Recurring Undercurrents

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Photography is a performative medium and … the camera is a theatrical device. [1]

Christine Webster is an artist provocateur. She uses photography and the adult body to demonstrate the complexity of gender, power relations and psychological states of being. She meditates on sexuality, but goes further to plumb the depths of desire through subconscious narratives. At times the artist unsettles our vision with images of emotional distress and implied trauma in order for the viewer to accept that the human condition involves confronting belief systems and power positions that impact socially and, further, that when a life is lived fully and engaged it cannot but experience the "out-of-the ordinary", and despair as much as ecstasy. This selected survey of Christine Webster provides an opportunity to review examples from earlier well- known cibachrome series and also become acquainted with less familiar aspects of her photomedia oeuvre. Recurring themes and modes of staging her subjects are readily apparent, yet her artistic drive is matched by an intellectual and emotional honesty. Webster's images quickly segue from the recognisable and known to the murky terrain of the transgressive, hence our societal mores are often thrown into disarray. In art historical terms, she is not alone in these reversals and re- examinations of the norm.

Re-visioning the Body

Now considered a trans-national artist, Christine Webster first came to prominence in New Zealand in a period when feminist expression matured. During the 1980s, exhibitions, university studies and writing (in fact, nearly every area of cultural activity) gave voice to this persuasive force. Feminism (posited by Craig Owens as possibly postmodernism's most significant player) destabilised the dominance of patriarchal readings (and intention) in the visual arts. And it was through photography and film that the feminist visual artist could best join the discourses surrounding gender, sexual identity and power relations. [2]

While not entirely eschewing the male domain of photo- documentary practice, many women using the camera during this time actively rejected notions of realism and the supposed neutrality of the photograph; their challenge to the mimetic tradition was deemed necessary to disrupt the grip of modernism. Instead, lens-based images grew larger and emphasised filmic and theatrical elements, while artists freely adopted postmodernist strategies of appropriation. One must remember, too, that the 1980s saw the birth of MTV and the popularity of slick fashion-magazine photography where images of androgynous sexuality brought surrealist photographers like Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) to mind. From his base in Australia in the late 1970s, fellow New Zealander John Lethbridge was also photographing synthesised fashion, advertising and so-called "high art". [3]

In the early 1980s, Webster's agenda as a photographer responded to this edgy fashion and advertising trend and melded it with shoots of 'little performances staged in old buildings and laneways'. [4] Having already studied drama at Massey University in Palmerston North and Victoria University of Wellington, she brought these skills to her work. An innate restlessness to explore new avenues prompted her to accommodate the burgeoning critical discourse on the "gaze", the ways memory works and how photography can be used as a psychological metaphor for desire. [5] One of the earliest cibachromes to address the subterranean impulses of the psyche was her Craigwell House (1984). Here, the interior of an old abandoned spa creates the possibility of a narrative with a male (not a female) as protagonist. The youth emerging from the tiled bath has his head flung back and eyes closed and invites us into an interiority that shunts the "outside" away. Although he has hennaed hair and rouged cheeks, no simple response (such as sexual transgression) can eradicate the poetry of this work nor lessen the impact of the architectural geometry as a prison to the ecstatic decadence implied through the performer's make-up and pose. One is reminded of the poet Charles Baudelaire's Fleurs du mal and Jean Genet's masochistic exhibitionism.

While much of her work in the 1980s was concerned with the empowerment of female sexuality, Webster often used male protagonists to act out subversions of society's prevailing myths. In this, she was far removed from the feminist photographers using literal, kitchen-sink realism or simple depictions of role reversal to deconstruct the norm. Instead, this artist was operating in the area of suggestion, mystery and dream and an investigation of subterranean forces. For instance, Moon Envy (1987), a large-scale cibachrome with separately printed title below, shows a male nude against black, poised as though airborne with his body arched. Alluding in part to man's craving for the hidden forces of woman, it is also a witty response to Freud's famous tenet about penis envy. Alexis Hunter, another New Zealand artist who was to forge a good part of her practice in Europe, states how she at the time also became 'more interested in psychology because it seemed you could not really change society unless you went into the subconscious as well as conscious behaviour of people', irrespective of gender. [6]

Laura Mulvey's influential text about the structuring of the heterosexual male gaze, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' (1975), can be seen as a parallel text for appreciating Webster's revisionism. It is widely recognised that media representations of women are generally normative, stereotyped or oppressive and they reinforce sexist attitudes. For this reason, a concerted effort by her and other female photographers in the 1980s (including Julie Rrap in Australia, Cindy Sherman and Lorna Simpson in the United States and Helen Chadwick in the United Kingdom) made it their project to critique and disassemble. Some, like Webster, went further and explored the politics of the female gaze, so that women's pleasure became an equal priority to that of men. The seduction and subliminal power of the glossy magazines, billboards and video clips required similarly sharp and stylish ripostes (or affirmations).

Webster's solution was to move her models from a setting or place (an atmospheric mise en scéne) and adopt the art director's black backdrop for a single character, accompanied by a panel with text. 'I first discovered black when I started working at night in the studio with a black backdrop. It was like a blank canvas and I was able to control what went into it', she later stated. 'Even though the performance was fun as well as cathartic, it was the final image that I was always after.' [7] These figures were dramatically lit against impenetrable shadow, and the resulting brilliance of the high-gloss photographic surface became the substitute for a mirror. This was evident in her cibachromes from 1987-88, including those shown at solo exhibitions at Museum Ludwig in Cologne, followed by Dunedin Public Art Gallery in New Zealand. Additional themes take these works beyond autobiography, such as their experimentation with the artist herself as subject. 'Webster's use of her own body, generally unclothed, together with props from various

periods and cultures, is a device that rejects associations of time and place', Elizabeth Eastmond wrote. [8] With the diptych Game and Bird, Webster was model for both, playing on the stereotypical association of bird with woman – a soft, fluttering entity – and the more sharply focused aggressive masculine presence of the bird of prey or the game. Such works using the self decisively separated the artist from the 1970s feminist mantra of 'the personal is political' (and essentialist aesthetics) and brought her in line with Cindy Sherman's personas, performance artist Annie Sprinkle and even the theatrical boldness of media star Madonna.

Webster's strict Baptist upbringing no doubt motivated her to bring in biblical references to these three-quarter length portraits with their predella-like text panels below. [9] In most cases she radically usurped conventional Christianity with its patriarchal codes and high-minded morality. Instead, she opted for beliefs of other cultures and used the figure to elevate woman from her subordinate position. For instance, in Water into Wine a woman with her arms raised like a pagan goddess and wearing a "dolly" mask appears to leap upwards from the constraints of a corset (or vessel) decorated with phallic symbols. The subject was actually procured from a book featuring a Buenos Aires prostitute who had penises tattooed onto her body. Such witty taboos appealed to Webster and the appropriation readily served her challenges to orthodox religion. Arguably a more challenging work, Surrender echoes the Crucifixion with the central panel featuring Webster in consort with a strange reptilian swan, employing the classical myth of Leda and the Swan rather than Christ's sacrifice to configure the cross. She is similarly photographed spot-lit for the side panels. Here, in a struggle for individuation, feminism seems to become consciously entangled with religious orthodoxy. As Webster herself admits, all her work is to some extent a self portrait: 'I channel myself through people.' [10]

Masquerade

While Webster's strategy in New Zealand was, on the surface, to intentionally 'shock, using sexual imagery because this is a very moralistic society', it wasn't the case in Europe where 'naked bodies were no longer an issue … [and people] were more interested in the concepts behind them.' [11] At the start of the 1990s, the artist based herself in Paris and started The Players series. Her model was Sarah, her landlord, roommate and muse. A year in Dunedin during 1991 as Frances Hodgkins Fellow (one of New Zealand's most prestigious art awards) allowed her to print the cibachromes in New Zealand. With this series, she concentrated on subjective states of being, which may be imposed upon or willingly chosen to empower either sex. Costumes and props were sourced in France for the protagonist to play a soldier, child, provider, seducer, gambler – all those roles that a mature-aged woman may in the course of her life have embodied. Provider (1991), for instance, clothes herself with an empty white platter and covers her hair as though a woman deprived of sensual pleasures through unstinting service to others.

In the South Island city of Dunedin, Webster worked on the series Possession and Mirth (1991-92), photographs which point to early masters of European painting with Dionysian and religious themes, as well as Jacques-Louis David's The Death of Marat. The artist had seen works of this period first-hand at the Louvre, the Uffizi and other venerable art museums in Europe. While Christian theology was an important motivating factor in this series, so too was 'an exploitation of the historical connection between sex and violence and a countering of the traditional portrayal of the female nude'. [12] In the case of the triptych Cross, which depicts a constrained and tortured male, Michelangelo's Struggling Captive comes to mind and depictions of martyrdom such as Saint Sebastian tied and bound. There are continuous reversals of the usual image expectations; for instance, the model's gilded crown suggests a substitute for that of thorns. And in Vein the central panel with its overtones of the Last Supper serves up on the white-clothed bench not the Eucharistic host but the body of a nude male with head covered (as though blinded and gagged) with wine- coloured cloth. This series is one of the most emotively charged of Webster's tableaux. It conjures up filmmaking that is also on the edge of decency and perversion; that which borrows, in fact, motifs from art history's great painters. In 1991 Webster admitted, 'The medium that I find most stretching and exciting is film; for example David Lynch and Peter Greenaway.' [13]

The nineties saw Webster produce her ambitious Black Carnival (1994-97), arguably the series which, more than any other, is considered her hallmark body of photographs to date. It has been extensively exhibited and was a series that Webster was pulled back into for years after, as though the parade of

figures was incomplete. Originally it was conceived 'to fill a room as a continuous running ribbon of cibachromes that would encircle the viewer – like being in a ball-room of life-size figures'. [14] Installed, Black Carnival also resembles a frieze at once reminiscent of erotic frescoes at Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries, medieval European carnivals and, closer to our times, the denizens of a Brechtian cabaret with its cross-dressed individuals and strippers. Taking her multicultural cast of characters from friends and acquaintances in New Zealand, the artist attracted a considerable amount of critical and popular media attention for this "hall of mirrors" experience.

For some viewers, the cross-dressed boy, the expectant bride, the Mäori transvestite, the full frontal male nudes with circus masks were too tawdry and provocative. Others, however, grasped how Webster (knowingly using the tools of high-class fashion shoots) was reclaiming the ritual gravity and moral bite of much "high art" figurative imagery to deal with uncomfortable truths. Juliana Engberg, for example, stated: 'In Webster's carnival, humans cross not only dresses, but genders and species, offering much to contemplate with regard to Lacan's idea of the construction of identity through the reflection of representation.' [15] Justin Paton wrote in Flash Art that 'Webster takes this shabby vaudeville and turns it into something moody, wry and defiantly festive: the gallery becomes an extended ballroom, and Webster's players step out in an end-of-the-century danse macabre.' [16] Like the title that American photographer Nan Goldin gave one of her solo exhibitions, 'I'll be Your Mirror', Webster's models position themselves directly in proportion to the spectator. [17] Under the guise of masquerade, they challenge, complicate and confuse conventional sex roles and notions of gender. When on display, these figures holding and adorned with a variety of props play with parody, irony and re-appropriation. In their various representations they return the viewer's look confidently, sometimes brazenly. Like Manet's courtesan (Olympia), the gaze from the pictorial plane makes no apology for the identity they project. As Webster says, 'Rather than merely spectacle, there is, I believe, the sense that these figures represent real people experiencing dream-like states, engaged in a complex game for which we don't know the rules.' [18] In order to reinforce this theatrical otherworldliness, Black Carnival was installed at Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane (1996) in a darkened 'and absolutely quiet room hung with a silently spinning mirror ball, the shadows from the mirror ball making long balloon shapes with strings to the floor'. [19]

Ritual

Webster followed with Can Can, a group of smaller photographs strapped to the wall with black tape. 'They came out of working with the tests and gaffer tape in the darkroom while producing Black Carnival … but whereas Black Carnival had put the viewer in the position of "object", with the work looking back at them, Can Can uses the device of the tape to make the viewer the voyeur, as though looking through a keyhole at a peep show.' [20] One associated image, Halo (1994), a three-quarter-length portrait of a man, is unnervingly powerful. On one level his spot-lit torso evokes virility, yet its truncated arms also suggest a cadaver; a reminder of mortality. Clad only in fishnet stockings, his head is flung back in an ecstatic gesture as though experiencing religious euphoria or the exquisiteness of forbidden sexual desire. For Webster, however, it is unquestionably a 'crucifixion image'. [21]

Douglas Wright, acclaimed choreographer and dancer, performed for Halo, and he was also instrumental in creating the psychological depth of Circus of Angels (1996-97), one of several series of large composite cibachromes Webster made following Black Carnival. Here, Wright observed that his role was 'an attempt to make a portrait of the soul … like being photographed from the inside'. [22]

Through these twelve works, Webster continued to convey the profundity of death and transcendence by directing and shooting Wright as a plunging Icarus: a tortured soul as much as an airborne angel. The man's extraordinary physical prowess was captured by the camera with minimal props; just one or two elements were used to underscore a sense of risk and pathos. In a couple of images he wears a set of large wings fastened to his back, while in another he sports an antique suspender belt and red lipstick. Some of the composite images include a trapeze tightrope on which the dancer's agility is put to the test; in others his embrace of death is underscored by the clasping of a skeleton to his chest, a prop Wright himself suggested using. These macabre encounters are the stuff of ecstasy as much as a tortured psyche; the longing and desire that is at the threshold of the visible world. They prove that photography can be simultaneously objective and subjective, a technology for capturing movement as much as a pose

held still, and one that can plumb the depths of shadow-play with its moments of radiance. As collaborators on the project, both Webster and Wright wrote the exhibition text: 'Circus of Angels focuses on the body; its struggles, its failures, all performed within the arena of gravity … falling is failing, balancing is equilibrium, flight is desire, hope, aspiration.' [23]

Provocations

With A Serious Doll House (1999), Webster photographed herself, hybridising personae such as those of housewife, nurse, mother and prostitute to intentionally meld together and confuse these stereotypical roles. [24] Depending upon where the series was shown, each comprised either 130 postcard-sized figures (at Galerie Focus in Cologne) or a selected group of full-scale "pin- up" figures (at Gow Langsford in Auckland). Here, Webster as "woman" is intentionally exaggerated in her costuming and sexually suggestive postures, reminding one of performance artist Carolee Schneemann, among other female provocateurs. These cibachromes are intentional assaults on societal mores of decency. Obviously self-observation is fraught with charges of narcissism, yet the artist uses herself 'not in a promotional sense but to up-end bourgeois pretensions and reveal that which is normally hidden or subdued'. [25] Webster produced enlarged fragments from the series and titled them The Busy Hands (2000), emphasising an even more grotesque alliance between perceived "femininity" and the gratification of carnal desires. Hence, she treads the thin line between eroticism and pornography and goes beyond the restraint of western society's codes of morality.

In-situ

Increasingly, Webster has concentrated on the fragment as a trigger for the spectator to make their own psycho- social investment in the image on display. For instance, in the series Quiet (2004), an embossed detail from a candlewick bedspread doubled with an emotionally distraught male presence invites speculation on masculine vulnerability. Some might read the series as an essay in remorse or the redemption of a rapist. Yet this is not Webster's intention. In his catalogue essay for the exhibition Quiet, art critic John Calcutt points out that the conventional notion of men being strong and women gentle is contradicted here. Webster reveals the 'very fragility of that masculinity which first appeared so unproblematic. It is not simply a question of the palpable sense of physical duress evident in these images of men … but, through physical training, they also treat themselves as objects.' [26] The models, including a manual labourer, a weight trainer and a professional boxer, were portrayed in a manner that was culturally at odds with what such "macho" activities normally evince. Cultural conditioning does not solely objectify women.

In the early 2000s, Webster, turned briefly to her young son Louis for a series of up-close portraits (called Fugue) which are endowed with incredible tenderness. The sleeping child shot close-up without props of any kind has an elegiac quality. Webster also started to abandon the black backdrop and her studio to return to location as a necessary device in the construction of meaning for her players. The resonance of place and how it is meditated upon became as important a stimulus for Webster's imagery as the body configured within it.

The series le Dossier followed in 2006. Intentionally erotic, Webster's partially or fully naked women are set in squalid interiors, repulsive and beguiling at the same time. Hung in groups of six, they sometimes take the form of a nurse figure outdoors juxtaposed with close-ups of china funerary roses, decayed in overgrown grounds. le Dossier is filmic; the performers act out a series of provocations. Three women (of whom the artist is one) engage in series of erotically charged actions that are highly troubling. There are hints of self mutilation, of eyes and mouths bound, of references to a house in the Loire Valley where sexual rituals (including violence) occurred. Violence and death are implicit in each frame. The photographs are not large, yet they mock the photo-documentary tradition through their artifice and psycho-sexuality.

le Dossier led to Blindfield, first shown as a multi-screen film installation at Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2007 and later edited as a single-screen projection for showing at short-film festivals in Athens and

Croatia (2009). Here, Webster alludes to the draconian practices for "unresponsive" mental patients in the past (Christine references her own grandmother who was subjected to the treatment). For many viewers this enacting of woman as hysteric or in a state of extreme emotional distress is unpalatable. It may surprise some to know that the controversial electroconvulsive theory procedure is still practiced (even though we remember that Janet Frame, New Zealand's most distinguished woman novelist of last century, was spared such treatment by an enlightened doctor). In this chilling work, Webster can be seen to be moving away from investigations of gender and sexuality to the nature of madness; arguably a state of ultimate transgression and freedom. Yet it is also overwhelmingly subject to what Foucault describes as '[d]isciplinary power as exercised directly on the body, not necessarily through acts of violence but violation – particularly surveillance and examination'. [27] What is hidden from the public gaze and now revealed as though in "real time", is one of the most compelling reasons why Webster has turned to making short films.

Webster has now returned decidedly to the present, questioning sexual orientation and lifestyles through filmed interviews in a recent project titled Vigil (2008). Here, alienation and the bizarre are matter-of-factually disclosed through film and voices transmitted through earphones, exploring the complexity of human desire, socially sanctioned or denigrated. It is each subject's vulnerability combined with resigned self-acceptance that is marked, and the faith in Webster to empathetically report which distinguishes this work from mere journalistic sensationalism. In Webster's most recent video work, Rapport (2010), she juxtaposes random telephone and webcam sex with filmed exchanges between long-distance partners, examining how, in a world where travel and separation are commonplace, technology can be a tool to satisfy longing. As in all the artist's projects, the terrain of "clear-obscure" is articulated to intentionally defy certainty and external pressures, to roam in a symbolic realm or one which suspends judgment. [28]Webster's provocations are not mere sensationalist statements; they are investigations into deep terrains of the human psyche and how it manifests through play, role-reversal and dramatic re-imaginings. Not only is the artist herself implicated in this process, but so too are each of us, as viewers of this exhibition.

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Endnotes

1. Anne Marsh, The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire, Macmillan, Melbourne, 2003. ?
2. Arguably the most significant early study of gender, difference and power (among other issues) is Brian Wallis (ed.), Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984. The essays by Laura Mulvey and Kate Linker are particularly apposite. ?
3. See Paul Taylor, 'Australian New Wave and the "second degree"', Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980, Art & Text, Melbourne, 1984. ?
4. Christine Webster in Bruce Morrison's film documentary Profiles: Christine Webster, TVNZ, 2005. ?
5. Kathy Myers in her essay 'Pasting over the cracks' states that 1983 'was a year in which numerous titles on Desire were on the presses'. Desire , ICA documents I, London, 1984. ?
6. Alexis Hunter, quoted in Trish Clark and Wystan Curnow (eds), Pleasures and Dangers: Artists of the '90s, Longman Paul, Auckland, 1991. All eight artists in this book, including Webster, were contemporary New Zealand- born women artists who Clark and Curnow selected because they took 'chances with the future, rather than adding its weight to the past'. ?
7. Webster in Profiles: Christine Webster. ?
8. Elizabeth Eastmond,'Gender confusion and general insubordination: some themes in recent work by Christine Webster', Christine Webster [exhibition catalogue], Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1989. ?
9. Webster revealed aspects of her life as well as practice in Profiles: Christine Webster. ?
10 Ibid. ?
11. Ibid. ?
12. Elizabeth Caughey, 'Christine Webster', Contemporary New Zealand Art, vol. 4, David Bateman & John Gow, 2005. ?
13. Webster in conversation with Shirley and Roger Horrocks, Clark and Curnow, op. cit. ?
14. Webster, email correspondence with the author, 16 July 2009. ?
15. Juliana Engberg, 'The museum of selves', Persona Cognita [exhibition catalogue], Museum of Modern Art at Heidi, Melbourne, 1994. ?
16. Justin Paton, review of Black Carnival at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Flash Art News, June 1994. ?
17. Refer to Kaja Silverman in conversation with Martina Pachmanova, 'The world wants your desire' in a special issue on Desire and the Gaze, n.paradoxa, vol. 6, 2000. ?
18. Webster, unpublished artist's statement on Black Carnival, 1992. ?
19. Webster, email correspondence with the author, 16 July 2009. ?
20. Webster, email correspondence with the author, 20 January 2007. ?
21. Webster, email correspondence with the author, 16 July 2009. ?
22. Douglas Wright, quoted in the exhibition brochure for Circus of Angels, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, 1996. ?
23. Ibid. See also the article by Sarah Gibson, 'Circus of Angels: recent work by Christine Webster', Art New Zealand, no.83, Winter 1997. ?
24. Refer to the artist's website: http://www.christinewebster.co.uk. ?
25. Webster, email correspondence with the author, 16 July 2009. ?
26. John Calcutt, 'Muscled out', Quiet [exhibition catalogue], Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, 2004. ?
27. See Laura Earley, 'Power games: Christine Webster's Blindfield', Blindfield [exhibition catalogue], Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2007. ?
28. See Olivier Zahm, 'Fatal Song', Clark and Curnow, op. cit. ?