



Left: Tristin Lowe, *Alice*, 1998 Photo courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art
 Right: Debra Reich, *Florilegium #2*, 2001
 Below: Anne MacDonald, *Azalea* from the *Petal* series, 2000
 Photo courtesy the artist and Australian Centre for Photography



Soft options

'Material World' – from *Lichtenstein to Viola, 25 Years of the Fabric Workshop and Museum*

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
 28 February – 28 April

Material World was in many ways an oddly uninspiring show. The works in it formed part of the collection of Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop and Museum founded in 1977. Residencies at this institution have allowed artists to explore the often neglected experimental and social dimensions of fabric in contemporary art. Many artists momentarily connected with the Fabric Workshop are instantly recognisable, from Claes Oldenburg to Vito Acconci, Mike Kelley, Ann Hamilton and Bill Viola. Yet despite the show's promise, ideas in it often appeared constrained by their material realisation. This is doubly surprising given the overall diversity of approaches evident in *Material World*. In certain cases fabric, rather than crucial to the presentation of contemporary ideas, became a means to an end in works that may have been better presented in another form. At best, works in *Material World* evinced a subtle understanding of fabric in its social and historical context.

One of the most celebrated offerings was Maria Fernanda Cardoso's *Flea Circus* from 1996–97. Cardoso's circus was a portable enclosure on wheels comprised of layers of multi-coloured printed and painted fabrics. Inside was a miniaturised circus tent containing a series of highly detailed simulations of traditional circus paraphernalia from tight-rope to trapeze. A video projection behind the enclosure depicted the artist and her star performers. The manner in which these fleas were induced to perform may explain the numerous tiny carcasses on the floor of the tent itself. Overall the work was a lightly humorous parody of the circus freak show. At the same time it sought to prove concretely the otherwise entirely mythological basis of the 'flea circus'. However, the work's humour was incidental and entirely self-referential. Beyond the parameters of its absurdist imagining and the exquisite detail of its manufacture, Cardoso's circus appeared devoid of relevance.

Another artist regularly celebrated is Bill Viola. Here Viola was represented by *The Veiling* from 1995. Viewers entered a darkened room in which a series of gauze screens were suspended in front of one another. These acted as a three-dimensional projection surface. The sound of running water, wind and chirping crickets established an atmosphere from which the video image emerged. In it an anonymous male dressed in a white robe walked towards us through a darkness harshly punctuated at intervals by roving lights. The work contained the mystic resonances found in much of Viola's oeuvre. The archetypal wanderer depicted in the video was just that; a figure, perhaps biblical, severed from contemporary existence and restored to the ambiguous flows of the natural world. The figure's anonymity encouraged viewer identification so that we might all picture ourselves as spiritual searchers. The universality and pervasive vagueness of this proposition remained problematic. The work's greatest asset was its capacity to frame an

immaterial architecture as light from the projector intercepted the hanging fabric. In addition and despite its quasi-religious overtones, sound in *The Veiling* was sophisticated and used to highly absorbing effect.

The most engaging works in *Material World* were perhaps also the most caustic. Virgil Marti's *Bullies* was a room wallpapered in day-glo fluorescent colours, an effect exaggerated by their ultra-violet illumination. The wallpaper suggested an adolescent boy's bedroom, composed of a series of patterned medallions, which framed photographic portraits of unidentified teenage boys of various demeanours and racial backgrounds. The portraits were generic and reminiscent of 1970s school photographs. At the same time they suggested police 'mug-shots'. The viewer was left to imagine which of these anonymous faces represented a violently disposed character, which of them were the bullies in question? Given the range of visages the answer was liable to rest heavily on viewer prejudice. Even more disarming [and dis-armed] were Chris Burden's jet black *LAPD Uniforms* from 1993. Here a series of three police uniform copies were arranged in aggressively impartial 'poses'. Each uniform was menacingly but not impossibly over-sized. There was an elegant fascist brutality to these works that was curiously re-contextualised by an accompanying gallery notice. This sign alerted the viewer that each ensemble was intended to incorporate a deactivated Berretta pistol. The stated reason for their absence are the events of September 11 and consequent concerns over the importation of firearms into this county.

Extending this social critique in alternate directions were Mona Hatoum's sculptural objects. Hatoum's *Entrails Carpet* and *Untitled [Brain]* were perfectly cast in rubber. However their visceral nature prevented them from simply assuming more passive consumable roles. *Entrails Carpet* as the title suggests, was a domestically scaled rug composed of cast pink intestines. The entrails in question coiled endlessly in labyrinthine fashion. They were at once an intellectual test and indicator of our overriding corporeality. Likewise the artist's small cast of a brain was intact albeit for a multitude of drilled holes. These rendered the brain as critical apparatus simultaneously sieve-like and violated. It was their constant slippage from material object to mortal reminder that made these pieces so compelling. Also compelling was Mike Kelley's series of wall pendants. In fact Kelley's lurid wall hangings were masterfully conceptualised. They mingled pathological adolescent fantasy with covert political content critical of institutionalised decorum. One of Kelley's by now famous crocheted 'carpets' was also included. It was compromised however by its confinement in a museum vitrine. Originally, such works substituted the gallery floor from under which amorphous lumps protruded. In these works, as in many of those on show, the fabric in question was both absolutely integral and incidental to the broader concerns of the art itself. This suggested potentially radical roles for fabric in contemporary art opposed to the merely decorative as well as the unfortunate political banalities of works like Robert Morris' atomic bed sheets.

Alex Gawronski

A rose by any other name

Memento Flori

Renée Campbell, Penelope Clay, Tracey Cornish, Karen Donnelly, Paul Ferman, Anne MacDonald, David Parker, Debra Reich

Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
 15 February – 17 March

In a lecture to art school students last year the 'new' director of the Australian Centre for Photography, Alasdair Foster, expressed his aim of shifting the ACP away from "artist-made photography" to a broader exploration of formalism and 'popular' image making [i.e. photojournalism]. His public address [and conversations] have set the tone for the reading of the broader exhibition program.

Consequently the ACP program has been choked with photographs illustrative of this particular set of ideals and aesthetic concerns. Moreover, in an attempt to connect with that particular slice of the photo-wise public, the program has been choked with prize shows, or industry based exhibitions. Recently in quick succession we've had the Nikon Awards, the Photo-technica awards, photographs from the ACP student workshops, and a recent Australian 'best-of' photojournalism show, *WITNESS: An Exhibition of Australian Photojournalism*. [I understand that the ACP is a technical teaching organisation, and has always hosted a number of these shows].

The principal public program for *WITNESS* was the symposium, 'Will Digital Kill Photojournalism?' The event was set to ask, and I quote from the ACP's advertising material, "Do we look at images for 'truth' or has the digital age undermined our ability to believe? This seminar deals with the transition from analogue to digital and the shift in the way photojournalistic pictures are received in today's image-consuming world... and will be an opportunity to hear how digital technologies have changed the way photographers work in the industry today."

The brief set me reeling. If Foster has set himself up as an expert on matters of the photographic image in 'press and public' he should be well acquainted with writing about popular image making and its masters: Jameson, Debord, Baudrillard, Burgin, and Virillio – all of whom have been questioning the truth of the image for thirty years or so, and most of whom have written books responding precisely to the crises of digital ethics in mass media. [Or do I live under an illusion, and the signs of reading and cultural consumption mean nothing to the Australian intellectual community?]. The implication is that the ACP is peddling discourse about a decade too late. [These terms of reference already comprise the pillars of first year art school syllabus and discussion]. A continued focus on outmoded concerns has the potential to make the ACP a peripheral site of cultural production.

Any which way, there is a growing sense that the ACP is developing a narrow and didactic approach to its framing of contemporary photography, built on the exhausted modernist tenets of 'Form and Function'. This is not problematic when analysing the blandished categories of commercial and press photography [which are necessarily narrative – they sell us something], yet it hardly complicates readings of artists' photography when it registers in the program. The result of this monocularity is a show like *Memento Flori*.

Literally, *Memento Flori* is an exhibition of photographs, by artists, of flowers. The work is gathered together by sheer dint of its verisimilitude. This is a bloody-minded exercise indeed when we consider that along with 'form and function' came artistic intentionality: an artist's right to determine the reading of his [sic] work. I know the images in *Memento Flori* had multiple and allegorical readings, yet the force of similitude weighs heavy on a gallery garlanded with flower photos, so they seem nothing more than an exegesis of 'flower-ness'. [The selection of images seemed to have something to do with proper art scale and finish – they were all big and glossy, produced under the sign of 'high-production-values'].

The title of the show became a *reductio ad absurdum* – as every one of the images stood for an exegesis of death and fragility. And the show depicted the beauty of death what's more, not its cruelty. Yet we know from literature [and art] that flowers have an infinite set of associations: for Shakespeare there's the gamut; in Proust it's homosexual congress and titillation; likewise in Ginsberg or Mapplethorpe; for O'Keefe the pussy; for the first wave feminists, or core-imagist, the cunt.

I know that I could have spent longer in the room and spared each of the works closer personal attention, but the proliferation of blooms gave off a boring pulchritude and not the whiff of fancy. Sensitive curating requires the production of a honeycombed space in which images can remain connected to those around them but also have a distinct site of reference – images that are made to cleave too closely to a curatorial premise will.



Simon Rees