

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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# ART MUSEUM

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## Real Fictions

Di Barrett  
Alyx Macfadyen  
Rick Martin  
Josephine Starrs  
Lisa Tomasetti

Essay by Cath Kenneally

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# Real Fictions

Cath Keneally

Why not try some Real Life? ask the ads for the newest of new TV News programmes, of the happening-now-in-your-living-room variety. Hot off the press, on the run, the real thing: *TV vérité*.

Noam Chomsky would disillusion you, if you needed disillusioning, about the realness of that reality: it's as contrived a fiction, as much selected, staged and mediated as the most stagey of stage melodramas. *Real Lies* might be a better title.

The push to accentuate this illusion of unmediated, *in medias res* reporting observable in the electronic media throws into relief the heightened sense of themselves as construction-workers, as fabricators of their product, of all the artists in *Real Fictions*.

Still-photographers, of course, need not subscribe to the documentary imperative imposed on reporters, and especially implicit in the ethos of mainstream 'moving pictures'. Nonetheless, one of the most arresting features of this

exhibition as a whole is its insistent calling of attention to the photographer's artifice, to the invasive nature of her/his

doctoring of camera images, for purposes whose political intent is made entirely clear.

Each of the photographers here is aiming to use artifice to create from the 'real' image desirable fictions, and to be abundantly explicit about the process by which that aim is realised.

Lisa Tomasetti uses some of the conventions of early silent movies, which now seem the height of artificiality, for the purpose of adding emphasis and a sense of 'real life' unlikelihood to her reversals of historical conventions of narrative and image-making. Josephine Starrs does the same, with specific reference to images sacred in the annals of Western art: the madonnas of the Renaissance Masters become the actual biological fathers of living, non-divine children, the photo-

grapher becoming the director and stage designer in this subversive enterprise, her editorial presence quite palpable.

Filmic touches, exaggerated studio-style

poses, reversal of expectations (indicated by Alyx Macfadyen, for instance – quite blatantly in titles as well as by her pointed rearrange-



Alyx Macfadyen, *Don't worry chaps*, 1992, hand coloured silver gelatin print, 1000 x 1400cm

ment of cliché images); Di Barrett's fracturing and kaleidoscoping

of the static photo-portrait – all of these techniques consciously preserve awareness of the tension between the illusion of unmediated verisimilitude the medium allows and the Value Added which is the artist's authorial control, intent and skill.

In the case of the women photographers, their insistence on the contrived nature of their fictions, in the context of a feminist (and therefore still utopian) agenda, makes for a high degree of

decipherability. An oppositional stance is evident, in Barrett's consistent choice of females as subjects as much as in Macfadyen's self-portrait with boxing gloves.

Rick Martin's images function on several levels in this company. His glossy male torsos are alarmingly like the classier 'art' photos in male homoerotic literature. Is he the enemy in this safe haven of reclaimed territory? Portraiture, erotica and film noir are his 'considerations' in this series. These



Lisa Tomasetti, *Prayer*, 1992, silver gelatin print, 1000 x 1040cm

reside, in the 'real world', in male territory. The fact that a male artist is

using their language in this context renders his images particularly loaded and multivalent. They act both as an irritant and a reference point to the sphere – ignored or defied by the other artists in *Real Fictions* – where men speak themselves to other men. This is the

case even if Martin's work is a critique of masculinity: his rhetoric of images – the Marxist symbols of the nobility of labour included (even if, again, critique is intended) – must be decoded with reference to a



Josephine Starrs, *Andrew and Jack*, 1992, toned silver gelatin print, 40cm radius

male-author(is)ed lexicon.

Nothing is solved by Martin's treatment of these images: they may be 'for real' on a number of levels or an elaborate joke. What is clear is their altered resonance in this show. Martin is also aware of the construction of her/his subject by the author/artist, and candid and defiant about his use of stagey tools and techniques, further confusing the issue with conflicting agit-prop trappings (heroic-labour icons super-imposed on almost

neo-fascist images of healthy male perfection), with a further overlay of homoerotic display.

Whatever the rationale for Martin's inclusion in the show, the effect is to raise questions that would not have arisen (or not immediately) without the presence of his work. Who speaks and who listens – those essential le Doueffean questions – become urgent. Martin invokes a mainstream it would have otherwise have been possible to forget or to laugh at – whose importance it would have been easy to diminish.

This is not to downplay the subversive energy of the work of the women photographers in *Real Fictions*. It is to say that the politics of representation is the front line in cultural struggles, among which the most important is the War against Women (in Marilyn French's phrase). Images

of the hegemonic female may be constructed, with wit, aplomb, intertextual shrewdness and persistence, as they are and have



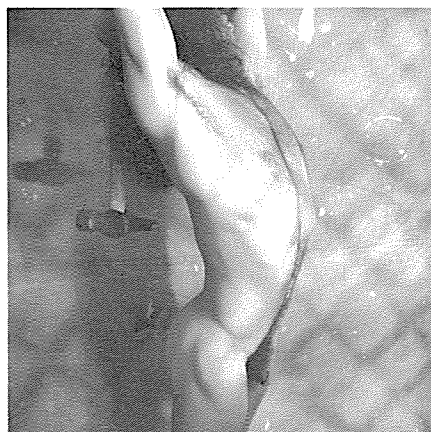
Di Barrett, *detail, Transposed Jyanni Steffensen II*, 1992, C type photograph, 118 x 128cm

been by all the women artists in this exhibition. But they have to make their way

in a cultural mainstream whose prevailing narrative (real-life as well as fictional) is murderously punitive of such females. 'Around all females swirls a culture pervaded by images of female sexual organs, of female bodies being assaulted by men' (Marilyn French: *The War Against Women*).

The fictionality of the constructed female images in *Real Fictions* cannot be evaded by the viewer who must also confront the potency belonging to the man-made images of men hanging alongside them. But there is also the practical fact that there is only one male and four female artists here: this is a kind of

practical politics. For Gayatri Spivak, the essence of a 'practical politics of the open end' is productive crisis. The crisis between the real and the fictional, the privileged and the subordinate



Rick Martin, *Forge I*, 1992, cibachrome photograph, 145 x 70cm

is exemplified both in these artists' individual images and in their conjunction. You will hear the echoes after you walk away.

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*SATEP – supporting regional visual arts development throughout South Australia.*