

Visions of Enchantment: Fictions of Intimacy within Contemporary Art

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The purpose of this paper is to elucidate my recent doctoral research entitled *Visions of Enchantment: Fictions of Intimacy within Contemporary Art*. This research forms the basis for a written exegesis that will accompany an exhibited body of artwork to be submitted for examination in mid-2011. The project is an investigation into the creation of an explicit form of Enchantment emerging within contemporary art. The aim of the research is to examine and identify this self-reflexive and overtly fictitious form of Fantasy with the intention of validating Enchantments as a mode of expression within contemporary culture.¹ The genesis for the enquiry has developed from observations and exploration within my own practice. Dissatisfied with descriptions of my oeuvre as 'pure fantasy' I determined that although the work functioned to enchant, it was far from being chaste or escapist as it stemmed from intimate actuality.



Figure 1: Project Eye Candy detail

¹ The term 'culture' is here used to describe Western culture and is informed more specifically by Australian value systems. This is consistent with the author's experience and pertinent to the intimate nature of the subject matter under consideration. Core principals concerning democracy, political pluralism, traditions and syncretism are therefore assumed. As western culture is also defined within the broader context of globalisation, references are not solely restricted to western sources. Artists surveyed are not all western as the quest for enchantment is not exclusively limited to western civilisations.

The particular style of 'conspicuous femininity' which typifies my work appears to confront a substantial demographic, as a corollary prompting speculation concerning appropriate levels of gendered expression. An intended outcome of the project therefore is to emancipate the 'hyper-femme'² within Enchantments in order to encourage equity.

Re-enchanting the World

The emergence of a particularly self-conscious and distinctly hyperreal Enchantment parallels and extends current philosophical discourse which theorises that there is a panoply of new secular stratagems emerging to re-enchant a disenchanted world in the wake of the void left by divinity. This hypothesis was precluded by Morris Berman (among others) in the 1980s with his book *The Re-enchantment of the World*. More recently, philosophers John Landy and Michael Saler developed a more comprehensive rationale in their book *The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*. In a lecture delivered earlier this year at the University of Tasmania, Professor of Humanities Wayne Hudson expanded upon the quest for re-enchantment, arguing that the desire for illumination is manifesting in the creation of 'new post-secular spaces' (Hudson, 2010, p.1).

The importance of these theories in relation to the project is that they demonstrate a central tenet of this research, which is that Enchantments fulfil a pivotal role in terms of social anthropology. The particular form of fictionalised Enchantment identified is culturally determined, a manifestation of desire, which identifies Fantasy as unique in terms of its location within post-modernity: i.e. enchantments have emerged in this particular form at no other time in history.

² 'Hyper-femme' describes explicit and excessive visual expressions of popular tropes of femininity. The term was defined in response to a perceived lack of appropriate terminology in order to embody significantly exaggerated forms of conventional femininity. Literally: 'hyper' translates to a 'greater' and 'femme' 'femininity'. The use of 'femme' was derived from gendered literature, where the term is used to describe lesbians who dress in a feminine fashion, as opposed to the 'butch' who dresses in masculine attire. The 'hyper-femme' has some relation to the 'femme fatale' of popular crime culture, a fatally flawed heroine who similarly exhibits behaviour not consistent with ideas of appropriate feminine behaviour i.e. violence and criminality.



Figure 2: Pierre et Gilles, *Ice Lady*, 1994

The artists cited in the project locate their practice in explicit and intimate concepts of desire predicated upon sexuality and identity. This ensures that their collective approach is one of pleasure and as a corollary non-critical and deliriously celebratory. Working from a position of love, a form of enchantment emerges which is remarkable in that it simultaneously inspires wonder and veracity. The work of each practitioner 'simultaneously enchants and disenchants ... delights but does not delude' (Landy & Saler, 2009, p.2).

The hypothesis for the research project then is that fictions of intimacy within contemporary art are explicit expressions of desire that variously contravene dominant cultural and aesthetic ideologies. It is proposed that artists who gratify self-fulfilling prophecies of desire within idyllic enchantments may fulfil an emancipatory function through subjective sation of passion.³

The “F” Words: Fantasy and Feminism

Informed by the context of my art practice, I would contend that within contemporary academia the genre of Fantasy is derided as inferior to creative expression; the latter demonstrating veracity, invention, rationality and innovation; the former perceived as unrealistic, naïve, nostalgic and fake. Fantastical experience equates to the kitsch equivalent of art and as a consequence is maligned as an inferior pursuit serving little scholarly purpose. It is possible to speculate that this largely insidious bias has arisen as a result of the conspicuous artifice innate to fantastical experience.

Fantasy in all its multifarious manifestations⁴ performs an important cultural function as fantastical experience frees the mores not condoned by society. Therefore the marginalised, radical or those ascribed secondary status find a voice through the manifestation of subjective desire, specifically within Enchantments.

Scholar Rosemary Jackson clarifies this point when she writes:

Fantasy cannot be understood in isolation (from its social context), for Fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire... (Jackson, 1981, p.3).

As it is a central tenet of this research that Fantasy is a key indicator of prevailing cultural values, it is also logical to conclude that fiction and authenticity are not (as commonly assumed) mutually exclusive.

³ Other forms of enchantment within visual art: It is necessary here to acknowledge that there are numerous artists apart from those referenced within this paper, who could be classified as making enchantments. Artists such as Gerda Steiner and Jorg Lenzlinger, who had an exhibition in early 2009 at the *Australian Centre for Contemporary Art* in Melbourne entitled *'The Water Hole'*, make seductive work which serves to charm, delight and captivate. However what tends to occur is that the explicit display of intimacy identified as central to this project is not present in the work, thereby prompting a less profound engagement. The resultant work may still be entrancing and seductive for the audience, but there is a critical element implied that stems from political, social or environmental issues. The outcome becomes didactic and in my view less successful in terms of inspiring contemplation and communication, despite the acknowledged fictional narrative being present.

⁴ Fantasy as a genre incorporates a number of well-documented and identifiable structures. Of relevance for this research are fairytales, metafiction and hyper-reality, all of which are discussed in detail in the exegesis but due to brevity will be unable to be discussed further here.

Due to the conspicuous feminine content of the work, it is necessary to posit the project in relation to feminism. I have variously been accused of setting the feminist movement back a hundred years or of fostering girl-hood nostalgia, neither of which is accurate. The work, as supported by my argument in this paper, is intended to perform a liberating function in relation to encouraging gender equity.

Feminism is distinctly unpopular in contemporary society and is commonly derided within the media as the “f” word. Associate Professor Linda M. Scott grapples with this issue in her recent book *Fresh Lipstick*:

By far the most common response to feminism among young women today... is to embrace women’s rights but deny the label “feminist” - a development that seems to be closely linked to the lingering Second Wave (of feminism) politics of appearance (Scott, 2005, p.8).

Scott analyses a plethora of information to support her argument that feminism’s anti-beauty ideology, together with a ‘compulsion to enforce homogeneity’ (Scott, 2005, p.9), are responsible for the current en masse rejection of feminism. She writes that ‘it is inconceivable (to many women) that a commitment to feminism could ever be reconciled with an interest in fashion’ (Scott, 2005, p.2).



Figure 3: Fashion magazine

Her writing resonates with my own experiences of alienation in relation to feminism, also motivated by subjective experiences concerning the politics of appearance. The clothing I wear and the art work I make evidence a euphoric engagement with the hyper-femme, which in turn appears to translate to a rejection of feminism. How to reconcile this illogical ideology on an intimate and professional level have inspired this research.

The Art of Artifice

Enchantments made by artists scrutinised in the course of this research demonstrate a preoccupation with pleasure. Pleasure as an approach to art is addressed by contemporary author Richard Shusterman in his essay *Come back to pleasure*. Shusterman investigates the notion of aesthetic pleasure, citing the views of philosophers such as Plato and Kant to support his argument that 'to identify art with the pursuit of pleasure was not at all a way of trivialising it, for pleasure was anything but a trivial matter, even for philosophers' (Shusterman, 2003, p.33).

Shusterman's research is significant in relation to my work as he negates the assumption that working with pleasure equates to a flippancy of conceptual ideologies that in my case mutates to the issue of gender. He goes on to elaborate upon the profound and varied nature of pleasure, concluding that:

To think that prizing pleasure means condemning art to frivolity and narcotic escapism is one more fallacy based on the presumption that all pleasures are uniform and shallow (Shusterman, 2003, p.47).

Hedonism and the primacy of the aesthetic experience is also the focus of author Oscar Wilde in his epic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the book Dorian obtains eternal youth while his portrait ages hideously in constant admonition of his vanity. Dorian's entirely hedonistic world is predicated upon his unmarred beauty, his dandified extravagant lifestyle excessive to the point of torpidity. His infatuation for an actress ends horribly, his passion inflamed by the romantic illusion of desirable femininity she embodies rather than the mortal woman. Dorian's dramatic demise testifies to Wilde's stance upon the co-dependence of pleasure, creativity and beauty with the opposing states of pain, excess and avarice. He was a keen advocate of the

'art for art's sake'⁵ philosophy which effectively advocates creative autonomy and the attempted suspension of morality by the artist. He subsequently conceded that art could not be entirely autonomous.

The degree of contrivance innate to Fantasy prompts consideration upon synthetic modes of aesthetic expression. Fantastical experience is essentially hyperreal; the process of creativity so explicit and abundant that the topic of the work emerges as the art making process. An Enchanted experience is located in acknowledgement of this fictional genesis. The result is simultaneously one of revelation and uncomfortable self-awareness for the viewer as it confounds expectations of the art experience.

Artifice and what constitutes appropriate degrees of 'naturalness' is also a core issue in contemporary feminist debate. Scott writes: 'From a cross-cultural perspective, the feminist notion of "natural" grooming is a perverse fiction. What is natural for human beings is artifice' (Scott, 2005, p.12).

Artifice is adopted as a strategy in Enchantments in order to heighten the fantastical experience. It assumes potency in regard to this project as the conflation of the hyper femme and fantasy flagrantly confounds conventions of both gender and art.

Patently cultivating the excessive, extravagant and audacious contravenes social mandates concerning appropriate feminine etiquette, sexuality and morality. The paradoxes implied by contemporary expectations of desirable feminine appearance are encapsulated by the current obsession with the 'natural look'. As Australian wit Kaz Cooke quips: 'The Natural Look takes a minimum of three hours, two make-up technicians, a professional lighting expert, a hairdresser and somebody called Georgiana to go out for bagels' (Cooke, 2000, p.12).

⁵ Aestheticism movement: Practitioners believed that art should be autonomous, not subject to moral, social, religious or moral standards. Art was therefore valued as a self-sufficient entity hence the phrase 'art for art's sake' (coined by philosopher Victor Cousin). Ironically the ideology died out due to the 'Ivory Tower' position artists adopted as a consequence of this doctrine, which left them isolated from the populace (unlike my own stance as a commentator from and of 'within'). Aestheticism also promoted the concept of art as beauty, exemplified by Emerson's poem *That if eyes were made for seeing, then beauty is its own excuse for being*.
Decadents: Was a mainly literary revolutionary movement closely related to the aesthetic movement. Largely initiated by Oscar Wilde in the last half of the 19thc, it also advanced the claim 'art for art's sake'. The Decadents embraced a perceived 'decline' from a higher order of culture and art, embracing a new state of being or form. Huysman, Baudelaire and Wilde were its most notable practitioners.

By gleefully advocating ostentatious motifs, symbols and decorative devices from the Rococo, Baroque, Art Nouveau and 1970s psychedelia⁶ I infer a complete lack of restraint which further inflames the issue of appropriate expressions of femininity. To be overdressed is indeed a humiliating condition!



Figure 4: Jean-Honore Fragonard, *Girl on a Swing*, 1767

⁶ A detailed art historical trajectory is traced in the exegesis to define the contextual parameters for this project. For the purposes of this paper an abbreviated list of the art movements which inform this research are listed below. These movements demonstrate a number of common conceptual and formal concerns already identified in this research and pivotal to this project, such as fantasy, pleasure, femininity/gender/identity, academia, beauty, and hyper-reality. More specifically:

Rococo: resonates on many levels with contemporary visions of enchantment. Besides the metafictional aspect and deliberation upon creative process already identified in the work of Fragonard, Rococo artists embraced pleasure, tactility and sensuality.

Penelope Hunter-Steibel argues that the Rococo rejected 'mere intellect' in favour of a broader appeal to the senses, which she establishes as an association with the feminine.

Pre-Raphaelites for their veneration of female beauty and form, idealised feminine visions and romantic impulse.

Art Nouveau: as a period when the sensuous impulse gained new currency; the continuing curve extended.

Aesthetes and Decadents: (primarily literary) Ref: earlier footnote; for their theories and discussion upon the nature of creativity.

Psychedelia: expression of flowery, decorative surplus, flowing forms, sensuality and idealologies concerning free expression in all forms. Critic Dave Hickey claims that Psychedelic art, together with the Rococo, the Pre-Raphaelites and Art Nouveau have been 'permanently out of academic fashion for nearly three hundred years'. He cites the reasons for this as complexity, pattern, repetition, femininity, curvilinear, the fractal and chaotic, sensuality and non-utilitarianism.

Romantic Intentions

The genesis for this study was inspired by Jean Honore Fragonard's seminal work *Girl on a Swing*. This frilly Rococo painting elaborates upon the ebullient pursuit of pleasure and delineates social issues concerning pleasure, luxury, status and class. Despite luxuriating in this poetic amorous intrigue, Fragonard insists upon our acknowledgement, participation and seduction in what is essentially a visual caprice. The overtly construed nature of his image ensures that the act of painting is revealed. Critic Daniela Salvionia acknowledges this when she writes:

The rococo may have been the first metadiscourse in art, in which art is understood as a self-conscious illusion and in which aesthetic appreciation is grounded in the awareness of artifice (Salvionia, 1992, p.22).



Figure 5: Jean Honore Fragonard, *Blind Man's Buff*, 1750-52

Fragonard's series of paintings on the theme *Blind Man's Buff* similarly interrogates the act of painting and ways of seeing. As in *Girl on a Swing*, there is a proliferation

of frothy skirts, shimmering rays of divine light and unambiguous inferences of sexual frisson. Idyllic illuminated backdrops frame luminous fecund green foliage and flirtatious revellers. Rose petals, cupids, dolphins, birds and vines writhe across canvases entirely sated with colour, light and erotic symbolism. This stylistic ecstasy is mirrored in the subject with a girl always blindfolded, and reliant upon her companions and other sensual stimuli. As observers, we identify with her lack of agency, as devoid of sight other senses become heightened; the scent of warm air, the sound of birds and running water, the skin and clothing of companions.

The metadiscourse initiated by the Rococo is extended in the work of American entrepreneur and artist Jeff Koons. He patently extols similar issues concerning class, materialism, sex and power within a contemporary context. Salvioni correlates Koons' practise with prime Rococo tenets concerning the role of art, preparation of context, presentation of desire and stylistic devises such as caricature, theatricality and excessive ornamentation. Despite my ambivalence to much of Koons' output, his work highlights many issues prevalent within my own work. He blatantly tackles desire, social hierarchies and commodification by cultivating mass produced objects into art consumables, following in the tradition of Duchamp and Warhol.



Figure 6: Jeff Koons: *Hanging Heart*, 1994-2006

Koons evidences his abiding affection for the banal commodities he covets by literally inflating the objects of his devotion. As he enunciates in typically brazen fashion 'If you like ice-cream, have a big helping' (Salvionia, 1992, p. 23).

An example is his famed *Celebration* series, constructed between 1994-2006. Part of this series is the monumental red and gold *Hanging Heart* which is one of five uniquely coloured versions. Executed in high chromium stainless steel, *Hanging Heart* weighs over 3,500 pounds, is almost 9 feet tall and was coated in more than ten layers of paint. The sculpture is so perfect, dazzling and flawless it assumes an iconic status. *Hanging Heart* is so highly reflective that it mirrors the surroundings, the audience assimilated into the work yet concurrently repulsed by the liquid-sheen surface. The heart as symbol of love, glistening and fecund, here elicits a void that inspires reflection upon its illusory genesis and contemporary concepts of value and desire.

The artists who most poignantly inform and sustain this enquiry are French couple Pierre and Gilles. They flirt deliciously with idealised perceptions of beauty, body image, glamour, mythology, sexuality, romance, culture, pleasure and love. Reality and artifice morph conspicuously within their overtly contrived and homoerotic images which resonate with luminous colour, meticulous detailing and elaborate ornamentation. Each idyllic work is a re-created paradise of their own conception.

Working in partnership they photograph friends, celebrities and themselves, further re-working the photographed image with paint. Their methodology is typically theatrical, involving extravagant sets, makeup, decorative costuming, props and lighting. The importance of the arduous process Pierre and Gilles undertake to construct each image is essential. The delight I experience from the act of making is echoed in their work. As Gallery Director Lisa Phillips writes: 'It is virtually impossible to look at the work of Pierre et Gilles without smiling. Their obvious pleasure in making art reminds the viewer of the pleasure in looking at art' (Phillips, 2000, p.9).



Figure 7: Pierre et Gilles, *Radha*, 2000

I am attracted in particular to their lush and exotic images of preternaturally beautiful women, floating amidst exotic landscapes of desire. Ruth Gallardo (1988) is implacably beautiful as *Sarasvati*. She is posed strumming a mandolin, adorned with masses of jewellery and framed by a gold lattice set with flowers. Likewise *Catherine Deneuve* (1991) gazes out dreamily amidst the froth of her voluminous skirts, assimilated into a backdrop of blue sky and fluffy clouds. The Ice Lady *Sylvie Vartan*

(1994) seduces sweetly, despite her skin-right red latex dress which is offset against a glistening background of radiating bubbles framed by phallic icicles

Of particular relevance to my research is the portrait of *Radha* (2000). Radha swims amid an effervescent swirl of bubbles and myriad of coral-like clearly sexual organic forms. A trail of stars emanates from the sweep of her uplifted arm. Her perfect blond tresses and obviously 'enhanced' body is demurely covered in rubies, diamonds and gold. The luminous colour, staged backlighting, intense decorative quality and lavish imagery immediately evoke comparisons with Fragonard's *Girl on a Swing*. These joyous environs testify to Pierre and Gilles narcissistic intent and self-conscious preoccupation with illusion.



Figure 8: planet joybelle prototype

Heaven Scent

The research culminates in an exhibition entitled *planet joybelle* that will comprise a series of innovative sculptural forms to be exhibited as a single artwork within a designated art gallery. The sculptural forms are derived from perfume bottle designs that have been conflated into new and exotic configurations. Nominally planets, these celestial 'genie bottles' have seductively glossy, 'blinged up', oyster pink and bejewelled surfaces, inscribed with symbols of transformation such as the butterfly, swan, and star. Each seductive form is designed to hover, and will have an incandescent 'heart', inferred quite literally with the use of light.

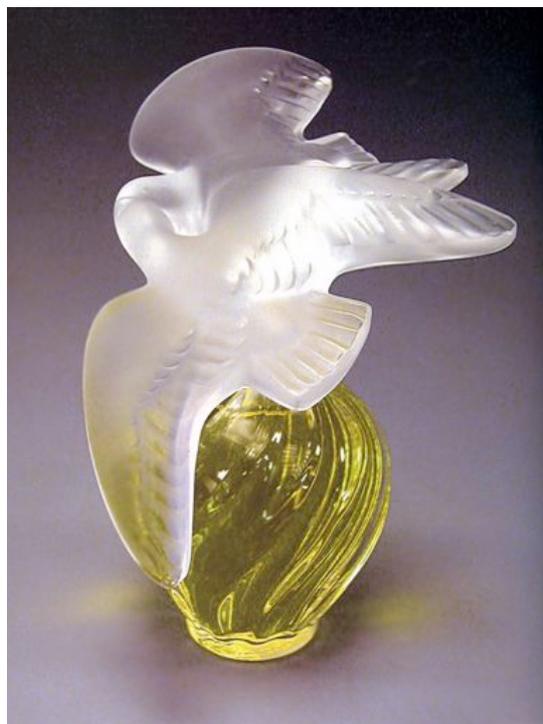


Figure 9: An example of contemporary Nina Ricci perfume bottle

Perfume bottles are the catalyst for the artwork as they represent precious sculptural objects rich with evocative associations that make direct reference to the mutability of presence, thereby allowing modification, transformation and re-definition of identity. Richard Stamelman in his definitive book *Perfume: Joy, Obsession, Scandal, Sin* writes succinctly: 'To choose a perfume is to assert one's body, or more precisely to choose a certain way of being that body' (Stamelman, 2008, frontispiece).

There are several other discreet elements planned for *planet joybelle*, including the *Celestial Star Gazing wall*, a suspended tear drop sculpture *True Love*, and the *Conduit to joy*, a pathway that will illuminate and negotiate the gallery space. A

significant tenet of the study is the interrogation of the relationship between the various elements of the exhibition and how individually and collectively they function to enchant. As a corollary a methodology is being distilled during the process of enquiry to enable the investment of the space with identifiable qualities of enchantment such as wonder, charm and delight. Key to this process is transformation.

As Pink is the quintessence of femininity it plays a significant role. From the pink blankets that define gender in the maternity ward to the adoption of pink as the Breast Cancer council's branding it represents the multifarious nature of femininity. In her essay 'Pink - the exposed colour' from the book *Pink*, Barbara Nemitz writes about the association of pink with beauty, transformation, transience and the fantastic. She comments upon the diversity of qualities associated with pink, and concludes that the colour pink is often used 'in its role as a means of achieving distance from reality' (Nemitz, 2006, p.36).

Conclusion

The aim of this research is to celebrate Enchantments as a vital mode of expression within contemporary art. It has been established in this paper that as Fantasy functions to demonstrate societal taboos it has the potential to provide a viable and experiential creative art forum capable of extending discourse concerning cultural, academic and aesthetic forms of value. It is my contention that I will be able to affect this transformation within the final exhibition *planet joybelle*. The outcome will be measured by surveying whether the sculptural forms collude to achieve a euphoric enchanted space, imbued with a sense of wonder.

The specific form of intimate, fictionalised Enchantment that is the focus of this project demonstrates a particularly poignant form of Fantasy. Inspired by love, re-enchantment of the world emerges as an alluring possibility.

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