



Romance... in your pants

Supreme Alkaline

Warren Vance

The Museum of Love and Romance presents: The Big Horse and other stories...

Bronwyn Platten

Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide
5 – 28 October, 2001

Warren Vance's elegant and beautifully made works appropriated images of the kind found on jigsaw puzzles, their cigarette-ad beauty rendered as crisp and colourful as the autumn or alpine scenes they depicted. By attaching various objects to the surface of these pictures Vance brought the images back to three-dimensional life and subtly extended their meaning. Perspex encased, each miniature world breathed quietly its own rarefied air.

The relationship of the attached objects to the image was simple, though never simplistic. From a forest scene extended a tangle of real branches, stuffed finches perched on the sleeve of a mounted King Henry VIII, and fake ivy leaves adorned an Adam and Eve couple. The objects were not merely three-dimensional extensions of the scene, but rather they annexed the otherwise banal images, subtly suggesting multiple meanings.

The cheap and mass-produced objects were juxtaposed with the fantastic landscapes: a comment on a society that can produce such things whilst ostensibly revering the beautiful, the sublime? A silent rebuke glued across the commercialisation of nature? The small leadlight window stuck over an alpine scene in *Qualage Window* seemed to refer to the reduction of the splendour of nature to a packagable form. Yet toy daggers, vertical against romantic forest scenes, invoked a kind of Arthurian magic and made explicit the inherent romance of the scene, and ultimately the suggestive beauty of Vance's works negated any animadversion. Vance somehow transcended materials that might otherwise tend towards the kitsch, elevating them from their commercial provenance. His was a modern uptake on the sublime and, however outdated this ideal might be, still spoke to us, delicious.

As visually appealing, though without the sense of commentary, were his smaller collage works. These were so intrinsically harmonious that the combined elements – pictures of pearls and a cathedral ceiling, a glass bird suspended in a spider's web – seemed inherently connected. A more witty and irreverent take on the found object sculptures was a school-style wall map of European countries, each country complete with attached souvenir spoon.

What link then between Vance's gently romantic works and Bronwyn Platten's *Museum of Love and Romance* *Romance presents: The Big Horse and other stories...* in the rear gallery. The image used to publicise the exhibition, and also printed on a white curtain that hung in the gallery, showed two horses mating. The horses are romantic, apparently: hung with garlands of flowers, captured during 'the act' in a glowingly tinted photograph whose edges fade away like an old-fashioned portrait. But could you ever say that horses make love?

The Museum of Love and Romance is an on-going project that explores "conceptions of love" and *The Big Horse and other stories...* drew on Platten's research of museums devoted to sex and erotic art. This topic is obviously pursued seriously world-wide, judging by the earnest efforts of the museums Platten records visiting. Included were documentary photographs of these museums, those of the more liberal East and the infamous Kinsey Institute – legitimization indeed!

The museum theme shaped not only the content of Platten's work but also the manner in which it has eventually been presented. She presented the various manifestations of her research using the formats of the museum, incorporating documentary photographs, sketches, a video [by Adelaide artist and colleague Alison Main] and explanatory texts that expressed a more personal response. In *The Museum of Love and Romance...* the viewer could see the giant phallus of Uwajima, or giggle at Platten's own painting of tiny flying penises.

It may seem nonsensical to criticise an exhibition as 'just' a collection of objects. In adopting the mantle of 'Museum', the project claimed the attendant right to present itself in exactly this kind of way and, of course, the structures and practices of museums and their taxonomic and interpretative systems are inherently related to art. Here however, such a straightforward, dare I say unimaginative approach results in a curiously unsatisfying [and faintly ridiculous] collection, that somehow felt like being forced to sit through some traveller's slide show, albeit a risqué one ["and then we saw a HUGE penis statue"].

Platten had examined, researched and re-presented her material for her audience with obvious care and involvement. But as is so often the case of things to do with sex, everything presented was amusing rather than erotic and of only fleeting interest. In an irking attempt to elevate the inane subject matter, the catalogue proposed that "the fucking horses are divine".¹ They were not divine – they were ridiculous, as is a room full of people thoughtfully considering a coarse, in both senses of the word, picture of a dog mounting a woman. A more germane response was that elicited from my companion, who turned to me and asked, "do you suppose the dog really had that expression on his face?"

Note

1 Lindy Warrell, 'The absent nurse & other mysteries', *Museum of Love and Romance* *Romance presents: The Big Horse and other stories...* exhibition catalogue essay, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, 2001



Top: Bronwyn Platten, *The Big Horse*, 2001
Above: Warren Vance, *Brave Sword*, 2000
Photos Alan Cruickshank

Jena Woodburn



The background noise of vision

The Looking and other outcomes...

Derek Kreckler

Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide
2 – 25 November, 2001

Derek Kreckler's large, almost metre-square photographs at first sight appear disarmingly ingenuous in their presentation of everyday suburban situations. In *Freezer* a woman cranes forward to look at something on the supermarket freezer shelves. In *Salon* the same woman reads the label of a bottle while she's having her hair done. Kreckler's 'subject', if there is one, is the everyday: life going on, nothing much happening. But the everyday, almost by definition, cannot be a subject: it lacks a specific location or focus, is diffuse and unremarkable, uninteresting, even. The everyday is not 'there', where you are looking, but all around it, in the background, the detail. But if you photographed the background or the detail you would transform it into a subject, or into pure pictorial elements: texture, colour, form. Instead, the everyday is the relationship between a locus of interest and its background, a kind of wavering of attention, a distractedness. Therefore what looks at first sight like artlessness in Kreckler's photographs reveals a carefully constructed pictorial logic. Kreckler presents the everyday through an oblique deflection of vision. Ian McLean in his excellent catalogue essay calls it "an almost shadowless world without moods, secrets or focus".

Kreckler's technique involves the construction of a kind of micro-narrative: 'someone looking at something'. While this is potentially a highly-charged pictorial genre, Kreckler's subjects are banal enough to be poised at the vanishing point of curiosity. Take, for example, *Nature Strip I and II*. In the first photo, two roadside workers are looking at something on the ground in front of them. In the second photo, the first has apparently called out to the second, who looks over his shoulder. But the picture doesn't show or even suggest what they're looking at – all you see is the dirt, the weeds, the freeway intersection, the KFC in the distance, irrelevant 'stuff' that the men do not see because it's not part of whatever-is-going-on. What you see, in effect, is the everyday, not 'in itself', but as background, incidental and irrelevant. In *Freezer* the woman's face appears in the vanishing-point of supermarket freezer shelves, craning forward to look at something, but all you see is cheese, pickles, prawn cocktail sauce: 'stuff'. In *Salon*, a hairdresser focuses on her work while her customer reads the label of a bottle, but this *mise-en-scène* is too banal to hold your attention, which wanders off through the mirror fragmented space, registering details: a wooden footstool, a glass of champagne, a plastic shopping bag. By putting these acts of looking into the picture, but withholding their objects from the viewer, Kreckler redirects the gaze to the meaningless unbeautiful details of the everyday, the background noise of vision.

A similar structure is evident in the installation *White Pointer*. In the darkened space five spotlight texts give the taxonomic details of fish from the New York Aquarium. Speakers on the opposite wall play ambient recordings of visitors to the aquarium. "Look at the octopus!", "Mum, what are they doing?", "That's a b-i-i-g fish!". But of course you don't see the fish: you get the phenomenology of looking, without the distraction of something-to-look-at.



Above: Derek Kreckler, *Roadwork 2*, 2001
Below: Derek Kreckler, *Salon*, 2001
Photos courtesy the artist

Russell Smith