



SASA
GALLERY

Dark Dreams +
Fluorescent Flesh
17 February – 13 March 2009



University of
South Australia

South Australian
School of Art

Dark Dreams + Fluorescent Flesh

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Curator:

Mimi Kelly

Artists:

Bianca Barling, Pat Brassington, Jane Burton,
Mimi Kelly and Monika Tichacek

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Mimi Kelly, *Untitled #5*, 2009, Glicée print

Monika Tichacek, *Lineage of the Divine*, 2002, digital video (still) | Image courtesy of the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne



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Introduction

Dark Dreams + Fluorescent Flesh, curated by Mimi Kelly, explores contemporary representations of female desire and sexuality. The exhibition includes artwork by five Australian artists – Bianca Barling, Pat Brassington, Jane Burton, Mimi Kelly and Monika Tichacek – whose practices span photography, video performance and installation.

Intense, playful and at times confronting, the exhibition resonates with a dark gothic sensibility and the artwork references film noir, horror, surrealism and pornography.

Dark Dreams + Fluorescent Flesh is one of a series of research based exhibitions that engages external scholars to participate in the SASA Gallery's exhibition and publication programs. The external scholar for this exhibition is Dr Adrian Martin, Senior Research Fellow, School of English, Communications and Performance Studies, Monash University. Martin is an academic, writer and film critic. He has written numerous articles and essays, published five books and given many public lectures on film, television, art, music, literature, popular and avant-garde culture. As well as writing an essay for this catalogue, Martin has traveled to Adelaide to participate in events associated with the exhibition.

The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovation, experimentation and performance. With the support of the Division of Education, Art and Social Sciences and the Division Research Performance Fund, the SASA Gallery is being developed as a leading contemporary art space publishing and exhibiting high-quality research based work, and as an active site of teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery showcases South Australian artists, designers, writers and curators associated with the South Australian School of Art and the Louis Laybourne-Smith School of Architecture and Design in a national and international context.

The SASA Gallery has received immense support towards the development and implementation of this exhibition and catalogue. The catalogue has been printed at Cruickshank Printers. The excellent wine served at the opening was supplied by Perrini Estate.

Mary Knights
Director, SASA Gallery

Sex Neurosis

Adrian Martin

Fucked Up and Acting Out

The problem with her, is that she attaches her sexuality to her neuroses.

This is the way a friend described his nineteenth relationship breakdown to me. It seemed, for a second or two, a valid way of describing a troubled person: it appears that whatever she did in bed (or out of it) became a continuation of war by other means, always a way of gaining ground (or losing it), resolving a problem (or losing it), staking a claim (or losing it). Lots of losing it in that relationship, for both parties.

It was something he recognised – in others, that is, never in himself. It was the others, those women, who were *fucked up* (as he liked to say). *She couldn't just enjoy it, he complained; she couldn't just let go. The sex was always a power game, a power trip. She was always trying to prove something.*

My friend had elaborate psychological theories about all this, based on his extensive reading, and on his bitter, lifelong experience. *It was because she had no sense of self, he proposed. No centre. Sex was the only arena where she felt she could perform, where she felt she could be someone. For a few moments, anyhow.* When my friend started to describe a sordid scene involving ropes and mirrors to illustrate these tendencies (a story which strangely made me want to laugh), my mind wandered, and I focused elsewhere. I thought of trying to humorously interrupt with a quip like *it takes two to tango, you know*, but thought better of it.

My friend talked the talk, as he had no doubt walked the walk – and would, no doubt, again. What he was saying made some sense to me: how awful, how sad it is (I reflected), when sex – that most natural thing in the world – gets hooked up to some other agenda, some other problem, some neurosis. When it becomes the stage for some kind of 'acting out', as they love to say on *Oprah*. When its gets *perverted*, in the strict sense of that word: diverted, twisted off in some other direction, put in the service of some other drive other than the purely sexual drive.

Purely sexual ... these words, these thoughts, have a way of crumbling on you. What is purely sexual, naturally sexual, uncomplicatedly sexual ... and where do you get it? I looked over at my friend – at every detail of his clothing, his mannerisms, his haircut, the way he smoked his cigarettes and drank his wine – at the signs of all the ways that he, too, was pretty fucked up – and wondered what part of that was not connected to his sexuality, wasn't some deformation (at whatever distance of displacement) of a sexual desire, a sexual make-up. I wondered, at the end of the long night: *Who in this world does not attach their sexuality to their neuroses?*

Bound and Gagged

There is no sacrosanct bit or level or island of the Self. Every part of our miserable social world is internalised – or better, *somatised*: taken into the body (the mind, the heart, the muscles, the guts) and then acted out, weirdly. Acted out with compliance, and/or resistance. Deformed, perverted. Upon sleeping as upon waking.

Female artists appear to have got to this truth faster than the guys. They display the twisted somatisation of life – not necessarily their own lives, but maybe those, too – in a hundred inventive ways. They have taken the world into themselves – not 'withdrawn into the private realm', as a grumbling neo-con complaint about women's art sometimes runs – and exploded it outwards, into postures, images, scenes, fragments of a theatrical *mise en scene* of desire and trouble. It is inescapably representational, figurative art, and urgently, inventively, even feverishly so – no room or time for abstraction here. They keep bleeding love (as the song says), keep spewing out the diamonds and pearls, keep twisting themselves into agonised poses for their own camera, even when using *alter egos* or models.



Jane Burton, *The Other Side #2, 2003*. Type C photograph | Image courtesy of the artist.



It's the reinvention of a venerable (and vulnerable) form, the Female Gothic. Women's Experience as Haunted House: shadowy, imprisoned, sadistic-masochistic. Of all the grand old movies of the 1940s devoted to this splendidly writhing female perversion (directed by straight men and gay men, often written by women), my favourite is Fritz Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door ...* (1948): a woman, transfixed by the sight of hot-blooded Latinos who flash knives and kill each other for love, falls right into the arms of a brooding intellectual architect, who takes her back to his mansion comprised surreally of a series of *felicitous rooms* (this is what he calls them) – recreations of historic Gothic chambers in which men have killed women. A honeymoon to remember ... And all throughout the tortuous tale, this woman does not have a clue whether she wants to save this guy through therapy, or join up with Man's Destiny and become the Next Victim, voluptuously accepting her tragic fate ...

Ambivalence is always the key note of Female Gothic waves and cycles in art and culture. Always the Ties that Bind, love/hate, come-hither and get-lost. The Great Ache of wanting to be desired, and pleased. Then the Great Unsatisfaction, the Great Depression. Something truly Horrible is glimpsed in this freakshow: the Other who wants to obliterate you, head to toe and all the way through. And the sweet wish for death, stillness, sleep. The cutting edge of rape fantasies (active and/or passive), way past all political correctness: the journey to reclaim some animality – is that the pure sexuality we all wish we could access? – of pure drives. Every teenager's pop vampire fantasy. But then the terror of revelation: the world that wants to kill you, devastate you, obliterate you is in that dream you swallowed. Can't detach the bound from the gagged, *Nightmare on Elm St* from *Jane Eyre*.

The Tender Trap

The first thing I notice in the work of the artists in this show: the wallpaper. Patterned, faded, obiquitous, no visible edges. Continued in the figure of the carpet. The whole world of so many of these images is an interior. It's the defining element of Bianca Barling's work. The very realm of the Female Gothic: twisted interior of the Self, invaded by everything outside it; artificially lit theatre-stage of the domestic interior. Mirrors, bathrooms, bedrooms. Literal and figurative chambers of every kind: home, prison, doll's house, brothel. If these walls could speak ... No matter the social class, it comes down a sort of Suburbia of Desperate Housewives: day and night blur in an endless interior confinement.

In Jane Burton's work, sometimes we peek out a window whose paint-peeling frame is fully visible: a disquieting, depopulated rural scene that merely mirrors, acts out what is already within those lonely rooms. No emotional rescue. A warped landscape that is itself also a somatisation. The 'other side' out the window in her work is the same side, the underside.

The next thing I notice: the hairdos. Fantastic, gorgeous elaborate, as in the tableaux of Monika Tichacek. Many hours of intense feminine work: layering, twisting, colouring, maintaining. The theatre of hair. Which goes with the intricate make-up, the sci-fi outfits, the endless fishnets patterning legs, head, hair. Strange phantasmagoria of sex neurosis in Tichacek's images: strands and ropes and outgrowths of surreal hair are the ties that bind, umbilical chords, medical stitch-ups. Bodies without organs, but growing inwards, not multiplying but decaying. Always the horror-thriller of sisterhood: twin-daughters of darkness, stuck together in a dreadful complicity.

Clothes of another surreal persuasion fill Pat Brassington's oeuvre: expanses of stripey fabric that blend limbs and extinguish bodily, genital parts. Pure, smooth surface. The zero-degree of perfect appearance: the self that is prepared in the mirror but primed and pimped and primed for the Male Other, as in Fassbinder's chilling Gothic melodrama *Martha*. Underwear as second skin: stockings, push-up bras. Motley wedding-dresses of wasted, forgotten, abandoned brides. And the ever-present high-heel shoes, perennial symbol in women's art and life of a doubled, knife edge: imposed oppression but also proud resistance, the physical deformation that is embraced, exaggerated, flaunted. Bridging the tawdriest porno and the most mannered subcultural, underground display.

Something else I notice: sheets, pillows, curtains. Covering, draping, smothering. Blessed sleep and autoerotic asphyxiation. Cradle and grave.

And other things to notice. The intensity of colours: the blood/liquid pouring out of delicately open mouths in Mimi Kelly's images, a gesture between submission (show me what you've got) and vomiting or wrenching, the great somatic reflex. (Godard's old adage: 'It's not blood, it's red' – which in the Female Gothic means that what gushes from split veins is something not quite human, all too pre-fab, all too social ...) The shocking pink cushion-walls of Tichacek. Mirrors: always turned inward, reflecting the physical pallor of the models' skin, and the infinite wallpaper. Objects that are turned against themselves: a bathtub is a suicide's tomb.



Come Into My Sleep

One of the purest – and most unconscious – expressions of the Female Gothic in cinema is an odd early '80s horror movie called *The Entity* starring Barbara Hershey. It's a descendant – light years distant in pop culture time – of the early '70s mega-hit *The Exorcist*, but re-routed through curious sci-fi imaginings like the late '70s *The Demon Seed*. All these films have the same morbid subject: they are about women who are repeatedly raped, beaten up and generally violated by Invisible Forces, always gendered as male: Devil, Computer, Evil Spirit, Alien. And, of course, in the world of more ordinary men (boyfriends, fathers, sons, doctors, scientists), the woman is never believed. It's another crux of Female Gothic: is she imagining it? Does she really want it? Is she somehow not merely dreaming but conjuring, creating these violent scenes in a spectacularly histrionic ritual of public display? Is she fucked up and acting out?

In *The Entity*, for a long time, no one around Barbara sees this supernatural Boogeyman. But plenty of people see its effects, its traces: objects flying through the air, rooms trashed, power blackouts. Not to mention the physical special-effects upon the woman's body: skin pressed, legs pulled apart ... (The PG-rated version of the same spectacle can be found in the Spielberg-produced *Poltergeist* of the same era.) But eventually, there is a veritable summit of psychologists, psychoanalysts and therapists gathered to discuss her case. Certain suspicious personal, biographical

factors are brought up: she married young, she had a difficult relationship with an abusive father, she has always been attracted to older men, her growing teenage son looks suspiciously like her lover-companion these days ... At the highpoint of this extraordinary conference, the Head Doctor pronounces his verdict: *It's masturbation*. What a remarkable force indeed this female sexuality and desire must be, if it can lay waste to the facades of suburbia so completely!

Sex neurosis is a problem of the Other, but also a frenzy of the Self. The whole sexual equation taken back into Oneself. In a biography of the filmmaker Jean Eustache by his ex-lover Evane Hanska, she records (with stoicism or masochism it is hard to say, so imprisoned is she within the mission of forever telling his story) the perfect misogynistic cruelty of his ultimate insult to her, as the typical young Liberated Woman of the '70s: *your multitude* – referring to the number of men she slept with – *is really a solitude*. No centre, no enjoyment, just the echo chamber of the empty self; he cursed her with that image, that thought.

In the images of these artists, couples rarely figure. The women are invariably alone – left alone, or alone by choice, or between visitations, we cannot say – and crumpled up: in the bed, in the bath, on the floor. There is – what shall we call it? – a masturbatory aura in these tableaux, but it has nothing much to do with simple self-enfolding pleasure or blessed relief. Not much self-love here. What the Doctors and Eustache said applies here, but differently: it's a sick solitude, grimy and encrusted, a dirty pocket in time and space, home and hearth perverted far beyond the sociality (and sociability) of families or food or paying the rent.

But the art of these women, while picturing this inwards movement, also reverses it, precisely by dramatising, theatricalising it, displaying it: *their solitude is really a multitude*. A multitude of people, situations, influences, incidents and forces, all readable in these furnishings that go on forever, these pale faces without eyes, these bodies wrapped in fabric, these colours that bleed.



Dark Dreams + Fluorescent Flesh

Mimi Kelly

Prism

Spanning the surreal, uncanny through to the hyper-sexualised and overtly agitated body, the artists curated in this exhibition use luscious and sinister landscapes, contexts, styling and sensual devises referencing powerful and polemic atmospheric genres, including film noir, surrealism, the macabre and porn, to explore the body and its potential (or lack of) sexuality, condition and experience.

With contemporary depictions of women in western culture limited and reified by media stereotypes, the problematised nature of female representation is one that is well recognised in contemporary artistic practices. Like a disease that cleverly morphs to resist new methods of fighting it (ultimately, understanding it) artists response to representations of the 'female' can be perceived as continually confounded – a prism of perpetual de-construction, assimilation, re-working, re-presenting and trying to get to the bottom of it all (the good, bad and ugly).

Adjusting the kaleidoscope of well-defined narratives by actively reworking visual codes, artistic interpretation however, adds to the alternate navigation of gender and identity based image making/viewing. Importantly also, individual response (as creator, subject and viewer) to duplicitous representations of femininity is multifarious, defined by a multiplicity of contributing factors coupled with personal ethics, desires and notions of aesthetics and beauty. It is this that ultimately leads to a shifting spectrum of interpretations of sexuality, mortality and the human condition and ultimately how we understand notions of self.

Thus understood, the creative practice of each artist in this exhibition is perspicacious to the fact that image making provides the opportunity for the performative construction of fictitious female sexual tableaux, provoking perspectives on the subject of the body, and the methods in which it is defined. Their artworks together present considered composites, *misè en scene* or allegorical narrative where layers of filmic/photographic techniques, 'sets', textures, colours, symbols and activities that either subtly sinister (eerie, ghost-like) or overtly constructed (posed, acting out, blood, fucking, Hollywood flesh) pour out and trigger the viewer to respond. Mesmeric, unsettling and uncanny, the viewer is asked

to interpret what is alluded to, be in the constructed moment or 'feel that feel that feeling' without feeling it – be transported.

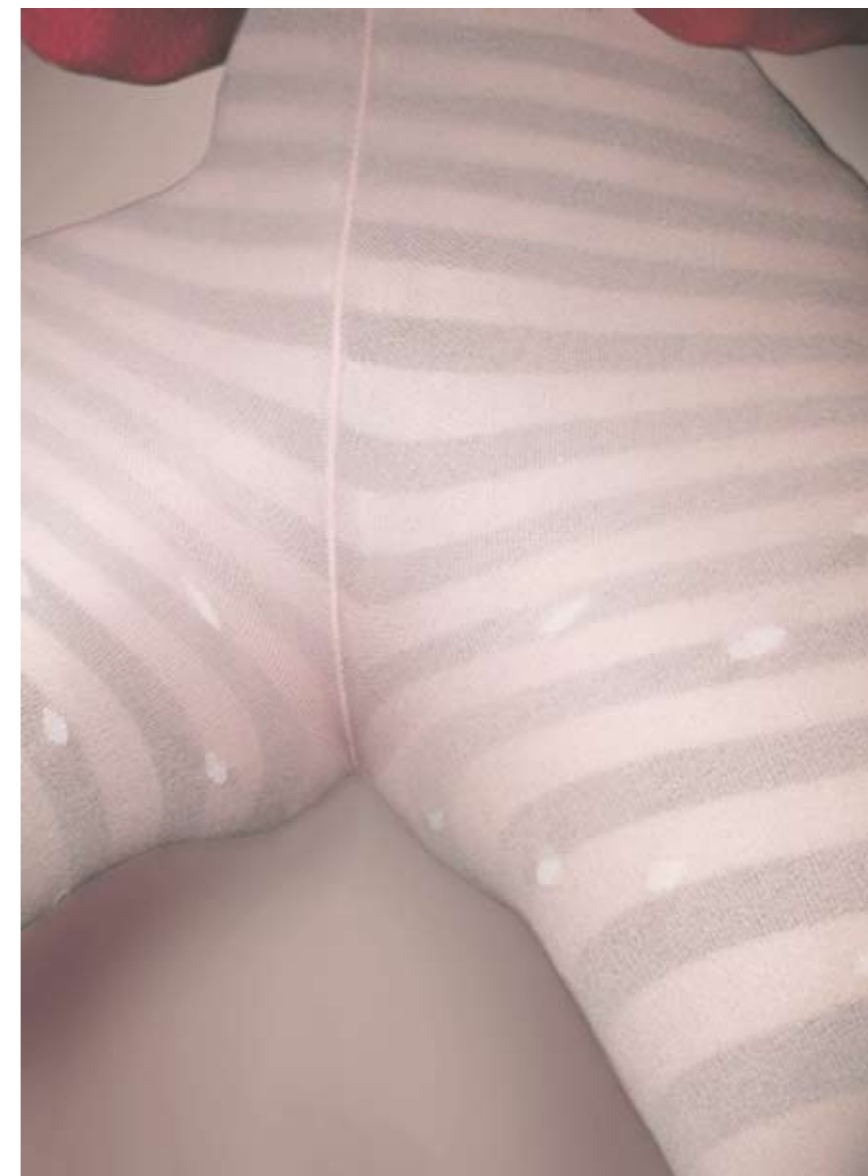
Much to the interest/desire of some and the disquiet of others (and all murky shades in between), these artists willingly step into this hall of mirrors where the body becomes a fragmented entity of terrible beauty and the viewer, their audience, is invited to join them in this gothic prism realm.

Body Parts

Look ... (but it doesn't touch me) ... Skin, clothes, colour, texture, hair, nails, eyes, body fluids and more body parts. The porno actress is hyper-sexualised performance artiste par excellence, her subjectivity compressed into one activity – sex and sexual being with a singular purpose. This is simply the performance of sex, with all its supporting cast of self-referential costumes, props, porno positions and poses, striped to glib formulaic visual conventions.

Barling's video installation *Gammelfleisch* offers a dreamlike re-working of the 1982 porn flick *Memphis Cathouse Blues* aka *Cathouse Girls* (a nod to the Dolly Parton and Burt Reynold film from the same year *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*). In *Gammelfleisch*, the film's 'Feline Farm' a rural bordello, is re-created as a gallery installation. Compressed to doll's house proportions it is presented as a maquette of the dilapidated cathouse/house where the girl's sexual performances are played (out) day (in) day (out). The screen itself is placed within the house of horrors, resulting in *Alice in Wonderland*-esque dimension relations between the two – the house is filled to the brim with 2D flesh, pulsating out from within.

As explained by the artist, the title *Gammelfleisch* is a German word for spoiled meat (rubbish – meat) that has been appropriated by young people as a derogatory phrase to describe old people having a good time (*Gammelfleischparty* is the collective term). With editing the narrative of the film in question is reworked and what remains is a personalised selection of mash-ups, where the narrative logic shifts to a compressed series of scenes that move even further from any 'reality' – a collection of body parts. Spoiled meat too?



Pat Brassington, *Topography in Pink*, 2005, pigment print | Image courtesy of the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney.



The artist's performance and video installation practice as a whole makes use of sumptuous styling and sets with attention to costumes, hair and makeup that does not necessarily have continuity of era but lusciously comes together in a blur of soft focus and slo-mo filmic techniques. Perhaps where the artist's interest lies here, in this video installation, is in an engrossment in the particular surface aesthetics of pornography, much less the act. *Memphis Cathouse Blues* presents as vintage style hardcore porn with that fabulous 70's/80's quasi interpretation of Saloon/Burlesque (black chokers, large loose up-styles, black lace and suspenders) mixed with French Maid complete with frilly cap, and fluffy blonde Playboy Bunny. In stealing these edits, creating a miniature gothic monument for them to be housed it, the artist in a way fetishises the accoutrements that *surround* the presentation of pornography, the husk of the 'empty vessel' (as the artist explains Dolly Parton would say), thus shifting to an alternate enjoyment than the actual fucking itself.

Sick Pink

Surreal, mercurial in meaning, teasing, uncomfortable dream logic unfolds. This does not really go with that in Brassington's composites – morphed and distorted body splicing and strange interiors. The 2006

photograph *Socket* from the *Sweet Thereafter* series for example presents a Geisha, swan-like neck, pale pinkie-grey and beautifully elongated. At the nape of the neck a small slit anomaly reveals the skin beneath. Tongue or gum pink, this opening is a sort of not-really-inside-or-outside body part. It is ever so slightly squeamish to view, with the title *Socket* alluding to its potential to be filled.

Brassington's 2007 series *Cambridge Road*, in de-saturated colour tones with damaged film/stained photograph effect, describes a house now haunted by domestic remains that whisper the presence of those who once lived there. The 'vacancy' of the house is made stranger by the visiting women who find themselves in these eerie interiors. In the images selected for this exhibition, visual tropes from spirit photos (paranormal activity – ectoplasm, grey mists, orbs, etc) and Weegee-esque crime scenes are employed. What violence or tragedy occurred here? One figure lies face down on the kitchen vinyl, what strange stain covers the face of another bundled in thick clothes stark against the wall? What spirit presence hovers over the Victorian dressing table? The macabre possibilities abound.

Linking Brassington's work technically is a consistency of colours. Mute greys, pomegranate red, pastel and vivid tangerine tinged hot-pinks, salmons – sumptuous and more raw than pretty. There is also a wry humour behind her sublime and serious visual proposals and slight obsession in the repetition of certain motifs throughout her images. What is strange is that the anatomical abnormalities in many figurative images in Brassington's large body of work are anchored in some logic of physical possibility from what should almost be a non-sequitire logic of collage. It's right, but warped patchwork and sickly-colour wrong. A body shape possibly could be like this (*Topography in Pink*, 2005 from the *You're so vein* series) a neck could be glitched with some weird skin incision, it's just a gloved hand (*Fresh Fruit*, 2005) despite the red balls it squeezes through its fingers. Things are odd yet so attractive at the same time. Brassington's artwork offers absurd notions of a strange beauty that both enchant and repels, dismantling notions of beauty and the world of appearances.

Saccharin Narcosis

In the selected works from Jane Burton's 2005 series *I did it for you* the viewer is very much not a player *in* the images, but as with *I did it for you #5*, filmically positioned as the voyeur, spy or perhaps absolute nothingness with the figure in the window presented as utterly alone. The context alludes to vulnerability and possible lurking danger (external and internal). Stripped back to black and white the images are eerie, mute, evoking a strange sensation like a nightmare scream where the sound doesn't come out. In *I did it for you #5* delicate lace curtains only just veil

the woman inside. She stands arms out from her side, a slight mixture of zombie, Japanese ghost girl and Carrie-covered-in-blood, as if some stunning or catastrophic emotional shock has just occurred. The air is palpable. Who did what for who? *I did it for you* – frantically acted out or with calculated menace?

Dripping in a V-shape across the wall, the photographs that make up Burton's 2008 series *When under ether* (interestingly, the title of a PJ Harvey ballad from her 2007 *White Chalk* album that alludes to ether-like delirium and archaic surgical experience) in their sepia tones and daguerreotype chocolatey softness are both beautiful and strangely nostalgic. Resembling flashbacks from an ether haze or suppressed memory, the landscapes are reminiscent of postcards or oddly angled travel documentation. In one image, two small islands seen in the distance through trees rise from the water, in another a white waterfall creates a slit against the inky mountainside. Each image presents land as giant female body parts, akin to fevered nightmare hallucinations where one's body becomes the landscape melting into the surrounds. In other images from the series, the photographs are displayed upside down, so the peeling paint from the dilapidated room rolls upwards, and the woman sits against warped perspective stairs. As PJ Harvey sings:

The ceiling is moving

Moving in time

Like a conveyor belt

Above my eyes

In all of her works, including the three photographs curated in this exhibition from her series *The Other Side*, 2003, Burton makes full use of drab, urban, gothic-style interiors and the landscape as an ominous other, a technique that deliberately entices the viewer to create visual cross-association and sinister connections. Burton's artwork presents unspoken desires through a narrative driven arrangement of 'scenes', beautifully and accurately utilising photographic techniques to create an atmosphere adding to the immersive nature of her work, and suggestive of the complex and ambiguous validity of individual (yet universal) fears and vulnerable arousals.

Fake Blood

Now I'm going to spread the news

That if it feels this good getting' used

*Come on and keep on using me 'till you've used me up*¹

Musk lolly pink skin. Marshmallow chalk softness and airbrushed detachment. In each image from *Untitled*, 2009, blood and small jewels bleed perfectly from different orifices and parts of my body – mouth,

pussy, ass, nose, eye, nipple. Gushing with promise and potential the body for me becomes a sight, a commodity where image construction on the one hand presents the opportunity for masquerade, to try the glove on of fucked up posed eroticism, and the other sadly speaks of unfulfilled desires, insecurities and identity without substance.

According to the logic of the masquerade, distance can be achieved through an exaggerated closeness to the socially determined codes of femininity, but not to a femininity that is essential, natural!

(The desire for an internal landscape to ooze out, to connect with others, to reach out and fuck someone, to reveal intimate thoughts and emotions and seep through the membrane of social and psychological barriers is as intense as its occurrence is fraught with near impossibility).

In Georges Franju's 1960 French-language horror film *Eyes Without a Face* (*Les yeux sans visage*), an ambitious Doctor's quest for surgical brilliance comes at the macabre and Frankenstein-like expense of his own daughter. Her face horribly disfigured by a car accident, she is at the whim of his abilities to 'repair' her. One traumatic, unsuccessful operation after the other ensues with the faces of innocent victims taken, attached to Christiane then removed as the 'grafts' fail to take. The movie concludes with Christiane realising her own cessation of the morbid situation – choosing to remain disfigured but covered by the mask designed to cover her scars between operations – a mask that hides the macabre truth in smooth emotionless white, revealing only her eyes.

Like Franju's masked character, my pastel Zombie alter ego acts out as the 'living dead'. Inner anxieties and body flaws are concealed through a very obvious deception. In the same way that photography itself is the act of recreating the 'dead' as 'living'. In this realm of photographic artifice, aesthetically borrowing heavily from the most seductive and contrived representations of women, fashion photography, even the seepage of blood is controlled – fake, rupturing with careful aesthetic hedonism. This façade becomes a sort of deception to myself. My flesh becomes willingly subservient to the desire to perform, conflicting a real self with a constructed self that seeps with visceral internal psychology.

Gossamer Ascendance

In the video component of Tichacek's 2002 performance video installation *Lineage of the Divine* New York transsexual celebrity Amanda Lepore presents herself in all her hyper-feminsed glory. Plastic surgery highlighted by her cat eyes, glossed and swollen red collagen-pumped lips, perfectly up-styled 40's/50's platinum hair and tight high-necked apricot dress suit. As the camera pans with her slow cat sashaying against darkness, her fabulousness is realised to be the absolute agitated excess

of femininity. More lady than lady, gender is worn as sumptuous exoskeleton. As the camera's eye follows her, a second figure emerges in focus. Dressed identically to Lapore this body double (the artist) lies in *Sleeping Beauty* repose. The sequence soon reveals that they are conjoined by their long blond hair which coils across the floor encased in gold filigree – a gossamer thread feeding from one twin to the other some sort of life/gender force – divine lineage. As Lapore watches over her, she takes her head in her lap. Sections of flesh coloured prosthetics cover the artist's limbs and chest, from which threads hook into her skin. Lapore gently picks at these to manipulate the artist, to control her other self.

In the same manner as dreams where one carefully controls ones breathing so as to 'breathe' underwater or shifts parts of ones body to fly, the quasi logic of Lapore's performance in the film is akin to some sort of careful act of magnetic mimicry to 'control' the situation – lip-synching for example to the 1953 Doris Day song *Secret Love* (apt given its perceived lesbian undertones), strutting and posing to ensure femininity. So too, Tichacek's interest in the body and the control over its physical possibilities (or its limitations) resonates through many of her artworks. Body modification, use of cosmetics and clothing as 'social constraints' and infliction of physical pain through ritualistic acts of violence all operate as an act of considered complicity between victim and perpetrator.

In *Lineage of the Divine* the twin duplication of 'the self' is the cell of the self split in two. One takes pleasure in inflicting physical suffering on the other – controlling it. The other half in turn derives, if not quite pleasure, then satisfaction in the endurance of the situation. One relies on the other for its fulfilment, but both are separate 'conflicting' entities. Like the inescapable response to strictures laid down by contemporary conventions of beauty and gender, the genuine self engages in a sadomasochistic relationship with the manufactured self, where the mantle of constructed femininity is both desired and fought against.

Dark Dreams + Fluorescent Flesh

Ultimately, the irony is that this very fascination with popular visual culture and contemporary representations of femininity, and the artistic 'control' and awareness in the deconstruction of sexuality and the female condition, in the end perpetuates through reconstruction the very cultural phenomenon which it seeks to critique. Indeed, the performative nature of this artistic construction can be perceived as weightless, without substance or meaning. It is this very activity I believe, that does however provide some sort of gravitas (when both creating artwork and viewing it) for experience, agency, or boiling to the surface of dangerous and difficult subjects.

Under the flesh there always a squirming mess of self-criticism, fascination, passion or emptiness, fucked up fantasies and the conflicting of the personal and political. Female artists exploring the themes presented in this exhibition wouldn't parade themselves or body doubles of their psyche unless they were trying to work through some sort of questions of actuality, or strategically cut up and re-present narratives without some desire to critique. A universal disquiet and absolute DNA encoded captivation with the female being results in a burning need to produce and spew forth. *My dreams are dark (some I'll show you, some I won't) yet I am willingly exposed to the light.*

Notes:

1. *Use Me* as performed by Grace Jones 1981 (lyrics Bill Withers)
2. Mary Ann Done as cited in Silvia Kolbowski, *Overexposed*, (New York: The New Press: 1999) p. 60



Pat Brassington, *Soclet*, 2006, Pigment print | Image courtesy of the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney.

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© artists, writers and SASA Gallery

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Pat Brassington is represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne.

Jane Burton is represented by Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne; Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Sydney; Bett Gallery, Hobart; Heiser Gallery, Brisbane; Johnston Gallery, Perth.

Monika Tichacek is represented by Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne.

