

Christine Webster makes the spectator a participant in the game of masks and mirrors. This is the common denominator in the series of the last few years – Can Can (1994) and Black Carnival (1993-1997).

In Can Can we witness details and fragments of the human body in living flesh tones, in many cases with theatrical props, gestures and masks, a set-up shared by her other series, new Myths: new myths elaborated precisely on the basis of what is not mythic, endowed with attributes such as those that prompt the recognition of the saints in art history.

Her work Black Carnival envelopes the visitor in a black cyclorama of grotesquely ambiguous figures. The spectators find their active role as subject overturned as they are converted into the objects of a spectacle. With its roots in the frescos of the Villa dei Misterii in Pompeii, in the chiaroscuro of Carravaggio and in the macabre dances of Dionysian initiation, the carnival with which Webster surrounds the spectator mixes irony and torture to make the visitors feel they are interlopers, discoverers, and offer them an intruder's view that surprises, enchants and frightens.

Black Carnival is an immobile dance that sets out to unmask the spectator. Actors masked with the history of art, in familiar or decontextualized relations with the world of cabaret, present a joint actuation, an ironic and burlesque act in which the faces cross over: the women dress as men and the men are adorned with feminine attributes. Nothing is what it appears and everything ceases to appear in the excess that envelops the spectator. In complete concordance with the tradition of renewal celebrated by carnivals, Black carnival offers the possibility of choice, it questions the assumption of roles and revels in confusion. This is the triumph of the flesh, of the senses and the sensual, of instinct over reason, of the visceral and Dionysian over the Apollonian and conventionally beautiful. The work of the New Zealand artist portrays the spectator by giving back her or his attitude in front of the mirror. The sequence of panels surrounds the visitors, enveloping them and making them the centre of the observation: the observer observed. The roles are confused.

Webster's proposal is a baroque game of appearances with a double edge: at the same time as it presents the spectacle it places the spectators in the uncomfortable position of being the only ones at the party disguised as themselves. The staging allows no escape: the set of life-size figures seems to be on the point of commencing a circle dance around the person who believes, with a sense of relief and security, that this is merely an inoffensive work of art. Perhaps this explains the irritation and annoyance that comes with the spectator's discovery of his or her defencelessness, the sheer size of certain pieces (274 x 120cm) that overflow any kind of frame to threaten the barrier between art and life in a gesture that is entirely untamed. Whatever might be argued to the contrary, the poses and the nudes add nothing to what the everyday invasion of images has already revealed. What is annoying is that they resemble us so closely, lighting up the thorny ground of our taboos and our desires.

In this gesture we know ourselves to be discovered, the victims of a black carnival that introduces us to the grotesquerie of that side of ourselves we had believed was subterranean, subcutaneous, hidden. Coming into contact with Black Carnival is like entering inside the hall of distorting mirrors in Valle Inclán's Callejon el Gato and being shown the grotesque reflection of our being, formless and refracted, yet cruelly and inescapably ours, faithful.