



Louise Paramour's
beautiful ugly,
ugly beautiful

WHEN THE GRUNGE MOVEMENT EXPLODED IN SYDNEY THE USE OF SALVAGED RUBBISH TO CREATE ALIEN STRUCTURES WAS THE HOT TICKET. BUT MELBOURNE ARTIST LOUISE PARAMOR HAD BEEN PRODUCING GRUNGE WELL BEFORE HER SYDNEY COUNTERPARTS. HER MOST RECENT BAZAAR SCULPTURAL FORMS HAVE CAUSED **ASHLEY CRAWFORD** TO RE-CONTEXTUALISE HER EARLIER WORK. PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KIRSTIN GOLLINGS**.

Louise Paramour's latest offering is a cornucopia of bizarre delights. Under her deft hand useless plastic detritus takes on a mix of the surreal and the sexual, the bizarre and the beautiful, the threatening and the coddling.

Back in the 1980s such Sydney artists as **Mikala Dwyer**, **Hany Armanious** and **Adam Cullen** were dubbed grunge artists for their use of found materials and their poetic resuscitation of rubbish. While not grunge per se, Paramour in a similar, but more refined tactic, takes the mundane and applies a maverick magic to it.

Her most recent exhibition titled *Louise Paramour: A Bunch of Flowers* at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art has three distinct themes: there are powerful abstract montages dubbed *Off-cut blow up*; 15 extraordinary sculptures titled *Jam Session* and a number of glossy painted paper collages.

But it is the works arrayed under the funky title *Jam Session* that spark the imagination. *Jam Session #6* could either be a grotesque sex tool or a terrorist weapon, depending on your mind-set. Whatever it is, it's weird. A plastic pipe snakes from the body of the construction which looks set to blast off. *Jam Session #8* could be a device for caring for children, at least if you weren't overly fond of them. *Jam Session #5* could be either a strange sex device in a sleazy Bangkok bar or a birthday cake for aliens. *Jam Session #7*, rendered with a pilfered plastic bumper bar, could be gardening tool or weapon. It's all, for better or worse, in the eye of the beholder.

What makes these strange sculptures so jolting is the ability to recognise certain decidedly mundane and everyday elements entangled in their macabre make up. It's somewhat reminiscent of the more organic results of the transmission experiment in **David Cronenberg's** filmic version of *The Fly*. Disparate elements that shouldn't be together have melded to become something altogether unique. There are washing baskets, milk crates and everyday bits and pieces scavenged from op shops and dumpsters, spotlessly cleaned, and then combined like a **Duchamp** Readymade. Their colours, bright and icky as plastic tends to be, manage to flow with weird harmony. It's Duchamp meeting the weirder moments of *Ren & Stimpy* or *South Park*.

Chris McAuliffe, writing in the catalogue for these works when they were exhibited at Nellie Castan Gallery in Melbourne, nailed it nicely: "Mashing objects together at random doesn't make for sculpture. It's more a case of finding objects that don't know that they're sculptures and convincing them to be more ambitious."

Paramour has been an artist to watch ever since her extraordinary installation at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in 2001, (which was first shown at the



Louise Paramour, *Lustgarten*, 2000. Installation view, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND NELLIE CASTAN GALLERY, MELBOURNE.



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Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin at the culmination of a residency in 2000) titled somewhat suggestively, *Lustgarten*. There she used gigantic honey-combed paper cut-outs to create an elegant and baroque installation.

She is fascinated with the politics of attraction and desire. Somehow this translates through the elegant but jarring *Jam Session* assemblages. While *Lustgarten* was executed in a softer material – light-weight paper – the plastics of *Jam Session* take on a similar strangely sinuous quality.

While she had worked with abstraction in the earlier years of her practice, in the late 1980s, Paramor's more recent move into abstraction with *Off-cuts* is in some ways an inevitable by-product of her figurative work.

As **Richard Grayson** noted in a text accompanying the exhibition *Off-cuts* at the Kunstlehaus Bethanien in 2003, these works were initially "...the result of process rather than direct aesthetic decisions. What in the art room at school used to be called 'mess' and which you were required to clear up at the end of the session. Well, Louise Paramor has not only cleared up her mess but she's carried it some twelve thousand miles. She's got a bag filled up with what is not in the other bag. This is enough to confuse the best of customs officers."

"The figurative collages I have been making in the last few years produce a large quantity of by-product in the form of colourful off-cuts," Paramor says. "I realised at some point that this rich material had to be put to good use and it took me some time before I had the confidence to use it in a serious way. The abstract pieces are made intuitively, and in fact this way of working is the complete antitheses to the strict and painstaking regime involved in constructing the figurative work."

Using the off-cuts of her more recent figurative collages to make abstractions (the *Mädchen Club* series, the *FOREVERYOURS* series and the *Classic Shazzy* series) began in 2003 when, during a four-month overseas working trip, she created the first set of off-

This page: Louise Paramor, *Madchen Club*, 2003.
Installation view at Ocular Lab, Melbourne. COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

Opposite page: Louise Paramour, *Classic Shazzy #3*, 2005.
Gloss & matt painted paper collage, 262 x 379cm.
COURTESY: NELLIE CASTAN GALLERY, MELBOURNE.



This page: Louise Paramor, *A Bunch of Flowers* - Installation view 2006, Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne.

Opposite page: Louise Paramour, *Lustgarten*, 2000. Installation view, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND NELLIE CASTAN GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

cut collages. These were made in Berlin (and subsequently shown at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in December 2003) from the refuse of figurative collages made directly before a residency in Singapore. "These first off-cut abstractions were very raw and I believe most recent off-cut abstractions made in 2005/06 are far more sophisticated," Paramor says.

When the so-called Grunge movement (Mikala Dwyer, Hany Armanious, Adam Cullen) exploded in Sydney in the late 80s their use of found detritus to create alien structures was a hot item. But the reality was that Paramor had been utilising similar tactics well before her Sydney counterparts.

"Using found objects is something I did a lot in the first five or so years of my practice," she says. "I have actually therefore made a return to this use of 'grunge' material in making the plastic *Jam Sessions*. So, I was actually doing 'grunge' well before becoming aware of such artists as Mikala Dwyer and Hany Armanious. It's interesting you ask me this as I now remember somewhere in the mid-90s thinking that a whole section of my work possibly missed being appropriately contextualised.

"Getting back to *Jam Sessions*, I sort of stumbled into it," she says somewhat sheepishly. "I had been collecting small plastic bits and pieces for no particular reason other than for the pleasure of looking at them. In my studio an ensemble soon started to grow and this got me really excited which lead me to start collecting larger, more human-scale objects. The decision-making in bringing the parts together and arriving at the separate sculptures was again intuitive."

There is a distinct relationship between Paramor's more figurative works and her bizarre sculptural forms, she says.

"The relationship lies in the fact that the figurative works and the sculpture come from found sources. The images used in the *Classic Shazzy* collages were found in a calendar, which was found in a mechanics' workshop in Kensington, Melbourne. I borrowed the calendar from the mechanic to copy it and he trusted me to return it.

"Obviously the sculptures too are made of found items," she says. "Both bodies of work are using elements that I could not have set out to find; these elements presented themselves to me. My expertise is to channel these sources and trust in my own instincts to make the 'right' choices."

Paramor has, in the past, made use of the covers of trashy Mills and Boone paperbacks as source material, images which many would deride as crap. She moved on to sourcing imagery from dusty, grease smeared calendars scavenged from a mechanic's

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wall. But such trash items are ideal fodder for Paramour in the meeting of mass consumption, the salvaging of detritus and her core fascination with the politics of desire.

"I love looking for things/objects/pictures that, once plucked from the bland context of the normal working world, are, quite unwittingly, extraordinary or odd or beautiful in an ugly sort of way, or indeed ugly in a beautiful sort of way," she says. "I'm attracted to the hidden power inherent in dysfunctional and essentially trashy representations of appeal, desire and wanting. I see it as my job to unearth this power, at the same time as dismantling the original intention of messages that were to be conveyed."

Like Paramour herself, her figures are lithe and sensual. In many respects it is highly tempting to read the women in the works as essentially self-portraits.

"A few people have asked me this and I don't know quite what to say," she says. "In a sense I guess so, but it certainly wasn't a conscious thought when I embarked on the project. The three supposedly sexy women depicted are actually pretty scary in a humorous kind of way I think. I mean I haven't earnestly tried to represent femaleness particularly, it just happens to be that these ridiculous clichés of woman/car continue to exist and I find that funny and interesting. I also happen to like the completeness of the total image and in particular the use of digital trickery in the foreground of the original pictures. It's a very serious and very ambitious bit of tongue in cheek."

There is no doubt that Louise Paramour is both serious and ambitious, but these attributes are filtered via a wry humour and dry wit to create a unique body of work. ■

Louise Paramour *A Bunch of Flowers* is exhibited at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art until 30 July 2006.

This page, left: Louise Paramour, *Lustgarten*, 2000. Installation view, Kunsterhaus Bethanien, Berlin.

Right: Louise Paramour, *A Bunch of Flowers* - Installation view 2006, Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND NELLIE CASTAN GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

Opposite page: Louise Paramour, *Classic Shazzy #2*, 2005. Gloss painted paper collage, 255 x 350cm. COURTESY: NELLIE CASTAN GALLERY, MELBOURNE.