

Anne Ferran

Carnal Knowledge, 1984

13 gelatin silver prints
64.0 x 80.5cm (frame)

The faces in the photographs are those of my daughter and her friends. It helps to know this. There are "good" reasons (personal, pragmatic, strategic) *not* to make maternal feelings a subject of art practice. But there are benefits: it makes for one kind of connection between personal experience and other, more public, orders of knowledge. And it turns out that the maternal is not an ordinary site but a potentially explosive one. It's no accident that the Madonna and Child is, like the nude, one of the most highly conventionalized of all representations: the maternal held in check so firmly that it can't break out and overflow its (imposed) boundaries.

The title *Carnal Knowledge* is meant to suggest transgression. It doesn't want to know about the sanitation scheme that goes by the name of Motherhood. It wants to suggest both the sexual body and knowledge, in one breath, because to do so is to call up simultaneously other discourses (medical, educational, legal) around sexuality and the female body in particular. The strategy is to elude that fixity, that certainty, that always contains the representation* of woman.

The text that accompanies the images is an account of the myth of the blinding of Tiresias but in it there is a shift of attention away from the proper climax of the story and the problem of sight/seeing to another (here unresolved) question: the mystery of Juno's indignation. By making this shift the text means to alert the reader to a possibility of (subversive) reinterpretation. The images and text don't read off one another literally: the images don't illustrate the text and the text does not explain the imagery, except in the most indirect way.

*In relation to representation . . . the photographs are not meant as representations, which is not to say that they are "abstract", but rather that they are not derived from a physical or cultural reality. They are fictional, made-up, conditional, maybe impossible.

A statement by Anne Ferran from the Australian Perspecta '85 catalogue, Art Gallery of NSW, 1985, p91.

Anne Ferran's photographic series, *Carnal Knowledge* offers all the pleasures hinted by its title. Larger than life faces of 'sleeping' girls (singly, in pairs and threesomes) are etched over textured stone, enveloped in a fog of soft, mid-grey tones. A dream of young flesh and weathered stone mesh states of death and sleep.

These images of girls are subtly yet thoroughly sexualised. The title itself, *Carnal Knowledge* endows these images with a promise of truth and pleasure; as if they speak, like an oracle, something of their pleasure, and of women's sex. They are further endowed with the more specific and 'shocking' pleasures relating to adolescent sexuality (a problem of discovery, knowledge, legal constraints).....

Another important problem *Carnal Knowledge* poses is that of an effective relation between photos and text. How to use words with images so as not to hinder possibilities and responses by imposing a crude or literal harness? There is clearly no general rule; relations between text and images need to be formed in relation to definite problematics. In raising the question of female/maternal desire, Ferran ensures that her photographs aren't simply left as 'givens', as simply 'beautiful' or 'evocative'. To suggest emotional and erotic responses is one thing, however, as Ferran points out, 'maternal desire' is too easily interpreted in the familiar 'personal confession' mode.

The text provides directions for reading this 'space to be traversed'. Yet the title and the story itself are cast so that the significance of the images aren't insisted upon. There is a strategic silence in the gap between title, text and images. We are left with an ultimate silence regarding 'hidden knowledge' of female sexual identity. As Ferran's text seems to indicate, the very promise of 'liberating knowledge' is but part of 'the incitement to discourse, rather than silence, on

sex' which characterises our culture.

Excerpt from Catriona Moore's review of *Carnal Knowledge* in *Art-Network* 15, Autumn 1985, p51.

Carnal Knowledge is 'captioned' with a piece of written text which is itself an image inscribed on a stone slab by the photographic process:

Ovid tells the story of Jupiter, mellowed by deep draughts of nectar, teasing Juno:

"Of course you women get far more pleasure out of love than men do".

Juno denies this is true and the opinion of Tiresias is sought in settling the matter, since he has experienced love both as a man and a woman. He confirms what Jupiter has said, whereupon Juno becomes very indignant and condemns the judge to eternal blindness – which Jupiter, unable to reverse, modifies by granting Tiresias the power to know the future . . .

The space which has to be traversed – that of language, desire, the body and knowledge – is that same risky terrain where Tiresias, the seer, came to a state of knowledge in blindness.

So, a set of immediately recognisable contemporary concerns is given a past, a place in a certain order of things, an order which is here being challenged.

Carnal Knowledge deploys a number of problematic signs – youth, beauty, femininity – which become distanced by the photographic, opening up the possibility of rethinking that most monotonous of concerns – the look or the gaze.

In the dreams of a 'new language of desire' it is somehow imagined that the eyes themselves have a gender specificity, but here there is a recognition that even if it is accepted that the gaze is masculine this does not necessarily displace woman from the picture.

Firstly, there is the terrifying spectre of maternal sexual desire, that which cannot be spoken if the 'order of the familial' is to be maintained, and secondly woman's heterosexual desire, which is spoken in the depiction of femininity . . .

At the same time *Carnal Knowledge* makes it possible to suggest that there are scenarios in which the so-called 'male spectator' does not enter the picture, scenarios which perhaps identify the source of the real problem of woman such that it is no longer a question of woman's difference but rather her total indifference.

Excerpt from Helen Grace's review of *Carnal Knowledge* in *Photofile*, Spring 1985, p6-7.

I think the reason why *Carnal Knowledge* has attracted attention, the main reason anyway, is that it lends itself to a particular debate which is the one around the question of female sexuality and the associated problems with



Anne Ferran, *Untitled*, 1984
(from *Carnal Knowledge*)
gelatin silver print, 40.2 x 60.0cm (image)

representing the female body. I don't think this is a bad thing because the debates are ones that interest me too and I'd like to think my work could contribute to that. But that's not to say that it has any answers. To start with it can be read in more than one way, even in this rather specialised context. All I've actually tried to do in this work is to give it a critical edge while at the same time holding on to the aesthetic pleasure of the imagery.

Excerpt from Anne Ferran's lecture 'Photography and some more esoteric knowledges', 1986, p6.

Each seductive cluster of adolescent faces in *Carnal Knowledge* defies our Cartesian scrutiny, refusing anything but the most diffuse of penetrations beyond their not-quite-transparent film of weathered stone. They laugh silently at our frustrated attempt to capture their specificity, like so many mermaids glimpsed at the bottom of a rippling impenetrable sea.

This tactical refusal of our surveillance, of our demand to know, represents a refusal of another dimension. For knowledge is produced by the activities of power and in this case, a case explicitly centred on female sexual identity, that power is informed by the interests of patriarchy. The 'indifference' of Ferran's girls suggests the possibility not so much of escape as of an active, effective resistance to this power-knowledge-patriarchy nexus.

Excerpt from Geoffrey Batchen's review of the *Australian Perspecta '85* exhibition, in *Photofile*, Summer 1985, p11.

Part of *Carnal Knowledge* was a text which was intended to open up certain ways of looking at the photographs and to exclude others. It had a secondary effect as well which was to help set up a consensus of critical response that the work was 'subversive' and 'disruptive' of conventional modes of representation. I've even said these things myself in a published statement on that work. Afterwards I began to feel that this kind of response (which I had in fact orchestrated) was an over-estimation of the capacity of the work. It was asking too much of it.

Excerpt from a statement by Anne Ferran in her *Scenes on the Death of Nature* exhibition catalogue, *The Performance Space*, Sydney, 1986.

Ferran (one senses, one hopes) would be just as grateful, or more grateful, for the speculation which her work (more than other, in some respects similar, work) could prompt, as for the kind of review which tried to attend dutifully and descriptively to her work.

Excerpt from Adrian Martin's review of *Scenes on the Death of Nature* in *Photofile*, Summer 1986, p11.



Anne Ferran, *Untitled*, 1984
(from *Carnal Knowledge*)
gelatin silver print, 39.5 x 58.5cm (image)