



Pat Brassington's Totems and Taboos

WHEN HOBART ARTIST PAT BRASSINGTON WENT DIGITAL IN THE MID-NINETIES SHE RAN RIOT WITH THE POSSIBILITIES OF HER MEDIUM. RECENTLY SHE WAS NAMED AUSTRALIA'S KEY SURREALIST WORKING IN PHOTO MEDIA. WORDS BY ASHLEY CRAWFORD. PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOFF PARR.

The figures ooze and throb, shifting like strange oscillating life forms from another dimension. A mouth gapes, a tattooed foot is delicately poised, a blinded mermaid sighs in despair.

Pat Brassington uses photography as a medium. But it is as much montage or, in colouration, watercolour. At times her work is pure abstraction, at others a kind of surreal figuration. Whatever it is, it's far from comforting.

In 2005 Brassington held two awesome exhibitions, *In the same vein* in Melbourne followed on from an exhibition at Stills Gallery in Sydney earlier that year titled *You're So Vein*. The play on the word 'vain', making it at once humorous and visceral, was typical of Brassington; she is a master of playing with and then blasting asunder her viewers' expectations. The title makes for a wonderfully bizarre juxtaposition; vanity presupposes a degree of attractiveness, but Brassington's figures are deformed and mutated; they are the antithesis of the photography of *Vogue* and *Kylie Minogue* underwear advertising. Vanity is about the last thing one might think of.

For all their floating, decidedly feminine appearance, Brassington's figures are far from seductive in the traditional sense. Even her colouration, a cloying, all-embracing pinkness, is totally stifling. "It's not my intention to feminise the image by using pink," she said. "It's nastier than that. Pink smothers."

But despite the difficulties in pinning down where Brassington's imagery hails from, she has become a favourite among critics and curators throughout the nation. Kate Rhodes, the Assistant Curator, Photography at the National Gallery of Victoria, writing on her work for the 2003 Clemenger Award stated that: "Pat Brassington is Australia's key surrealist working with photo media ... In mixing past and present, analogue and digital images, the artist exploits the special connection to reality on which photography is based. The works hover in time and a nostalgically diffuse light as if caught in ambiguous

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dream logic." In a review of *You're So Vein* in *State of the Arts*, Jo Higgins commented that: "Brassington's images are not gratuitous, despite these pulsating and disturbing undertones, and in their nuances and quirky perversities there is something inherently beautiful about them, even if you do recoil occasionally. *You're So Vein* is an excellent example of current photo-media practices being explored and Brassington's images – in their subtlety and poetic monstrosity – are well worth seeing."

Although she is perpetually dubbed as a photographic artist, this is far from traditional photography. The Hobart-based Brassington is a tinkerer of imagery, an alchemist of form. Her imagery feels restless, as though the artist refuses any sense of contentment. Despite this her work resides, somewhat uncomfortably one might surmise, in a number of major state collections and was a highlight in the photographic exhibition *Fokunst Aus Australian*, curated by Bernice Murphy and shown in Berlin in 2000. In 2002 she was the subject of a major survey show, curated by Helen McDonald, at the Ian Potter Museum of Art at Melbourne University to rapturous response and some degree of bewilderment. While photography in the last five to 10 years has been a hot ticket, from Bill Henson to Rosemary Laing, Brassington eschewed the more seductive figurative approach of those artists; she stands alone in terms of subject, technique and presentation.

Brassington's earlier work was executed in black and white. But in 1996 she abandoned more traditional approaches in order to pursue digital manipulation in large colour images. Making use of the potential dismemberment and radical rearrangements of the digital medium freed the photographer from any sense of the real and allowed her decidedly fecund imagination to run riot.

Brassington was quick to admit to her restlessness, both in terms of process and source material. "I've always been inclined to experiment," she says. "I have been a straight photographer and some of my pieces today still fall into that category. As for source material, the main ingredient often comes from my own archive of negatives and black and white prints. Sometimes I might throw into the mix a scanned found image or a potentially suitable object. If I don't have what I want I'll reach for the camera.

"The process can be a difficult journey or certainly a contorted one," she says. "The primary source material suggests possible directions and bits and pieces are added, sometimes only to be discarded. I will repeat this trial and error approach until I get as



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close as I can to what I have pictured in my minds eye."

Writing on Brassington's 2005 Sydney show, the critic Helen McDonald noted that as a printmaker-cum-photographer, Brassington does not take pictures so much as make them. In this respect her photographs are in fact a *mélange* of technical influences from printmaking to montage.

"Yes, I do make pictures," she says. "I am not a printmaker but my images are built up in layers and I cut and paste. I did study printmaking alongside photography in my student days. I prefer my images to seep into the paper base."

In some ways there is a strong narrative sensibility here, as though Brassington were telling a macabre fairy-story. But if there is a narrative, it is a by-product of her process, she says. "I don't deliberately set out to tell a story," says Brassington. "But sometimes when I am working away at an image I can sense a narrative emerging."

People tend to bandy about certain terms when it comes to Brassington's pictures: "perverse", "deformed", an "uncertain sexuality", and a "poetic monstrosity" were among the responses to her last body of work. One suspected that Brassington is less than impressed.

"I accept that viewers bring to an artwork different life experiences and, by inference, different interpretations," she admits. "I haven't flinched, although I may look away when some commentators describe my work as 'bleak', 'perverse', 'unsettling' and so on."

"A viewer approached me at a recent exhibition of my work. He was genuinely complimentary, but what pleased me, surprised me even, was his description of that body of work as 'very beautiful'. I do walk a fine line and it's intentional up to a point. It relates to binary oppositions."

Left: Pat Brassington, *Angel lust*, 2005. Pigment print, 86 x 62 cm.

Right: Pat Brassington, *Mouse trap*, 2005. Pigment print, 85 x 63cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

Left: Pat Brassington, *Pillow talk*, 2005. Pigment print, 86 x 62cm.

Right: Pat Brassington, *The wedding guest*, 2005. Pigment print, 86 x 65cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

What is it with Pink? Traditionally it's meant to be feminine, but with Brassington's palette it is cloying, a kind of entrapment. "Your interpretation feels fine," is Brassington's response. "Pinkness can be skin deep, the veil drawn over blood red capillaries."

The works in *In the same vein* were suggestive of a kind of dance, a ballet from another dimension. The theatrical, dance and cinema seep through the work. At least one image recalls the harrowing figure prominent in the Japanese horror film *Ring*. But not surprisingly, it is the savage, visceral **Martin Scorsese** film, *Raging Bull* with its balletic and bloody boxing scenes that is one of Brassington's favourite films.

"I've always danced in one way or another and music is ever present in my life," she says. "As for cinema, I can't say that film influences my art practice overtly, but subliminally I'm sure it does. Film is an art form I love very much."

One was also inclined to start dredging the bookshelf to look up references to **Sigmund Freud's** links between the photographic process and the unconscious, to which Brassington simply says: "Bookshelves are precarious things."

But it is inevitable with Brassington's work to look at her precursors when it comes to explorations of the unconscious. Although there are few, if any, literal links, one is reminded of the work of the early surrealists, of the spooky photography of **Hans Bellmer** and his dismembered dolls and the dark musings of **Georges Bataille**.

"Year's ago I read Freud's *Totem and Taboo*," Brassington says. "If I think about it, it must have been a catalyst for me in some ways. It was Freud's musings on 'the unconscious' and the 'return of the repressed' that fuelled my desire to probe into some aspects of surrealist practice. The fascination is still with me. It's not that I want to travel down the same road, but it is a lantern in the window."

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Pat Brassington will be exhibiting at Stills Gallery, Sydney from 22 March to 22 April 2006. She is also represented by Arc One Gallery, Melbourne.