

THE KINGPINS

Rhapsody Happens

Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney
artspace.org.au
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CRAIG JUDD

Audiences enter this exhibition through a painted almost medieval and carnival-like Hell's mouth. Inside the darkened section of Artspace, The Kingpins have brought to bear their extensive live performance experience by creating a complex theatrical and sculptural environment. The insistent 'qualities' of Artspace's early twentieth-century architecture are carefully considered in the placement of the three large screens, but also in the location of sets of cloud or rock-like blobs, as well as the bright pink pulsing lines leading to the mythical vanishing point.

By far the most complex and longest of The Kingpins work to date, this work is a tightly orchestrated coagulation of images and effects. The cloud/rock/landscape blobs act as screens that periodically activate the space and complement the action on the large screens. On the left and right are biker creatures. A mass of orifices, they sit astride shimmering tinsel magic bikes. The power of these machines is emphasised by goddess emblems. The obviously composite creatures sing songs developed by The Kingpins. They are strangely muted soft rock ballads such as 'Night Dust' and 'Lady of the Night'. Towards the end of the piece the creatures sing a more typically Kingpins death metal rock verse. This music is complemented by an ambient soundscape made with the help of the old fashioned analogue Juno Synthesizer that lends a cotton wool-like muted density. Occasionally a puff of smoke crosses the picture plane to simulate speed and motion and even less occasionally, Black Theatre of Prague-type hands enter the fray to deftly adjust the creatures' sunglasses.

As we know in real life, motorcycles can provide an excess of somato-sensory stimuli. The body experiences a massive data flow of vibrations of the pleasures of speed and motion. The machine comes to 'life' with the synchronised movement of the gearshift brake and throttle. The freedom of movement through spaces enhances the trope of the motorcyclist as transgressive, forever-loose, rebellious troublemakers. Costume and other forms of self-fashioning enhance this image. However, in *Rhapsody Happens* while the creatures are forever grabbing the throttle, these critters ain't goin' nowhere man! Fixed to their machines, they are totally incapacitated.

As a counterpoint to such inaction, the central panel features images of initially faceless wild go-go girls. Filmed with an acidic orange filter overlay, they dance in a slightly more active syncopation to the soft rock accompaniment emanating from the Greek chorus of biker creatures. The girls have pony tails of hair hanging off their bodies. Transvestism, an ongoing interest for The Kingpins is further explored when out of the darkness a hairy woman dressed as a man in bad drag appears. Her T-shirt is the actual one worn by Richard Bell when he won the Telstra Awards in 2003. The text on the shirt, a play on the 1992 film, *White Boys Can't Jump* reads 'White Girls Can't Hump'. Still confronting, the text is in contradistinction to the obvious skill and dare I say humpiness of the dancer/s.

Rhapsody Happens is a Dionysiac site of anarchic excess and cross purposes. Phillip Brophy in his catalogue essay explains how much this work is infused by the knowledge of a range of B-grade 1960s, '70s and '80s films. Another influence is the 1970s San Francisco performance group The Cockettes. This troupe of men, women and children developed an aesthetic of the glamorous, yet incomplete and dislocated pose. One of the leaders of the troupe, Hibiscus is the model for the hairy woman dressed as a man in bad drag.

Hair is everywhere. It whirls around and from the go-go girls. Not only luxuriously abundant on their heads, hair escapes from the wrists of the motorcycle creatures. These are hardly the transvestite saints of the Christian Middle Ages, Saint Thecla, Saint Pellagia etc. In 1878 the Danish physician C. Krebs defined hypertrichosis [excessive hair growth] as a medical condition that could also be a sign of social unruliness. But perhaps these creatures are more akin to the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. When Banquo meets the witches he is confused, "You should be women/and yet your beards forbid me to interpret/that you are so".

Rhapsody Happens is a Möbius strip of references; not necessarily, but inevitably part critique, this work is more an invocation of a range of popular culture niches that reverberate in influences from the 1950s. There are motorcycles, bikers, go-go girls, drag queens, kings and princesses, secret helpers, speed, rock and roll music, psychedelic monsters and the landscape. These are just some of several key motifs. As in chaos, all are equal in value.

Rhapsody Happens is a wilfully mediated view of some cultural icons. While it is a disturbingly weird lament for lost utopias, it is also work that clearly suggests that there are bigger projects waiting to be unleashed from The Kingpins.

Below: The Kingpins, *Rhapsody Happens* [installation views], 2005
Photos courtesy the artists

