

THE ARTS

Wolfman Jackman nails the franchise jackpot

FILM X-MEN ORIGINS: WOLVERINE (M) ★★★ General release (106 mins) Jim Scheiber Reviewer

LOOK, it might contain a tad too much growling and gnashing of teeth, but there's plenty to enjoy in Wolverine, not the least of which is the vision of the most impressive set of mutant chops in film history. And star Hugh Jackman wears them the way he does the rest of the film — very comfortably. This manically paced, —dare one say it — touching

spin-off from the X-Men film franchise seeks to explain the back story of Wolverine who, let's face it, was the only "real" character among the X-Men cast. For the record, and the sake of those diehard aficionados affectionately known as X-Heads, Wolverine is far more energetic than the first two left-argued X-Men films (directed by Bryan Singer), having more in common with the no-nonsense drive and action of the critically under-appreciated X-Men 3 (directed by Brett Ratner). Kicking off in the 1980s, Wolverine shows our hero Logan as a kid who has trouble

dealing with his special mutant super-powers, which chiefly involve his ability to grow killer, razor-sharp blades of bone out of his knuckles. These are later replaced by killer, razor-sharp blades of steel that cause him trouble while visiting the bathroom. As an immortal, Logan deploys his killing skills in the big war zones of the 20th century before going into retirement as a lumberjack and living in the Rockies with his girlfriend. But two villains disrupt his quiet life. One is his brother Victor (Liev Schreiber), whose super-strength is supplemented by an

impressive set of pointy fingernails. Whereas Logan is all about control and focus of his power, Victor is more into venting his rage. The other is military man William Stryker (Danny Huston), who recruits mutants for special operations. He sorely wants Logan to get with the program, the aim being to turn him into the ultimate weapon by injecting his bones with a substance that will make him indestructible. The film's visual effects are of a standard wherein a guy with a scabbard can slice a bullet in half in ultra-slow motion, and Logan's climactic battle

upon the rim of a nuclear cooling tower is genuinely impressive. But as dazzling as Wolverine's many action set-pieces are, popcorn spectacles like this don't really deliver much in the way of genuine thrills and there is a certain sameness to the repertoire of fireballs, muzzle flash and twirling vehicles that inevitably show up whenever anyone closes in on Logan. More to the film's credit is how it manages, amid all the high-gloss visuals and frenetic editing, to work in a decent handful of dramatically

satisfying story twists and revelations. Given how over-served the super-hero genre has been of late, that Wolverine delivers a few surprises ranks as an achievement of sorts. Ultimately, what Wolverine says about the evolution of a franchise film character is actually less interesting than what it says about the evolution of Hugh Jackman as the all-around showman movie star. Jackman, who served as a producer on this movie, has proved himself

adept at romance, comedy, drama, music and action. Like a well-run corporation, he has been diligently choosing film roles to consolidate his status and build himself into the quintessential movie star. He is one of the few actors to consciously keep his celebrity in service of his career, sort of what Tom Cruise was like before he went nuts, or like George Clooney, only commercially successful. And as heightened as Wolverine is, it still sports dashes of Jackman's earthy, distinctly Australian sense of humour — even though the character is, technically, Canadian.



The sound of shadows and shapes

VISUAL ARTS NICOLA LODER Sighted/Child 1.1. Helen Gory Gallery, 25 St Edmunds Street, Prahran, until May 2. helengory.com

DOMENICO DE CLARIO Tristement, John Buckley Gallery, 8 Albert Street, Richmond, until May 9. johnbuckley.com.au

ROD MCNICOL Portraits from Last Century, Place Gallery, 20 Terryson Street, Richmond, until May 16. placegallery.com.au

IT'S DISTRACTING the way Nicola Loder's children look at you. Her large portraits of Helen Gory show children's faces enmeshed in a psychedelic digital matrix. All the lights and darks of their physiognomy have been exaggerated in hypnotic extrapolations, with wild concentric bands of colour that follow the tonal contour and create crazy moiré effects between the peaks and hollows.

Brimming with ripples and pulses, the visages have immediate impact, even though the camera seems remote. The pictures are done on the computer, and the children inside the images recede from the hallucinogenic patterns that translate what would otherwise be mug shots.

The bright designs are neither a veil nor a tattoo: the colours and lines that echo with the shadows are just chromatic outgrowths of the incidence of light. The multiple faces don't attach to the face itself but merely echo the light or its absence.

Children at the best of times can be a bit distracted and uncontactable, because they're in their own world with thoughts that they can't share or you're unable to follow. Loder adds to the sense of a barrier between us and them

by mounting the digital print behind slick perspex. So in addition to the faces being disembodied with so many hard crossing ripples, the abstracted children are encased in bullet-proof screens. The images are installed in a dense and forbidding line, reducing their individuality. A fascinating essay by Stuart Koop explains how Loder has built her visual system. She began thinking about how blind children might see. A great resource, for example, is a computer system for translating the visible world into sound. If the sound system translates the light — as opposed to distance, as judged by radar — the results might resemble the waves that radiate from the lights and darks in Loder's portraits.

Coincidentally, Domenico De Clario entertains similar ideas in his contemplation of the shadows of the French painter Maurice Utrillo. It occurred to de Clario that when Utrillo painted his famous courtesans of Montmartre, the Parisian artist was, in fact, depicted transmutations of shadow, which could be manifested as sound. So, in a dark and beautiful installation at John Buckley Gallery, de Clario goes about translating the shadow into sound then back into light. The mood prepared is very unlike Loder's. Instead of the "visual sound" racing around noisily, de Clario's is muted and settled. The walls have been painted deep grey and the paintings have mostly settled into a dark range of elegiac tertiary colours. Chairs are positioned in the centre of the room with a vase of flowers, and de Clario's piano compositions, made especially in the context of this show, argue for the audibility of the shadows.



Sighted Child 3, by Nicola Loder, brims with ripples and pulses.

It seems spooky that two exhibitions should arise with "sound sight" and that they should cover two traditional genres, the portrait and the streetscape, and in two media, photography and painting. Photographic portraits can be musical in their own right and still display a great deal of information. Rod McNicol's Portraits from Last Century shows young people of feral fashions who used to frequent Smith Street in Fitzroy in the 1990s. By all accounts, the festive raggedy clothing and grooming have since disappeared, almost as if an endangered species reached

extinction. This is the other way that visual art "sounds out" our cultural landscape. The photographs and the models created a noise against globalisation, against the conformity of marketed lifestyles and branding. The pictures are stylistically deadpan but this is their strength in listening to a song of difference that our society no longer wanted to hear.

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Tightly choreographed and revealing only head and shoulders, the 12 images read as grief's own repertoire of disfiguring effects

VISUAL ARTS ROSEMARY LAING A dozen useless actions for grieving blondes, Iolana Galleries, Level 4, 104 Exhibition Street, city, until May 23. www.iolanagalleries.com

TO PRODUCE her portrait series, A dozen useless actions for grieving blondes, Rosemary Laing spent a day each with local actresses, all blonde, who were asked to grieve on camera. Tightly choreographed and revealing only head and shoulders, the 12 images read as grief's own repertoire of disfiguring effects. Tear-stained, bruised, and even bearing marks of self-flagellation, the women become symbols of authentic torment. Yet they are also mere displays of cinematic dexterity. In one, the artist's hand is even clenched and wrung by the actor seeking consolation. Such speaks to the complexity of their fastidious contrivance. Some might read



Rosemary Laing balances the performative and profound.

even "victim porn". But this dismisses their invitation to observe, at unbearably close range, what Derrida called the slow repetitive work of mourning. That this is the fruit of stage direction proposes grief to be always performative, especially when the rituals are self-derived and wrought from the flesh. The perverse joke, buried in the title that all blondes are dumb, bottle-fake, and therefore alike, reflects back to haunt with the spectre of our own projections. These women, sympathetically aligned like a Greek chorus, in collective travail, are nonetheless realised in intense singularity. Each blonde trapped in her pictorial frame is required to express her suffering acutely alone. Yet, as gallery viewer, we are also pierced by their accumulated sorrow. Can grief be any other way? And can it be, like orgasm, faked? Laing has created an extraordinary work.

Noonan is a gifted and adventurous improviser, willing to stretch melodies and extend phrases beyond the bar line

JAZZ FESTIVAL KATIE NOONAN — BLACKBIRD PROJECT Hamer Hall, April 27 www.melbournejazz.com

KATIE Noonan is accustomed to large audiences, but she seemed genuinely appreciative of the several thousand people who turned out to see her as part of the Melbourne International Jazz Festival. Her opening act, local jazz outfit FGHF (Farrugia, Grigorian, Howard, Robertson) looked delighted, too — they were beaming with pleasure, exuding a joyous energy as they modded their instantly appealing melodies with lush instrumental textures. Noonan's Blackbird Project was inspired by her love of the Lennon/McCartney songbook. The project began life as a recording with US jazz musicians in New York. On Monday, however, the singer was accompanied by a quintet

of fine Melbourne and Sydney players — including pianist Sam Keeners, who provided all the arrangements. Noonan's voice is a thing of wonder, and its natural purity lends a sheen of beauty to any material she adopts. And, while not strictly a jazz singer, Noonan is a gifted and adventurous improviser, willing to stretch melodies out of shape and extend phrases beyond the bar line. Listening to her interpretations of Beatles songs, however, I did feel that her eager reinvention of each song — however delicate and sensitive — was sometimes at the expense of its emotional impact. Occasionally she pulled so insistently at the fabric of a tune that it almost disintegrated, leaving little for the listener to hang on to. The most effective numbers were those with a clear rhythmic impetus, includ-



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Arts Directory listing for 'DRALION' at 'Circus' and 'KAFKA'S MONKEY' at 'MALTHOUSE THEATRE'. Includes showtimes and contact info.

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