

**being drawn**  
**barbara campbell's inflorescent**

Macleay Museum, University of Sydney  
The Cube, Canberra Contemporary Art Space

*'Inflorescence.* 1. The mode in which the flowers of a plant are arranged in relation to the axis and to each other... 2. The process of coming into flower.'<sup>1</sup>

The tradition of the nude is a history of bodies, surfaces, seeing and being seen. Barbara Campbell's recent performance *Inflorescent* addresses these relations by drawing in the tradition of the nude. Borrowing from its repertoire of pose and gesture, Campbell reclines on a *chaise longue* in a dimly lit space, gently fanning herself—the genre has been revived and transfigured. As the fan moves across the body its contours and phosphorescent surface inscriptions alternately emerge and recede. The markings are fine tracings of cycads, those unique ancient species valued as decorative, ornamental conservatory plants.

The first siting of the performance was in a crevice between two display cases at Sydney University's Macleay Museum. Campbell was a curious temporary exhibit amongst the ethnographic collections. The performance could be viewed directly, intimately, or at a remove through a video monitor trained on the space. A yellowing effect on the screen registered Campbell's figure strangely, lending it the patina of a varnished canvas. This distancing effect was interrupted by viewers moving in and out of the camera's trajectory. Who were the objects of curiosity here?

The second siting was in the Cube at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space. This time distancing was created by the surface of the window through which one looked to apprehend the performance. The window was walling us out, its diminutive size reinforcing the sense of self-consciously occupying the viewing space with one's fellow spectators. Through the dim light in the walkway outside the Cube we saw ourselves drawn as shadowy figures on the surface of the glass and were aware that we were drawn for Barbara.

Campbell's performance occupied time in a number of distinctive ways. At one moment there was a confrontation with the viewer, as the artist's insistent stare outwards was accompanied by uncanny facial transfigurations, as the fan revealed what appeared to be scarifications. Beware! In its Australian variant, the cycad is poisonous, causing partial paralysis and swelling of the eyes. At another moment, the viewer witnessed Campbell's absorption in self-discovery. As she looked down at her body, moving the fan gently across its surface, it was as if she were discovering for herself these delicate markings and this capacity for body writing—this was not iconoclasm, instead quiet self-possession.

Through *Inflorescent*, Campbell continues in intriguing new ways to investigate what has been a preoccupation in her work over recent years. Through a beguiling mix of historical and contemporary references, Campbell challenges us to rethink how the feminine body is inscribed, performed and desired.

mary roberts

1. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, volume 1, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973, p.1069.