

Art from Australia

E I G H T
C O N T E M P O R A R Y
V I E W S

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IMANTS TILLERS

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Curator: Alison Carroll

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Anne Ferran

Anne Ferran: Scenes and Scenarios

BY
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What are viewers to make of
Scenes on the Death of Nature?
The title of Anne Ferran's
photographs is as tantalising, and

as open to a variety of readings, as the work itself. Ferran is one of a number of Australian photographers who have in recent years produced work of a scale and inventiveness to rival that produced by contemporary painters. This new photography revels in artifice and an overt theatricality, an approach designed to cast doubt on the truth-value which the medium of photography has always implicitly promised to deliver. As a consequence, the border between fiction and reality is shown to be a porous and uncertain one. However this is not a photography that is only about its own attributes. Although this type of work often makes direct and indirect references to other famous photographs, it also eclectically engages with the history of painting, sculpture and cinema, as well as the visual culture of everyday life. This is an interest that is common to a wide spectrum of contemporary art work in Australia, whatever the medium being used. What all such practices seem to share is a desire to turn representation inside out, to produce images that look out at the world and in on themselves at one and the same time.

Certain elements of these general attributes can be discerned in Ferran's *Scenes* and also in her earlier photographic work, notably the series of thirteen prints entitled *Carnal Knowledge*. First shown in 1984, this series attracted considerable critical attention in Australia, mostly focused on its capacity to comment on traditional representations of femininity. Conjuring memories of the work of Pre-Raphaelite photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, *Carnal Knowledge* features a number of seductive clusters of adolescent female faces overlaid with a translucent film of weathered stone. Without adhering to any discernible narrative, Ferran's girls appear to exist in their own internal world, a world that is glimpsed from afar but which we somehow cannot quite penetrate. When these girls do choose to meet our eye it is only to laugh silently at our frustrated efforts to capture the specifics of their identity, like so many beckoning mermaids at the

bottom of a rippling impenetrable sea. In a catalogue statement about this series, Ferran touches on a number of its most salient, and also its most troubling, features.

'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* in 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.'

A similar strategy of elusion and knife-edged ambivalence seems to inform the production of the five photographs that make up the complete *Scenes on the Death of Nature*. Once again it is Ferran's daughter and her friends who are placed at centre stage, confronting us with a presence as large as life itself. Dressed on this occasion in classical costume, they are arranged in languidly inter-twined groups in the style of a high-relief sculptural frieze. In the case of the diptych (*Scenes I and II*), one of the girls can be identified in both panels. However there is no immediately apparent narrative that links one panel with the next, nor do the girls appear to be playing particular roles other than those of generic 'classical' figures. For the artist behind the camera, what seemed to matter more than individual character or storyline was the careful distribution of elements (formal and rhetorical) across the adjoining surfaces.

It is clear that this distribution has been self-consciously orchestrated by Ferran to suit the constraints of classical taste. The costumes, lighting, proportions, emotional tone and the general demeanour of the figures all obey the strictures of this most familiar of Western aesthetics. On one level



Anne Ferran, *Untitled from 'Carnal Knowledge'*, 1984

these photographs therefore speak of a ready compliance with authority and tradition. And yet there is also a disturbing lassitude about the arrangement of these figures, a wilful anarchy about the relationship of one to the next that seems to obey individual desire more than noble precedent. If these photographs have adopted the classical tradition, it is not to effect a simple repetition but in order to rework the grammar of this tradition from the inside.

A memory of the work of Julia Margaret Cameron and Lady Hawarden from the 1860s and 1870s continues to pervade these more recent photographs. We might therefore look for the sources of Ferran's sculptural references not only in the forms of ancient Greece or Rome, but also, and perhaps more insistently, in the congealed neoclassical aesthetic of late Victorian public monuments. Drawing directly on the Elgin Marbles and other spoils of British empire building, sculptors of the late nineteenth century were able to utilize a vocabulary that was already familiar to their audience. Contemporary male heroes and obscure female mythological figures were combined to give imperial power an historical lineage and a facade of civilising benevolence. Living in what was one of the colonial outposts of the British empire, Ferran has used this public vocabulary to suit her own ends. Muting its confident acclamations with small ironies and ambiguities, she has sought to undermine, and perhaps even to transform, its residual political implications.

In an interview about the making of *Scenes*, Ferran has allied her strategic flirtation with neoclassicism to a critical reading of feminism and the archetypes of femininity.

'It ought to be acknowledged that the work does derive from theoretical concerns, particularly debates from the history of feminism. But I am not interested in trying to depict anything that could be said to be a truth

about femininity. I am concerned with the representation of notions on femininity as they are arranged in systems in such as religious iconography, mythology and classical aesthetics.

The idea was *not to claim* any power of resistance for the images but to go the other way, to make them overtly

passive and unresistant and to see what effects that would have. One of the problems to be dealt with in the current work is whether these pictures are literally passive and compliant or whether they are (instead/also) somehow *about* passivity and compliance. Whether they are exactly what they pretend to be or something else as well.'

Ferran's comment suggests something of the finely-tuned danger that underlies the calculated beauty of this work. At first glance the girls in these photographs would seem to unproblematically reproduce a masculine ideal of femininity, Vestal Virgins transported from a bygone age (when, incidentally, such women held a certain power over the affairs of men). And yet the process of photography also works here to mercilessly reveal the flaws of their adolescent skin and home-made costumes, offering these ideal figures to the viewer as both palpable and contemporary. They hover disconcertingly somewhere between an intimate accessibility and a haughty disdain. In *Scenes I and II*, for example, their expressionless faces studiously avoid our gaze in a manner reminiscent of funeral guests sharing a well-rehearsed grief. Their flowing hair, the torpor of their bodies (leading, in the case of one figure, to a total collapse), the tender supportive touches of hand and arm: each of these signs hints at a restrained outpouring of feminine emotion on the edge of exceeding conventional codes. The suggestion of mourning is further reinforced by the flat, unresponsive, almost sombre, surface of each print. Roland Barthes has spoken of pleasure as something produced through the loss of preconceived identity; here that loss, expressed as a protracted and savoured melancholy, could conceivably involve the termination of an existing but doomed closeness between mother and daughter.

In this context, *Scenes V* takes on particularly

disturbing connotations. What might at first have been thought of as a sexual, almost post-coital abandon on the part of one of the two figures, becomes instead the distorted arching of a painful, seemingly hysterical demise. This girl's eyes stare out blindly towards us, while her companion's look upward as if into an inner space. Always in Ferran's work we are faced with this ambivalent space of the in-between, a dynamic spacing of sex and death, pleasure and pain, reason and intuition, ideal and real, heroicism and intimacy, ancient and modern, classical and contemporary. It is the viewer who is left to fill this void with productive speculations, it is we who are required to take up a position and make a critical judgement.

A similar uncertainty characterises the co-ordinates of space and time which these photographs inhabit. The *Scenes* are shallow in depth (again echoing the work of the Pre-Raphaelites) but seem to extend in all directions beyond the picture frame, even forward into our own viewing space. So too with their articulation of time. Most traditional photographs appear as a single, vertical slice cut through a horizontal passage of time and motion, a passage lived in the past. The photograph is read as a freeze-frame of both historical and real time, always presenting a dead version of that which once lived, a *nature morte* or still life. *Scenes* represents a partial thaw in photography's cryogenic inclinations. Historical time has been compressed into the present even as the normal photo-freeze is momentarily reversed. What were once static stone figures can here be coaxed by the mind's eye into a glacial animation. One is encouraged to imagine a shiver, an almost imperceptible trembling across the surface of these photographs, as in a living breathing *tableau vivant*. The time-frame occupied by these figures is therefore infused with life as much as with death; their state of being is irrevocably tied to the viewing experience of the person standing before them in silent contemplation.

My brief traversal of Ferran's photographs has suggested a number of possible identities for the terminal 'nature' of her title – the nature of photography, the nature of a certain representation of femininity, the nature of photographic time and space, the nature of motherhood, and so on. However it has to be recognised that the corollary of death is always birth, just as any end necessarily signals a new beginning. In similar vein, Ferran's work lends itself to provocation and endless conjecture rather than to definitive summary. In *Scenes on the Death of Nature*

she has deftly sketched the outlines of a big picture, but in the final analysis has left we viewers with the daunting challenge of filling its frame.

Anne Ferran

born 1949, Sydney, where she lives and works.

Education:

University of Sydney; Mitchell College of Advanced Education; Sydney College of the Arts

Qualifications:

B.A., Dip.Ed., B.A. (Visual Arts), PG Dip. (Visual Arts)

Individual Exhibitions:

- 1984 Performance Space Gallery, Sydney
- 1986 Performance Space Gallery, Sydney
- 1987 Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
- 1988 Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris
- 1989 Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
Street Level, Penrith
Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide
Linden Gallery, Melbourne
Canberra School of Art Gallery, Canberra
- 1990 Plug-In Gallery, Winnipeg
Women in Focus, Vancouver

Selected Group Exhibitions:

- 1985 *Australian Perspecta* Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1986 *Gods, Demi-gods and Demi-demi-gods* Developed Image Gallery, Adelaide
- 1987 *Borderlines* Australian Regional Galleries
Deception (with Elizabeth Day, Melody Cruickshank, Mandy Smith) First Draft, Sydney
- 1988 *Australian Photography: the 1980s* Australian National Gallery, Canberra and other venues
- 1989 *Shifting Focus* Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol & Serpentine Gallery, London
New Acquisitions, New Work, New Directions International Museum of Photography, New York
- 1990 *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Selected Bibliography:

- Catriona Moore 'Anne Ferran: "Carnal Knowledge"' *Art Network* Autumn, 1985
- Helen Grace 'The Repetition of Difference' *Photofile* Spring, 1985
- Geoffrey Batchen 'Pluralism Rules! O.K.?' *Photofile* Summer, 1985
- Catriona Moore 'Dangerous Liaisons' *Afterimage* September, 1986
- Ross Gibson & Anne Ferran, interview *Scenes on the Death of Nature* catalogue, September, 1986
- Adrian Martin 'Immortal Stories' *Photofile* Summer, 1986
- Denise Robinson 'Impure Solutions' *Art & Text* 26, 1987
- Anne Ferran, Artist's statement *Australian Photography: the 1980s* Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1988
- Anne MacDonald 'Anne Ferran: I am the Rehearsal Master'

Photofile Autumn, 1989

Linda Marie Walker 'This is the Hour of Lead' *Broadsheet*, 18, 2, June, 1989

Carole Hampshire 'Tarantella' I 9, Winter, 1989

Ken Bolton 'Adelaide Commentary' *Otis Rush* 5, 1990

Anne Ferran 'Maladie' *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 1990

Collections:

Australian National Gallery, Canberra; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Monash University, Melbourne; Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; International Museum of Photography, New York.

Awards:

1985 Visual Arts Board, Australia Council, project grant

1986 Sydney College of the Arts Postgraduate Scholarship

Visual Arts Board, Australia Council, travel grant

1987-88 Power Studio, Cite Internationale des Arts, Paris

1989 Visual Arts/Craft Board, Australia Council, project grant

Bibliography by the Artist:

'Imaging photographic work by Suzi Coyle' *Photofile* Spring, 1986

'In Full View critique' *Photofile* Autumn, 1987

'Choices' catalogue essay for *Feminist Narratives*, George Paton Gallery, Melbourne, June 1987

'C'est moi le repetiteur' *Photofile* Winter, 1988



Anne Ferran, *Scenes on the Death of Nature V*, 1986

Gelatin silver photograph, 114 x 173 cms