

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Millner, Jacqueline.

Title: Conceptual beauty: perspectives on Australian contemporary art / Jacqueline Millner.

ISBN: 9781920781415 (pbk.)

Notes: Bibliography.

Subjects: Art, Modern--21st century--Australia.

Art, Australian--21st century.

Art and society--Australia.

Other Authors/Contributors: Artspace Visual Art Centre.

Dewey Number: 708.994

Editor: Blair French

Design: Ricardo Felipe

Image processing: Spitting Image

Printing: Peachy Print

Published by Artspace Visual Arts Centre Ltd, Sydney

© 2010 The author, artists and Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Ltd. This publication is copyright. Except in the context of research, study, criticism, or review, or as otherwise permitted by the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission.

Artspace Visual Arts Centre

43-51 Cowper Wharf Rd

Woolloomooloo NSW 2011

Sydney Australia

T +61 2 9356 0555 F +61 2 9368 1705

artspace@artspace.org.au

www.artspace.org.au

Artspace is a member of CAOs (Contemporary Art Organisations of Australia).

Artspace is a member of Res Artis (International Association of Residential Art Centres).

Artspace is supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments.

Artspace is assisted by the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW and the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

**ARTSPACE**

SYDNEY WWW.ARTSPACE.ORG.AU



## Barbara Campbell: A body of/at work

2002

Flesh winnow...I love the way that phrase rolls off my tongue. It's languorous, sensual, and playfully suggestive while also connoting a certain violence. Just as, of course, Marcel Duchamp would have demanded: the title of Barbara Campbell's performance retrospective<sup>1</sup> is after all in direct dialogue with the French prankster's *Fresh Widow* (1920), a delightful proto-conceptual object comprising a French window, whose panes had been fitted with black leather with instructions that they be polished every day...

Campbell's work is full of subtle wit and intellectual play, just like that of Duchamp from whom she continues to derive inspiration. Her performances are carefully orchestrated debates with art history, contemporary culture, and gender politics. At the same time, they are beautifully wrought tableaux vivants, each element chosen for maximum visual effect and coherence.

Take *The Midday Movie and the History of Australian Painting* (2002), performed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) amongst, naturally, the gallery's Australian collection—not the icons of Australian identity, but some 'lesser' pieces from the 1920s and 1930s portraying both family scenes and fantasy figures. The viewer enters this sun-filtered room to find the artist outstretched on the floor, a large, lopsided wicker basket masking her face, a remote control in her hand. The white crochet of her dress melds seamlessly with the weave of the basket, catching the white of small marble sculptures on white plinths. Suddenly, the reverential quiet of the art gallery is ruptured by the drone of an American movie on television. The viewer is perplexed, torn between intensely watching the artist for signs of 'performance' and the seduction of the midday movie that will remain annoying background noise unless deigned with full attention. Yet as the channel is about to go to a commercial break, the artist switches the remote to 'mute', and begins a muffled monologue that the viewer must strain to catch. Perfectly timed to begin and conclude in synch with the commercial break, the monologue is a history of iconic moments in Australian art, delivered with all the measured cadences and inflections—and titbits of personal anecdote—that are the stock in trade of the professional tour

guide. As soon as the commercial break/art history tour is over, the artist switches back to the next instalment of the midday movie, and again the viewer is thrown into conundrum: 'Should I watch and enjoy?' 'Shouldn't I be exercising my higher faculties here, in the midst of fine art, and not giving over to trash television?' 'What if I miss something?'

This is a well-measured performance, economic in its elements, but fertile in its provocation of ideas and emotions. The key response is a preternatural awareness of time: the time in our everyday lives that we spend walking through a gallery, pondering the meaning of art, as against the time we sit transfixed in front of 'The Box'; our changing perception of the rate of time's passing depending on our level of intellectual activity and emotional engagement; the carefully manipulated duration of time-based media built as it is upon marketers' consensus about the average attention span of twenty-first century Westerners; the parcelling up of time over which we have little or no control. This evocation of a hierarchy of time also sets us thinking about that familiar cultural hierarchy that postmodernism claims to have disturbed, but that remains even as 'High Art' incorporates elements of popular entertainment and mass media to hold its viewers' attention. This irony is well handled in Campbell's work; her performances betray a sophisticated awareness of the Catch-22 of contemporary art while affirming the importance of the artist still attempting to claim a position of critique and intellectual provocation. The high/low culture divide is also evoked in the performed art history monologues, which are pitched to a general audience in the tradition of popular understandings of art history as the story of individuals' lives, of their talent and genius. Given the critical tradition from which Campbell's practice emanates, this has a comic effect as much as causing us to ponder the irony inherent in contextualising contemporary art for a general audience.

Art history as a discourse and spectatorship are also key elements of *Inflorescent* (1999–2000) (see illus. 10). As in many of Campbell's works, site is essential in this performance. Here, the artist performed in Sydney University's Macleay Museum, a small, wood-panelled, vitrine-lined nineteenth century den that houses one of the most significant natural history collections in Australia. The viewer must walk past taxidermic specimens of Australian wildlife, some extinct, and indigenous artefacts, before arriving at a dimly lit, curtained chamber. Already, therefore, what we are to see is

contextualised as exotic, rare, historically significant if perhaps also archaic. Gradually it becomes apparent that the artist is arranged, *Olympia*-style, on a chaise longue, languorously fanning her naked body, the only light emanating from fluorescent markings on her skin which ebb and flow according to the subtle waving of the fan. These markings could be tattoos, or even the veins pulsating through the artist's body. Their frond-like arabesques and curves cause the artist's body to resemble variegated leaves, so that the human comes in line with the vegetal in a kind of elemental sensuality. Anais Nin, in her notorious soft-porn stories *The Delta of Venus* (1978), once described one of her most sexually attuned heroines as 'purely a plant'.

As in *The Midday Movie...* (2002) Campbell compels us to intensely scrutinise her, so that in that fixed moment of regard questions arise that take us outside the spectacle to our position as spectators, as voyeurs, as consumers of art. Similarly we become aware of the way our looking is prescribed by different conventions, of how so much of what we 'see' is actually not so much observation as confirmation of prior, assumed beliefs. This is particularly the case, Campbell reminds us, with a woman's body, overexposed and overused in contemporary consumer culture as much as in the hallowed halls of 'Great Art' for its connotative value. Campbell's incarnation of these representational conventions, her making flesh of the 'word', brings them into sharp focus. Her admiration of her own body-text and her direct gaze at the spectators, as well as her very real-time presence, force a re-positioning of conventional practices of looking.

Also in the Macleay Museum is video documentation of the performance *Cloche* (1999). Campbell is shot from the waist up against a black background, wearing a cream silk negligee, methodically clipping her head free of a white, beaded, skull-hugging cap. The soundtrack features the crisp tones of scissors snipping hair. The artist's face is intent as she concentrates on the labour-intensive task of cutting off her own hair, painstakingly slowly, through the 'crawl-space' between the cap and her scalp to which it has been glued. The act has the air of self-mutilation, or even self-sacrifice—reminiscent of de Maupassant's heroine who cut off her hair to buy her lover a gift—an act practiced with astounding restraint and sang froid. Campbell's 'crowning glory' eventually falls in a damaged clump in her lap, the violent and fetishistic sexuality of disembodied hair cupped by the delicate purity of the beaded cap.

The retrospective *Flesh Winnow* is an opportunity to consolidate a body of work that by its very nature as performance art has remained diffuse and under-documented. This intensive presentation of works made over a period of years is very useful for tracing the lines of research and investigation in Campbell's oeuvre, and provides a valuable testament to one of Australia's most important contemporary artists.