



SIGNALLING THROUGH THE FLAMES¹:

THE ART OF AMANDA DAVIES AND ANDREW HARPER

In the age of rationalization, of the ideal of calculation and of generalized rationality of the market, it falls to the [artists] to deal with the extremes of affect by means of an *aesthetics of risk*, extremes which always also contain the possibility of offending by breaking taboos (Lehmann 2006: 187).

In the archives of the small provincial city of Hobart in Tasmania lies an account of an astonishing historic occurrence². Two artists - a woman and a man - each barely known to the other, are invited to participate in *Shotgun*, an early career artist exhibition and professional development opportunity.

At first glance, it seems these artists have little in common. Amanda Davies is a painter living in a rural idyll on the Tasman Peninsula, while Andrew Harper is a performance artist and experimental filmmaker, inhabiting an inner city suburb of Hobart. They create work that is clearly differentiated: painting and performance, object and action, image and spoken word, and yet despite these obvious differences, what becomes increasingly evident are the affinities between these artists and their distinct and distinctive bodies of work.

These may be described in terms of visceral and emotional intensity, art-making as a profoundly embodied experience, an interest in a religious, or perhaps less contentiously, a spiritual condition of heightened awareness, a DIY aesthetic, and a strong sense of theatricality, which following Artaud, may be characterised as, '...that momentary pointlessness which drives them to useless acts without immediate profit' (1977, p.15). This may be understood as a kind of excess, referencing an ethical extreme, a moral edge that demands our attention, speaking to the means by which pleasure and pain, joy and despair, humour and disgust are drawn or etched into the surface of life and art.

The externalisation of inner landscapes, an unsettling of the viewer's perception, the shout of rage, tension - and its physical expression or evocation - the body as a site of meaning. I did not anticipate these artists in proximity.

THE PAINTER FOLDS, DRAPES, WRAPS, CONSTRUCTS, UNSETTLES...

Sometime mid winter and then again in early Spring I fly over Tasmania's dreamy landscape. Gazing down, I see sky, water, clouds, hillsides, shadow, sunlight and drifting rain - a magical landscape - not my everyday. Once landed, I drive out of Hobart, heading east then south to Eaglehawk Neck and beyond, to the peaceful pastoral of Premaydena where Amanda Davies currently makes her home.

This green and pleasant land - so calming to the eye - nonetheless holds within itself a turbulent history encompassing the devastation of Tasmania's Aboriginal peoples, the 1996 shooting spree at nearby Port Arthur, and the site of the first factory-farmed chickens in Tasmania. Of course what lies beneath, even were it able to be fully known and comprehended, cannot be read through its surface contours.

Whilst Amanda Davies' artistic concerns are neither with the surrounding landscape, contemporary politics nor history, as a painter, she nonetheless seeks to articulate something of what lies within. She seems to understand the self as a surface topology concealing a 'real' that is not 'really there' (Phelan 1996, p1). As such she carefully stages herself for the camera, using herself as model to create images, which are later rendered and made strange through paint. In this way she distances the act of representation invoking through the process itself, and the materiality of paint, a kind of 'psychic reality'. Whilst Davies is the recognisable subject of her own paintings, this seems less to do with self-portraiture than a matter of convenience, utilising the self as a site for experimentation.

I wander through the house looking at older works, which encompass both the figurative and the abstract, often using home photography and family snaps as a source, sometimes drawing on the vernacular language of signage. In one, a child,

with her knickers around her ankles, sleeps on the toilet. In another, a young woman falls from above headfirst into a drum kit. Accidents of the everyday, surreal vignettes, ambiguous intentions and quietly humorous, these are paintings that make you smile, if a little nervously.

For *Shotgun*, however, Davies has created a series of portraits that seem to be about the expulsion or displacement of internal organs, fluids, hair, and vital essence. Close-ups of a face shrouded in white gauzy fabric that drags the skin and facial features into grimace, red lips, blood, blue bruising in high contrast, rejecting the art historical idea of the painted self portrait as expressive of some inner truth or reality. These paintings are not autobiographic, and nor do they depict any personal trauma. Resisting simple interpretation, they are nonetheless highly evocative generating a disturbing emotional and aesthetic intensity.

Even more unsettling are a second group of self-portraits, in which the artist's face, including her eyes, is obscured and disfigured by a patchwork second skin of yellowish brown bandaids that resists physiognomy. What lies beneath - whether diseased, charred or pristine flesh - is impossible to tell - and no revelation of inner character from outward appearance is possible. The abjection of these images, and their mute resistance to revelation or witness denies viewers the satisfaction of identification or empathy. In one portrait, the subject begins to peel away her bandaid carapace, but fixed in time, no butterfly ever emerges.

In another sequence of portraits, Davies moves from the close-up to the medium shot, which depict the artist/subject vomiting a horse's tail of black hair in one, and expelling a dense white vapour in another. This series of portraits, including one in which the eyes are covered in what look like the fleshy pink sections of some internal organ, and another stripped-back study in which the head is slightly uptilted, have a tension suggestive of mystical or ecstatic experience. As in mediaeval religious paintings, meaning is assembled through the draping of cloth, the structural planes of face, pose and gesture. These portraits of the artist do not allow us to experience 'character as inner essence' (Fuchs p. 49) but to intuit a metaphysical reality that whilst not immediately knowable is strangely familiar.

The largest painting reintroduces one of Davies' recurrent motifs - a woman seated on a bed. Her head and hands are shrouded and wrapped. Nothing of her flesh is visible. Painted in monochromatic greys and white, accented in turquoise, this painting is not yet complete when I see it. Entrapment, suffocation, quiet endurance... Even incomplete the work is poignant, suggesting loss or malady. Whatever is stifled within cannot be expelled or released.

THE PERFORMANCE ARTIST INVOKES, INCANTS, ENDURES AND CONFRONTS...

Andrew Harper is uncertain about the word artist. It feels too grand, although he's been doing it - art that is - for quite a while. He likes other words: performer, writer, experimental filmmaker, a reader of cultural studies and a lover of conspiracy theories. He's been an actor, a poet and a student. His artistic lineage may be mapped through the DIY aesthetic of punk music, and underground film, fantastical, supernatural, horror or simply 'weird' fiction as practiced by H.P. Lovecraft, Arthur Machen and Clark Ashton Smith.

Also critical are the dark and gloomy byways of Nordic black metal with its emphasis on Vikings, paganism and Satanism, and themes of sacrifice, darkness, depression and death. The writings of Antonin Artaud, the performances of Mike Parr, Luke Roberts and Leigh Bowery, are all important to his understanding of art making, but the word artist? Well as the Melbourne-based commentator and festival director, Marcus Westbury famously said, 'This is Not Art' thereby ensuring that it was and is.

He's been an actor, a poet and improviser, a witch and the 'bad fairy'. He found - despite his misanthropic tendencies - that standing on a stage and engaging with people came easily. Happy to improvise, he would ask his audience to give him something to riff on; 'give me something interesting' he'd say. He didn't want to talk about girlfriends or football. He wandered into the visual arts by accident, as a way of knocking off his degree in cultural studies.

I visit Andrew at his house, and we chat about his work, his influences and his background over a cup of tea, with his witchy black cat skittering in and out. The skies are grey and the clouds low when I arrive, and so I'm shocked utterly at one point to turn and see snow capped Mount Wellington reveal itself, looming large over the city. With the mountain's dominance so evident, witchcraft, shamanism and the pagan seem a reasonable response. How could the mountain not exert its influence over the town and its people?

In earlier projects such as 'Celluloid curse against the current government' (2005), Harper goes onto the mountain. As a witch, magician or wizard, he casts a spell against the then Howard Government. Naked, exposed to the elements, and with super 8 film projected against his naked flesh, Harper howls, screams and curses his quasi-improvised text, before inviting the assembled audience to contribute hair, nails, phlegm, blood and other bodily parts, to be burned in a ritual offering.

This coupling with the elemental does not feed the inner mechanisms of capitalist consumer society. This is not a functional act, however one may wish it to be. It nevertheless serves – precisely by being surplus to requirement – as Artaud's 'useless act' of generosity undertaken without thought of profit.

Andrew Harper shows me three rough cuts on video towards his work for *Shotgun*. He talks me through the making of the work and the pleasure of working with friends who he can actually pay, thanks to the *Shotgun* project. The starting point for this new work is Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. It will be a triptych using images from the tarot: the magician, the devil and the angel. He thinks there's something cartoon-like in the idea of an angel on one shoulder, a devil on the other... The three loops will screen simultaneously.

In the first, naked, bathed in red light, he moves into the centre of the shot. His monologue is suffused with the pain of self-loathing. His abject but recalcitrant body spits words into the universe: 'hating, ugly disgusting, you fraud, you prick! You make sure of that don't you...'

As the magician, the image Harper creates is pristine. Illuminated in lambent light, his hands held out suggesting the codification of gesture in early Christian paintings. His tones are mellifluous, quietly confident, and measured as he intones around the 'warmth of the sun', affirming capacity, resolution, the future. 'Everything will be fine. Believe and grow. It is not indulgence. It is honesty. Give yourself permission. Everything will be fine.'

The final image in the triptych sees the artist suspended. Recorded suspended upside down, with milk cascading down over his body, the image is then reversed and screened inverted – or heads up – unsettling the viewer's perception, exerting strange forces on his stubbornly corporeal body, and distorting the face. In this sequence, he voices the incantation against fear as practiced by the *Bene Gesserit*,² a powerful sisterhood of witches, in times of peril.

I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.

I will permit it to pass over me and through me.

And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.

Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.

Only I will remain. (Herbert 1965)

In its compressed articulation of fear, loathing, abjection, but also love, this work is simultaneously an incantation against evil, and an affirmation of life.

SIGNALLING THROUGH THE FLAMES...

For this exhibition, Davies and Harper have separately created paintings and performances for video that offer images and behaviours that may offend or be understood as taboo. Lehmann has defined 'the taboo as a socially anchored form of affective reaction that rejects (abjects) certain realities, forms of behaviour or images, as "untouchable", disgusting or unacceptable prior to any rational judgement...' (2006, p186).

By engaging with 'aesthetics of risk' (Lehmann 2006), these artists offer the viewer an alternative to the non-stop barrage of apparently 'rational' information that in our mediatised society endlessly detail war, death, persecution, and cruelty. These low-fi actions performed for the camera, rendered in video or paint – and so incompatible with the immediate appetite of the machinery of news and entertainment – offer a perceptual space through which to contemplate the astonishing and the irrational.

The *Shotgun* project has brought together two artists in an exhibition that speaks to the importance of those things that we apprehend as felt truths rather than know as empirical facts. In these economically rational days, it is all too easy to lose sight of other kinds of knowledge, ways of seeing, modes of experience, the humble, the tentative and the wayward. At this time, it does not feel too extreme to cite Artaud's maxim (1958), regarding artists, who 'like victims burnt at the stake, [are] signalling through the flames'.

SARAH MILLER WOLLONGONG 2011

¹ The title is borrowed from Antonin Artaud (1958) in 'The Theater and Culture', the preface to *The Theater and its Double* as quoted in Lehmann, H T (2006), and Fuchs E (1996).

² With apologies to Antonin Artaud, (1977) 'Theater and the Plague'.

³ The *Bene Gesserit* is a powerful sisterhood of witches inhabiting Frank Herbert's *Dune* universe.

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