationalists, techno Libertarians, Men’s Rights advocates, trolls, anti-feminists, anti-immigration activists, and bored young people*”<sup>8</sup> that run amok on 4chan, these works (realised as paintings) also play a part in this appropriation process, but for a different agenda. All of the text in this work has been found from real posts, from real users of 4chan and has appropriated imagery commonplace to the site in a way that I, (as a ‘normie’, I guess) see fit. Pepe the frog for instance, is one of the most famous memes on the site and after being used in mostly apolitical contexts for years across multiple platforms, became categorised as a hate symbol in 2016 by the Anti-Defamation League (a US-based hate speech watchdog) in light of a trend to combine it with Nazi imagery.<sup>9</sup> As a figure that has been theorised as a unifying icon of the internet alt-right,<sup>10</sup> this frog was an appropriate place to begin my journey of disassemblage. By uncovering the layers of abstraction that

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas E, (2019) ASPI explains: 8chan. Australian Strategic Policy Institute  
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/aspi-explains-8chan/>

<sup>6</sup> Ling J, (2022) How 4chan’s toxic culture helped radicalize Buffalo shooting suspect. The Guardian.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/18/4chan-radicalize-buffalo-shooting-white-supremacy>

<sup>7</sup> Fieldman B, (2019). The Shooter’s Manifesto Isn’t in Code. *Intelligencer*, New York Magazine.  
<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/03/the-christchurch-shooters-manifesto-isnt-in-code.html>

<sup>8</sup> Marwick A, Lewis R (2017) Media manipulation and disinformation online. *Data & Society*,  
<https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>

<sup>9</sup> BBC (2017) Pepe the Frog ‘is killed off to avoid being a hate symbol’. BBC,  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39843468>

<sup>10</sup> Quote from Tuters, M., & Hagen, S. (2020). (((They))) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering on 4chan. *New Media & Society*, 22(12), 2218–2237

mask these images, I hope to shed light on the pervasiveness of postmodern extremism, as it bleeds from the fringes of the internet into the mainstream and then, into the real world.