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Unlacing Carnal Margins: Portraits of Angela Stewart
John Curtin Gallery
17 September – 10 December 2010
Unlacing Carnal Margins: Portraits by Angela Stewart.

What does a portrait do, actually?

There are multiple responses to this question determined by the perspective accorded to representation and associated political, economic and social discourses, but I want to hone the question of what a portrait does to desire. A twofold desire — desire as matter, and desire as something that matters. If we take my question above literally there are two separate yet connected issues — what a portrait as a material object does to itself, and what it does to the viewer. The first notion would seem implausible. How can a non sentient material object do anything to itself? How can it have a self? This is a valid point, yet is a not uncommon event in the movies. Portraits do all sorts of (mostly mischievous) things in fictional texts exemplified by Vigo the sixteenth-century magician who up and leaves his portrait in ‘Ghostbusters 2’, and let’s not forget the portrait of Dorian Gray.

The second issue is what happens to a viewer encountering a portrait. The tradition of representing either the self or other, be this person a family member, lover or patron, is much esteemed. Perhaps because embellishing the body with some presence or pretence of self is an acceptable form of auto affection. We are given permission to affect ourselves in a painting. Which gets to the matter of desire, that is, although we know it is not possible to embody ourselves or anyone else in a painting, the recurring pleasure gained from this phenomenon remarks upon a longing for such embodiment. It is the potency of this projection that initiates the sometimes uncanny corporeality we encounter from a portrait.

Desire is a nebulous attribute to be literal about, but is what wrenches us to new ways of thinking about things previously accepted on face value. In this way desire is transformative, it causes us to alter our opinions, amend our priorities, revisit our decisions and so forth. Desire might be considered the main event in Angela Stewart’s self portraits and pictures of family, friends and colleagues. Given that each portrait operates as a desiring event, they are left necessarily unfinished. There is always more to come. These are drawings and paintings open to suggestion, a seduction. This unfinished-ness about her portraits is not frustrating (except, deliberately, a little) rather it is a performance. A provocation that arises from partial glimpses, a partiality that has a distinctive glow in Stewart’s remarkable earlier portraits of elderly women; figures entirely displaying their age, resplendent in a becoming-old that is absolutely their own. But how does such fecund life or liveliness transfer to us when the possession of desire is utterly of one’s own making? It has to do with affect(ion); encounters with a realm that acknowledges the autonomous production of our desires, an encounter with our agency.

Stewart’s recent portraits engage with the autonomous agency of desire through a play with pentimento. A play with paint as ground and surface, with the shapes and brushstrokes an artist usually intends to remain hidden. In this sense, her portraits are playgrounds. Pentimento in Italian means ‘repentance’ (to repent, to turn to God). In Stewart’s case, however, the ‘turn’ averts attention away from any hint of sanctimony. The ground and surface of her painting are equally exposed, refracted, reflected, detected so figures hover as
ghostly apparitions of themselves. A multiplicity that is re-iterated in the double figures in her compositions, oft times two women, a dual portrait, or a seeing through one to glimpse another. In these ghost forms, lines retrace lines to disrupt the assuredness associated with opaque layers covering over unwanted marks.

In this (a)rising of the underneath to the surface, the costumes worn by her figures often appear more exoskeleton than adornment — garments of oil exposing that which they cover. But what do they expose? The overflow of representation, of the history of portraiture? Although this is probably too grand an exposition when affection is the act, nevertheless this seepage of history is part of the portrait event. Also exposed, raised to the dark surface of her paintings, to the light, are striking floral and lace motifs that float as if flotsam come adrift from another painting, perhaps drifters from the portrait of a woman alongside? The women Stewart portrays in her drawings and paintings are not fixed, immutable figures, stony sitters. These figures are not captured and consumed by the artist’s (s)kill. They come from behind the scene, they are brought out, to provide a performance of persuasion, engagement, enragement — whatever the spirit of the moment.

The uprising of pentimento in Stewart’s art is a different encounter to viewing portraits created by Sofonisba Anguissola (c1532-1625), the Italian Renaissance artist whose work inspires Stewart. Anguissola’s Renaissance mistesspieces have a perfect composure it feels brazen to intrude upon. There exists so much tradition and scholarship discursively holding such portraiture together. Anguissola’s art disguises Stewart’s guise of affect. The disguise of perspectival realism was invented in the Renaissance and has a powerful logic that is skilfully managed by Anguissola. Her paintings assure the exactitude of every observation. There is no question these paintings are true. The viewer is plumb in the centre of this logocentricism, accorded a position of centrality within the picture plane as it was necessary (Leon Battista Alberti advised painters in the mid fifteenth-century) to present the form of a thing on the pictorial plane as if it were of transparent glass. The human eye at the centre of the world.

Thus, Anguissola’s portraits are an opaque mirror of hidden brush strokes, a hidden-ness that convinces that each mark on the canvas is a strand of hair, is a pattern of embroidery, the is-ness of a person. How come we believe this? Precisely because it cannot be. A miracle! These quite wonderful paintings are gestures of repentance, they render a window on a world that is thoroughly controlled; they are a creation of subjects and objects understood as fixed and immutable. Layers of gesso that the artist has sanded in-between, create smooth porcelain surfaces. What is enacted is a kind of double cover up; repressing both the process of making and the myriad of markings that lie beneath the perfect surface, thus avoiding any leakage of meaning.

It is this logic of representation that makes Anguissola’s paintings entirely legible to us in the twenty-first century. Has nothing changed? As if we are on a time continuum with Renaissance Florence. Such art does not set out to accentuate the multiplicity of subjectivity or convey the different duration of things, but to assure that the familial and sovereign relations portrayed are watertight. There is a brilliant confidence about Anguissola’s portraits of her siblings, and patrons, and in her self portraits that aligns with her circumstance as a wealthy, accomplished daughter of a Florentine aristocrat. Which of course, is what most of us, actually are not. Strange then, that we so readily identify with such representations of a world.
Stewart's art belongs to a modernist tradition that messes with such certainty. Motifs in her paintings are drawn from costume and decoration found in Renaissance portraiture but such detail is left without definition. Appropriation and displacement lie within the tenor of post modernism, yet Stewart does not care to fragment so much as to use Anguissola's painting as her own pentimento. There is a great admiration for tradition and technique in this appropriation. What is at stake, what is affected, however, is that beneath every surface is sullied flesh, a carnality that affirms us as creatures who slip and slide with each moment, despite all (in)human efforts at centring and emotional fixity. With great respect to Anguissola, Stewart's art shows no repentance.

In discarding form as emotional fixity, Stewart's portraits attend not to the details of a figure's appearance, expression, gesture (though these are here) but to the potency of such imagery. We come to the impossible possibility of embodiment; actuation through desire. Stewart dispenses with background detail to focus upon the profound ambiguity of the formation of portraiture. She is not concerned to parade her sitters as exemplary citizens or celebrity (those these they may be), or as mysterious entity, as having a deeper self, or some kind of spiritual succour, but to offer presence itself as a pentimento; an ongoing marking and unmarking of ourselves. In overpainting, as it were, we reveal our self to be always an overpainting. This annihilation/restoration aligns with the process of art; as long back as we care to go images have been palimpsested so that one artwork is rarely what the eye may think it sees. Each painting is a reworking, a multiple layering of figural and nonfigural modifications, and in this context every new mark, every embellishment destroys as it creates a new, singular art object.

And so Stewart glosses detail that would too stolidly give coherence or integrity to her pictures, for this would imply an integral present self. Her portraiture does not over settle her sitters or viewers. Both escape the common sense inclination to recognise the self and other as mutable and unchanging subjects. And thus in Stewart's portraits the subject is often turned away, in the background, too close, or about to exit the frame. There is always something missing, absent, behind, just around the corner. What is affected by this imperfect presentation might be likened to desire, in the sense that desire can be provoked in empty spaces and pauses. Yet any attempt to realise desire turns into something else, over clarifies, defuses into a familiar emotion. Instead, portraiture as pentimento plays with the matter of desire, for what matters is what is to come.

Perhaps then the question should be what a portrait does not do, actually?

Janice Baker, Curtin University
Poesis, 2007,
 oil, acrylic on wood,
 129 x 90cm.
Poeis, no. 2, 2007, oil, acrylic on wood, 129 x 90cm.
Claudia luxe, 2009, oil on canvas, 130 x 97cm.
'Detail' Blythe no.1, 2010,
 oil, acrylic on wood,
75cm, circular.
Poesis no 1xxx oval, 2007.
90.5 x 68 cm.
Name: Angela Stewart

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2010 Doctorate of Creative Arts, Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia
1993 Master of Visual Art, Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia
1988 Bachelor of Fine Art, Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia

Solo Exhibitions

2010 Unlacing Carnal Margins: Portraits By Angela Stewart, John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University
2005 Here's Looking at You, Cullity Gallery, University of Western Australia
2004 Here's Looking at You, Bunbury Regional Gallery, Western Australia
2002 Portrait, Perth Galleries Western Australia
2000 Recently Drawing, Perth Galleries, Western Australia
1999 3 Women, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery University of Western Australia,
1997 IAAB Christopher Merian Stiftung Projectketung, Basel, Switzerland
1993 Scrutinizing Representation

Collective Exhibitions (Selected)

2010 Mandorla Art Award (invitation)
2009 2009 Albany Art Award (invitation)
2008 City of Perth Black Swan Portrait Prize (invitation)
2008 Albany Art Award (invitation)
2007 Guildford Grammar School (Artist in Focus)
2007 The Smaller Picture Perth Galleries Sotheby's, Western Australia
2006 ArtSingapore.
2006 Project 23 FALVA Cullity Gallery University of Western Australia
2005 The Year ahead, Perth Galleries Sotheby's, Western Australia
2005 Kedumba Drawing exhibition Wentworth Falls, New South Wales, Australia
2005 Links Central TAFE Western Australia
2004 Deck the Walls, Ochre Gallery +Mix, Collingwood, Victoria, Australia
2004 Melbourne Art Fair-represented by Perth Galleries, Victoria, Australia
2004 writing the collection, John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia
2003 Joondalup Invitation Art Prize, Western Australia
2003 Guildford Grammar School-invitation, Western Australia
2002 Bank west Contemporary Art Prize, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Western Australia
2002 Every woman's Expo, Burswood Dome, Western Australia
2002 We are Australian, Interstate Travelling exhibition Australian regional galleries
2002 Melbourne Artfair, Victoria Australia
2001
ART 01, Fremantle, Western Australia
Bank west Contemporary Art Prize, PICA, Western Australia
We are Australian, Interstate Travelling exhibition
Melbourne Artfair Victoria, Australia
About Face, Edith Cowan University and the City of Bunbury, Western Australia

2000
Melbourne Artfair, Victoria, Australia

1999
Kedumba Drawing Award (Invitation) – Wentworth Falls, New South Wales, Australia

1997
IAAB Basel Switzerland, artist exchange recipient

1996
Art, medicine & the body. PICA, Western Australia

Awards (Selected)

2005-2008
APA Postgraduate Scholarship for Doctorate in Creative Arts Australia

1999
10th Kedumba Drawing Award, runner-up, New South Wales, Australia

1998
Australian Art Council Grant, new work

1998
Arts Western Australia, Catalogue Grant

1997
Arts WA travel Grant

1995
Arts WA Project Grant

1994
Albany Art Award, Open Prize Western Australia

Collections (selected)

BHP Billington
Bank West
University of Notre Dame, Western Australia
Government of Thailand
John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University of Technology Western Australia
Kedumba Drawing Award, Wentworth, NSW
University of Western Australia
Murdoch University, Western Australia
Sir Charles Gardiner Hospital, Western Australia
Edith Cowan University, Western Australia
Art Bank Australia
Department of Equal Opportunity, Western Australia
King Edward Memorial Hospital, Western Australia
West Australia School of Art Design and Media
City of Fremantle, Western Australia
Great Southern Regional College, Western Australia
Lady and Sir James Cruthers Women's Portraits, Western Australia
Ministry of Fair Trading, Western Australia
Western Australia Ministry of Arts
City of Albany, Western Australia
Various private collections in Australia, Finland, USA, Canada, Switzerland
Reviews:

2004/2005 Insite homes design and gardens Summer page 97
2004 Art Monthly September page 50 Annie English
West Australian Art Notes, Ric Spencer August
2004 Catalogue essay, Here's looking at you, Annie English, August 2004
2004 Faces Before their time, Nyanda Smith page 8 Arts Monday 30th August, 2004 WA
2004 Memory, self and landscape, Saturday September 11, 2004 Ric Spencer page 12 West
2004 Writing the collection, pages 66-67 John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University
2004 ART TALK-series of eight 30 min programs-video for TV, programs1-4
2002 The West Australian, Portraits of Anticipation, Robert Cook, Nov 23
2001 Art Monthly, Australia May 2001 No 139 Art Notes page 43
1999 Melbourne Age, September 13 Cochrane Waves of Bliss wash over Kedumba Judge
The West Australian under the Skin Robert Cook Arts today June 13, page 6
The West Australian ‘In praise of older women’ Josephine Allison. Arts today June 1
1997 Artlink, Australian Contemporary Art Quarterly, Art, Medicine and the body vol17, no2
Art Monthly, April, no. 98, cover page, page 28 Helen Ross
1995 Artlink, Australian Contemporary Art Quarterly, Helen Ross vol15 no2&3
Cover Page, pages 12-13
1995 Artlink, Australian Contemporary Art Quarterly, “Art,
Medicine and Imaging the Body” Theunissen, M. Page 57, vol. 17, No. 2
Basler Zietung, Monday 12, Wednesday 15, December
1997 Artlink, Australian Contemporary Art Quarterly “Means to Endoscope”,
page 58, vol. 17, no. 2
1997 Art Monthly, April, no. 98, cover page, page 28 Helen Ross
1997 “Mine Own Executioner”, catalogue essay
1996 Art Medicine and the Body”, catalogue and essay
1996 The West Australian, “Big Body of Work Puts Medicine in its Place”, David Bromfield
Reel to Real in context, Paola Anselmi, Catalogue and Essay
Reel Time, 10 August, Terri-Anne White, September Issue
1996 “The Section and the (Whole) Performance”, PICA, 9-11 Aug
1995 Art Link, Australian Contemporary Art Quarterly, page 34, vol. 15, No. 1
1995 Artlink, Australian Contemporary Art Quarterly, Helen Ross, vol. 15, no. 2 & 3
1994 Artlink, Australian Contemporary Art Quarterly, page 34vol14no1 1994

Academic

2009 Presented a paper ‘Sofonisba Anguissola Portraits’ Renaissance Society of America
Conference and annual General meeting, Los Angeles USA
2008 Presented a paper “Vulnerable Encounters” Renaissance Society of America Conference
Annual General Meeting, Chicago, USA
2008 Presented lecture at University of Western Australia Albany Campus Western Australia
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