

Bronwyn Platten: Unlocking the Silence

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A 1960s snapshot from Athens, Greece. At a Christmas party for her father's firm, a small Bronwyn Platten is handed a Christmas present by an as yet unknown Nana Mouskouri, who is there to perform as part of the festivities. A moment to savour, one might think. But the young Platten is disappointed, for it transpires that her gift is intended for a male child. A misreading of language. To the Greek eye/ear the combination of consonants which makes up the Welsh name 'Bronwyn' is unfamiliar and the mistaken assumption had been made that Bronwyn was a boy.

In March 1988 at Adelaide's Experimental Art Foundation, sculpture graduate Bronwyn Platten showed three large paintings based around the theme of duality and the new knowledge of feminism, as part of the group exhibition *The Image in Question*.¹ That same year, following a period of involvement in a number of community based projects, Platten and her sister, Anna, spent six months as artists-in-residence at Strathmont Centre for people with intellectual disabilities.² It was a seminal experience, which brought her into contact with a more direct and spontaneous form of creativity, fundamentally altering the direction and emphasis of her art practice. She continued to paint – a recent series of gouaches directly onto the wall at Dublin's Green on Red Gallery [2000] for instance – but it has become a secondary and largely private activity. Increasingly she incorporates text into the visual, interlacing the work with language – frequently, like the phonetic script which accompanied *Objikt Joi* [1998], it is an inventive prose of her own devising.

Already interested in the unconscious and the influence it plays on creative consciousness, through meeting Cecilia Clarke, Platten became exposed to a sensory experience which is not verbal.³ In their interactions, like *Possible Clouds* [1993] and as part of the Art Access touring exhibition *Bodysuits* [1997], Platten has assisted the non-speaking Clarke in the realisation of an enigmatic written language – the rhythms of the formerly unbidden. Adelaide artist Alison Main has poetically described Clarke's communications as "tendrils of prose." Clarke's musings seem ephemeral, almost not there. Appearing to hover, they engage in a singular and cryptic visual dance.

Platten's desire to acknowledge these "unacknowledged lives" reached an apogee in her collaboration with Bruce Rodenrys and Cecilia Clarke for *everyday*, the *11th Biennale of Sydney*. This project received a degree of positive viewer response – as well as some animosity – but met with silence from the critics, although a few overseas curators expressed their support. Art continues to be "contested terrain" as Roger Trowbridge asserts in his catalogue essay for the *Possible Clouds* exhibition. Hearteningly, there was a more positive outcome for Platten's six month *Building Art Project* collaboration with artist John Foubister and twenty-two artists with an intellectual disability.⁴ The resultant exhibition *Popular Windows* [1997] – "a celebration of difference within the community" – was further developed as a sound installation by radio broadcaster Mike Ladd. Broadcast nationally on ABC Classic FM, *About Love* presented a number of people with an intellectual disability speaking poignantly and memorably about their experiences of love.

Paralleling Platten's interest in the "culture of silence" associated with intellectual disability has been a burgeoning focus on the equally unspoken/proscribed role of sexuality in our society.⁵ "What's repressed and what comes forward is a dance," says Platten – ever fluid and shifting. Our culture, Platten believes, is shaped by absence – that which is left out is as important as that which is included. For a number of years there has been an erotic subtext to much of Platten's work – a subtext which became overt in works like the silicon rubber nipple curtain of *Jemmy* [1994] and the pubic hair-like Spanish Moss of *White Goods [which she seemed to gather from the air itself]* [1993].⁶ With *Objikt Joi* from the *Defiling the Object* travelling exhibition at Nexus Gallery [1998], Platten ventured into the sacred/profane world of the taboo, of the object as anthropological erotic artefact. This large black lacquered limewood dildo/totem and accompanying text confounded most viewers. For cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis, Platten's erotic work evoked profoundly intimate and personal responses, which were at once layered, complex and culturally contrary – characteristics inscribed upon the larger world of cultural objects.⁷ The gift-boxed chocolate vaginas of *Don't Stop* at the St. Kilda Art Centre in Melbourne [1994] were more readily 'digestible' by the public and critics alike ["Any curator possessing an ounce of entrepreneurial nous

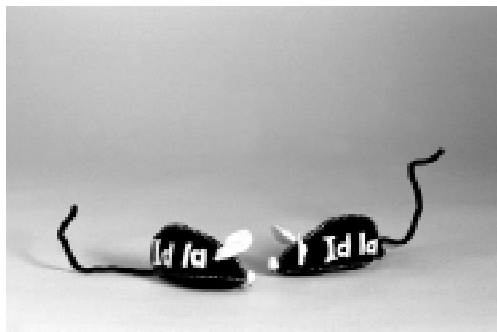


Bronwyn Platten, *Objikt Joi* [detail], 1998 Photo courtesy the artist

would have some of these on sale in the foyer"].⁸ The droll mood of that show was encapsulated in Alice Ellis' *Moustache Box* selection of artworld disguises ["Picture yourself turning up at the next opening with Frida Kahlo eyebrows or a Salvador Dali moustache"].

In 1997 Platten formalised this strand of her practice with the creation of *Museum of Love and Romance*, an ongoing project exploring diverse concepts of love. "The overarching philosophy is that it exists as an open collection and/or strategy. This inclusiveness is in recognition of the need to imagine new systems of community, those which can embrace difference whether it be differences of culture, gender, spirituality, sexual preferences, bodily difference or disability".⁹

A strong sense of playfulness and humour streaks its way subversively through much of the work of the last decade, like the deceptively phallic black-enamelled Marge Simpson heads [*Jemmy*, 1994], the "fat ruler" and the button-eyed boxing glove in *The Plutocrat's Sub-conscious* [1994], or the [consciously] child-like larrikin spirit inherent in the smeared jam and the oatmeal-coated semi-circle of teddy-bears shown in both *Possible Clouds* and the *Bad Toys* exhibition [1994] at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. Above a swathe of nine metres of screen-printed 'Id la' fabric featured in the show *How deep is the lake?* [1996], skittish 'Id la' message mice scuttled startlingly along the rafters of Trevor Smith's garage in Canberra.¹⁰



Bronwyn Platten, *How deep is the lake?* [detail], 1996
Photo courtesy the artist

The screen-printed 'Id la' material surfaced again as part of the *Body Suits* exhibition at the Experimental Art Foundation. Platten's fascination with semantics orchestrates an antipathetical tension in the aural frisson between the Freudian 'Id' and the more languorous 'la' [of la-la land or the musical notation system]. John Barbour's son Guy observed that if you said "Id la" over and over, "it becomes 'Hitler' ". Platten relishes this kind of interchange with her audience. When the luminous *A Monument to Wolf Children*, [also incorporating the 'id la' fabric] was shown in St. Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne, she observed an old woman who intriguingly appeared to be speaking in tongues. Drawing closer, Platten realised that the churchgoer was intoning the text which accompanied her work.¹¹

A black and white image of one of India's 'wolf children' – pictured lapping at a bowl of milk – was included in *How deep is the lake*, and presaged the significant later work *A Monument to Wolf Children*, conceived as a memorial to all those who grow up without the benefit of language. In the luminous containment of the tent within the vastness of nature, solitude and estrangement are implicit. All the more cogent in its glowing and breathtaking subtlety, it is – with *Circle of Murmur* [2000] – Platten's most powerful and resonant statement about the way in which our relationship with language shapes our experience of the world.¹²

Describing herself as an "unpredictable practitioner", the idea is paramount in Platten's oeuvre – its expression – which is almost infinitely mutable. Platten's installation-based work crosses many media and her response to a query about artists whom she respects is indicative of her range. Not surprisingly she admires the mercurial, surrealist-in-denial Meret Oppenheim, the apparently eternal Louise Bourgeois, as well as Vivienne Binns, Susan Hiller and Rosemarie Tröckel, but less predictably the "truly inspirational" painter of the Italian Baroque Artemisia Gentileschi and the unwavering fortitude of Clarice Beckett.

In her desire to unravel the self and her unabated probing of the boundaries, Platten has come to represent something relatively rare in contemporary Australian art practice. Like Janine Antoni, Jana Sterbak and Cindy Sherman, she is an audacious practitioner. Unless you constantly test your limits, she says, "how do you know what those limits are?" She dares to gaze into the spaces of repression, in the process revealing and exposing them. "The shadow is all that is within you which you do not know about".¹³

Throughout the last decade and a half, Platten has exhibited prolifically and received numerous awards including an Australia Council residency at the Greene Street Studio in New York, a special project grant for research in Mexico and America and more recently an Australia Council professional development grant to research museums and collections devoted to erotic art. These have taken her to points as diverse as the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction in Indiana, the Shanghai Museum of Ancient Chinese Sex Culture, Japan's Hiho-kans [Secret Treasure Houses], The Duchamp Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and George Witt's nineteenth century collection of erotica in the Secretum at the British Museum. In her forthcoming exhibition at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, *The Museum of Love and Romance presents The Big Horse and other stories*, the fruits of that research will begin to be revealed.

Acknowledgments

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Bronwyn Platten will be exhibiting at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, 5 – 28 October, 2001



Bronwyn Platten, *The Plutocrat's Subconscious* [detail], 1994 Photo courtesy the artist

Notes

- 1 One of Platten's paintings *Gina Pump and Squeeze* was purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia
- 2 In 1987 Platten instigated a mural with artist Vicki Petrusevics and clients of Glenside Psychiatric Hospital
- 3 "It has not been definitively proved that the language of words is the best possible language. And it seems that on the stage, which is above all a space to fill and a place where something happens, the language of words may have to give way before a language of signs whose objective aspect is the one that has the most immediate impact on us". Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. Victor Corti, Calder & Boyars, London, 1970
- 4 Community Bridging Services' *Building Art Project* and other ongoing art activities, offer individuals with an intellectual disability opportunities to develop their potential and achieve goals in recreation, education and career development
- 5 Roger Trowbridge, catalogue essay for *Possible Clouds*, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1993
- 6 William Faulkner, *Light in August*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1960
- 7 Nikos Papastergiadis opening address for *Defiling the Object*, Footscray Community Arts Centre, 10 August 1998
- 8 Brett Buttfield in his review of *Out of Adelaide*, *db magazine* #120, Adelaide, 1996
- 9 Bronwyn Platten, "Artist's Statement", 2001
- 10 Trevor Smith was at the time Director of the Canberra Contemporary Art Space
- 11 *A Monument to Wolf Children*, inspired by Platten's contact with Cecilia Clarke, was purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia in 2000 and a version of this work was shown as part of *City Provoked*, RMIT Public Art Project, Melbourne, 1998
- 12 *Circle of Murmur* from the exhibition *Installation Stills*, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, 2000
- 13 Marie-Louise Von Franz, *Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales*, Spring Publications Inc., Dallas, 1957: 6



Bronwyn Platten, *Telepathy [Jemmy]* installation detail, Ebenezer Studios], 1994 Photo Alan Cruickshank