

ANN STEPHEN

Laura Ginters and  
Barbara Campbell (eds),  
*Flesh Winnow: Barbara Campbell*

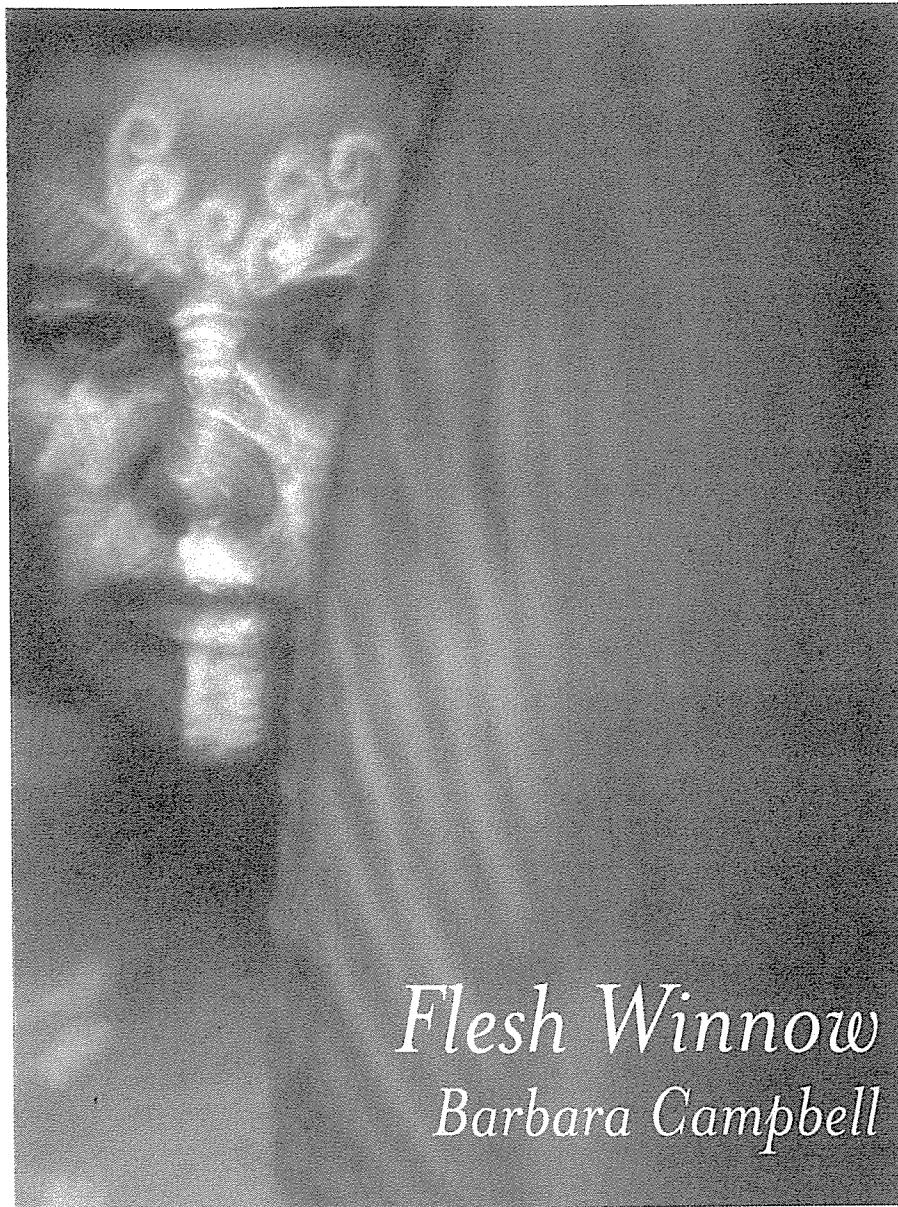
Power Publications, 2002  
47 pp RRP \$10.95

Barbara Campbell's *Flesh Winnow* refers in a precise and allusive way to several things. It links six recent performance works that Campbell represented late last year in Sydney under the auspices of the Department of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney. The event was timed to coincide with the publication of an elegant set of illustrated essays also titled *Flesh Winnow*. In her fine introduction Sarah Miller recalls how the title plays on Duchamp's post-war work, *Fresh Widow*, which is also a pun. She explains:

Duchamp replaced panes of glass with black leather. An instruction accompanies the work that the panes 'should be shined everyday like shoes'. It is a work about mourning, an emotionally precise evocation of those experiences that can neither be contained nor explained, but only experienced, or evoked.

Campbell's appropriation is worthy of Mrs Malaprop, a bending and blending of words and meanings – reverberating through the pairs, recapitulating a historical sequence from *French Window / Fresh Widow / Flesh Winnow*. *Flesh* embodies the senses and is the performer's metier. *Winnow* both names a tool and an act. The *winnow* is a fan of palm leaves and describes the act of fanning that separates chaff from grain. The front cover of this book reproduces Campbell's painted face from the performance *Inflorescent* 1999, simultaneously half-exposed and half-concealed by a fan. The final image in the book, and the only one from 2002, returns to a literal French window as the artist is represented as the *Black widow in the factory*. She is caught in a series of multiple exposures against the panes of a large curtained glass door, the after images of her limbs perform the terrible stilled dance of a Shiva figure. The book is dedicated to Barbara's husband, the artist Neil Roberts, whose accidental death earlier that year cast a shadow across the book, and there is no escaping her pain. The black and white photograph by Imogen Van Sebille is the most recent of Campbell's ongoing series of self-portraits sent through the mail as postcards, in a project that spans two decades.

The six performance pieces from 1997 to 2001 were mostly re-enacted within the grounds of the University of Sydney, using the academy as an extended stage across which to work. Two performances, *Cloche* and



## Flesh Winnow Barbara Campbell

*Inflorescent*, inhabited the purpose built cathedral of colonial natural history, the Macleay Museum. Clare Grant's essay on *Cloche* conveys the tense and mesmerising relation between spectator and performer in that one-off act:

As the cutter cuts, the watcher catches the tilt of the head ... She's looking at the monitor, not at the camera, so her attention is deflected from the viewer ... She obviously can't have done this before so it becomes clear we are possibly seeing actions or struggles she mightn't have been able to predict.

The documentation and a creamy white 1920s cap lined with hair hangs like a scalp in the nineteenth century arcade of museum vitrines, uncannily resembling the surrounding anthropological trophies. Such connotations also permeated *Inflorescent*, Campbell's performance as an odalisque. Its title refers to the apparitions that momentarily play across her flesh as phantom after-images of cycads, blossoming in the shade as she winnows a fan. Mary

Roberts' splendid essay, which reads the work through the discourse of the neo-classical nude, suggests that it is these phosphorescent markings that unsettle the conventional distinctions between the roles of model, artist and spectator. She writes:

Campbell is also a viewer, witnessing the emergence of the body markings being drawn as she moves the fan across her torso ...

In the half-light, the full view of her body is obscured as our attention is focused instead on the curious body markings that appear part by part. As the fan moves, these isolated patternings become sites of fascination, and there is an intensification of the view of these part drawings. Focusing on the part, the whole recedes. Our vision is interrupted as we are diverted by the desire to grasp the details that present themselves only momentarily before receding from view. They distract and divert our gaze, refusing our mastery of the field of vision.

There is in all of Barbara Campbell's performances a most unlikely marriage of modernism and magic, her bag of *trompe l'oeil* tricks is undercut by a rejection of any sort of theatrical naturalism. She tests and tackles the contingent effects particular to the performative mode of time, body and her audience.

In the late 1960s when art history finally arrived at the University of Sydney, Australia's first generation of performance artists such as Joan Grounds took refuge from the academy, on the other side of the road in the informal setting of the Tin Sheds, as the University Art Workshop was known. These artists worked with street theatre, posters and film-making in opposition to the institutional discourses of the University. Now we witness a very different strategy, for Barbara Campbell has infiltrated the walls of the sanctuary to undertake research on its historic, architectural, literary and visual archives. Amongst the collection of essays there is a cross-generational dialogue with Joan Grounds in which the latter still shivers amongst these academic surroundings, when witnessing the performance of *Remanence*, a portrait of Campbell's grandfather, a farmer whose water dowsing is cast against the 'hard science' of Paleomagnetism.

The Woolley Building where the performance was sited is bulky and, to my contemporary eye, overbuilt. Like so many of the older buildings at the University of Sydney, it is positioned somewhere between a monument and a fortress. As a fortress I imagine it as a vain attempt to exclude the invisible forces arising out of the earth: magnetic energies or harmful gases from underground streams running over various metals in rocks... It is a relief to return to the image of the dowsing man in an airy suburban back garden.

Joan Kerr, who knows the University from the inside, takes up the theme when witnessing *The Machine, oiled again*, performed beneath the stairs surrounding the Art History and Theory Department. Into this awkward space Campbell inserts her body as the archetypal female nude of the avant-garde, running a *son et lumière* show across her flesh, while reclining on the table of an inverted working sewing machine. Professor Kerr is struck by the frustration felt by the audience whose vision is deliberately thwarted:

... not quite recognising something so bafflingly familiar, surely a modern icon that anyone watching a contemporary art performance should know. Edging forward they peer more closely at the screen in the vain hope it will reveal its secrets. 'The slide test from Hell.'

The grainy amateur slides that conceal the modernist object at the centre conspire in Kerr's opinion to make 'a key work in the new history of Modernism in Australia – a book as yet unwritten.'

Another astute art historian has argued that 'a consciousness of precedent has become very nearly the condition and

definition of major artistic ambition. For that reason artists have become avid if unpredictable consumers of art history.'<sup>1</sup> Barbara Campbell's ambition in former centuries would have been defined by the genres of history painting and the nude. Certainly her art is a learned self-conscious activity, which distrusts optical experience alone as an adequate basis for art, and all her performances require the audience to slow down. As Joan Grounds observes:

There is no fast theatrical pace here; the forces, the materials, and the conditions under which the performance is enacted determine the duration of the action. It is not unlike a setting sun over a vast expanse of water, affirming each time one witnesses it that the earth is revolving in its own time.

Barbara Campbell's recent works have moved away from historic female personages who formerly she inhabited, or who inhabited and spoke through her. Her tales are now drawn from close at hand or turn on modernism and its local possibilities, in what has been characterised by Grant as 'a disquieting mingling of the public and private'. Throughout these pieces, Campbell's body is mostly undemonstrative with any movement restricted to functional acts of fanning, writing, cutting or operating equipment. She frequently uses language to deflect attention from the purely optical to other bodies of knowledge – to the not visible forces at work upon her grandfather's divining stick, alongside evidence from the hard science of geomagnetism in *Remanence*. Or to the fragile lines between language and memory in *Sécateur*. Anne Brennan's impressionistic reverie on *Sécateur* is not so much about this work, but what thoughts it provokes.

As performance art relies so much upon the witness, there can be problems when the account turns so subjective. Ian Maxwell's essay suffers most from this affliction. His self-conscious narration of *The midday movie and the history of Australian painting* exposes the vulnerability of such temporal works of art to interpretation. The midday movie is performed across the real time of daily television programming and shaped by the particular context. In the performance Campbell lies motionless on the floor, her head entombed under an anthropomorphic woven basket, narrating in the three minute commercial breaks in between the movie a succession of accounts of Australian landscape paintings. Nondescript elements of suburbia – a carpet square, a radiator and a television set tuned to the midday movie – intrude into the public space as part of the work. The movement between the televisual and Campbell's muffled voice has the strange disjuncture of ventriloquism. While Maxwell found the screen hypnotising, the gallery audience – in whose company I stood – talked over the movie but was hushed by the performer's interrupted 'sleep talk', bending closer to catch the detailed accounts of 'beating about the bush'. Each anecdote recalls but distances the spectators from its object, each one an absent icon of national

life as its subject, and however carefully they are recalled and described each painting slips blandly out of sight. Throughout the endurance of the two hour midday movie slot, Campbell is blind, but the biomorphic basket she wears appears to rise up to meet the screen, the unwoven ends of cane like a mad woman's unkempt hair. Her basket mask, made by the artist Paul Saint, sits uneasily between the debased home crafts of shell-shocked basket weavers and the illustrious woven sculpture of contemporary Indigenous art. Her body is revealed more than covered by a cream crocheted mini-dress, whose weave and colour matches the suburban banality of the basket. Just as her speech does not interact but appears in the gaps between the televised movie, so her body occupies a similar autistic position as it meets the vessel, in a tussle between art history and pop culture. Installed at the end of the Australian wing at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the performance I saw turned the surrounding neoclassical sculpture by Rayner Hoff, *Australian Venus 1927* into an erotic prop.

Barbara Campbell holds her audience with strange tricks, marvels and taboo acts, but her real magic consists in how she slows down time compelling the twitchy twenty-first century viewer to spend some time under her spell. But in this, is art history a basket-case? Yes and no. Artists desperately need art history to focus on contemporary work and to engage art in a critical exchange which allows their work to circulate beyond known audiences, particularly in fields as ephemeral as performance art. Future publishing projects should consider including original scripts with CD audio visual documents, as Campbell's work warrants close attention as well as broader audiences, notoriously difficult with performance work. Artists now more than ever rely upon museums and universities to support them, as most commercial publishers are unwilling to take risks. The Performance Studies Department at Sydney University is to be congratulated on realising such a challenging project.

#### Notes

- 1 Thomas Crow, 'Unwritten histories of conceptual art' in *Conceptual Art: A critical anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, MIT Press, 2000

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