



## In Pat Brassington's House

Work in Progress #4

Pat Brassington

Guest Curator Helen McDonald

Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne

13 July – 15 September 2002

This survey show presents a selection of works by one of Australia's most important photo-based artists, perhaps our pre-eminent surrealist working today. The show offers an insight into the development of Brassington's practice, and Freud's well known link between the photographic process and the unconscious. Arranged in loosely chronological order, the first series, *1 + 1 = 3* [1983], is loaded with motifs that reappear in various guises throughout the exhibition. These are conventional 35mm black and white 'snapshots' taken inside a family house: a girl's legs spread-eagled on the carpet, caught by a flash, her upper torso hidden under a bed; a dog sprawled on the carpet, a young girl with her long blonde hair flung forward over her face; an intimate, downward view of a woman's legs and some pointy shoes on a grassy backdrop, presumably a self-portrait. Stylistically, in terms of the history of photography, they fall somewhere between Gary Winogrand and William Eggleston, but in Brassington's more performative hands these ordinary scenes form a vocabulary of domestic otherness. The series culminates in several images of a hairy man, whose fleshy skin becomes white and flaccid in the glow of bedroom sunlight. By the time we see the image of his aged naked bottom, we are already moving into the realm of the abject.

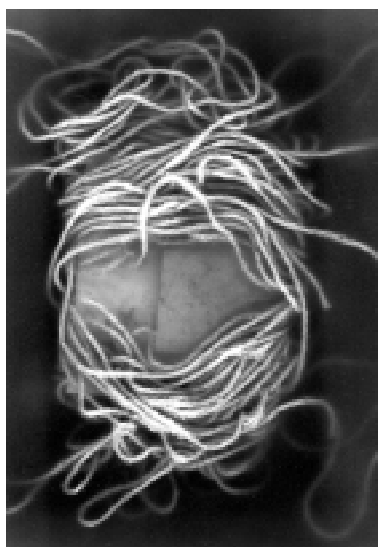
Brassington's insistent exploration of the psychic drives of perception seems almost unique in Australian photography. Her work has never fitted easily into categories of feminist photography, which has tended to move between expressing female desire as political consciousness to deconstructive postmodern interrogations of gender roles and representations. Though she has not been alone in working with the body and unconscious desire, Brassington's appropriations are of a different, more associative kind. *Memory au rebours* [1987] consists of found images collaged together and re-photographed – fairly conventional Surrealist motifs – an orange with an eye, a floating fish and so on. The series continues in 1989–90 with two sequences of three images. One features a bandage-like bondage outfit, a giant phallic coiled centipede and a doll, the other a famous still from Hitchcock's *Frenzy* [1972] of a woman's head with her tongue flopped to one side in murderous ecstasy.

Freud and contemporary psychoanalytical theorists such as Kristeva are influential forces behind Brassington's work, but thankfully a familiarity with them is not essential. *In my father's house* [1992] is an installation work comprising three plain wooden doors against the wall of the gallery. They open with a distinct creaky sound to reveal a large black and white image, perhaps from a children's book, and a smaller framed colour image. The juxtaposition of disparate images is especially successful in one highly sexualised combination of an elegant human back, dragon fins and a long red tongue. The uncanny familial theme is reworked with *In my mother's house* [1994], comprising some of the most memorable images in the exhibition: a crooked landscape painting on elaborate wallpaper, a blurred image of a freckled girl, and a neck with two bulbous Adam's apples.

The exhibition reveals a significant development in Brassington's practice in the mid-1990s. The year 1995, in particular, appears as a turning point, in which she produced several major bodies of work: *Rising damp*,

a wall-size grid of thirty-five black and white images of crumpled, stained underwear, and the melancholy *Pond* series, with its oblique, waterlogged clothes. *Adjacent*, *In the pines* [1995] shows a fragmented and absurdly gold-framed large rephotographed image of a woman in a Sunday dress, whose head is obscured in darkness, giving the maternal image a ghostly feel.

By 1996, however, Brassington left black and white behind to pursue digital manipulation in single, larger colour images. The best of these include *Feeding time* [1999], whose pelican-like legs and shoes returns us to the first works in the show; *Akimbo* [1996], a pink dress with a red vulva-like slit; *Twins* [2001], the twin legs from one dress; *Starlight* [2001] with its stockings over legs [or fingers] overlaid with stars; and *The frog* [1997], a magical underwater girl spurting red liquid from her mouth. We can't properly identify these images as anything from the real world; they are the photography of unconscious thought – weird, grotesquely pink, phantasmatic. Some comment directly on the gaze, such as the exhibitionist 'upskirt' *Camera* [2000], some are abject, such as *Boucher* [2001], with what looks like a pink teat or extended belly button squashed between a pair of legs. The humour can feel a little clumsy, as in the puzzling floating figure donning snorkels at the beach in *First wet* [2001]. In keeping with the work in progress idea of this series of exhibitions, this show concludes with two series of works in progress, *Fragments* [1992–2002], which are like pages from an artist's diary, and some performative portraits stretching across the artist's career – including some perversely fascinating images, such as a child taped to the wall. Brassington's work is significant not because of any immediate cultural relevance but because of her sustained devotion – personal but not expressive – to psychosexual undercurrents invisible in everyday life. It's also stimulating to witness a photographer working with the latency period allowed by the negative-positive process, so fantastically invigorated by the digital domain.



Daniel Palmer

Left: Pat Brassington, *The frog*, 1997

Bottom: Pat Brassington, *The pond*, *VIII Raw Nerve*, 1995 Photos courtesy the artist

Right: Simon Price and Simon Terrill, *Human Machine Landscape* [video still], 2002

Photo courtesy the artists



## Lost Highways on Flinders Lane

*Human Machine Landscape*

Simon Price, Simon Terrill

fortyfivedownstairs, Melbourne

16 – 25 May

Three little nouns, that's all. But what an almighty triumvirate of concepts to do justice to and wrangle meaning from, in the context of this intense though modest installation. It suggested in its title an almost foolhardy ambition at the heart of this budding collaborative practice of documentary film-maker Simon Price and sculptor Simon Terrill. Taken literally it translated as an extended exploration of the hitch-hike as a distinct, highly experiential mode of travel. More expansively, the project had an almost quixotic quest to see beyond the banality of the road journey, to reveal a magical world. Where servos are brooding theatrical places, slow moving trucks are menacing monsters and the flies that circle their roadside fluro-moons are in fact, far off galaxies spinning to their own time.

fortyfivedownstairs gallery is an evocative place, a transition into a subterranean environment, ideal for an exhibition that descends into the nocturnal reveries of night time travel. For though the ostensible subject was the forever transitional space of the hitcher, one of enforced immobility combined with the aleatory consequences of taking the first lift, *Human Machine Landscape* was as much located in the landscape of the night as the road from Darwin to Broome. I was reminded of [David] Lynch country, that endless mysterious black top of the *Lost Highway*.

Not that the artists didn't do their geographical homework in making this installation. Most of the material presented, both film and objects, was garnered on a five day odyssey as *bona fide* hitchers from Darwin to Melbourne, the process curing them both of the need to travel for some time. It is the intensity of that first hand experience and the sensitivity with which they have approached its translation into the mediated environment of the gallery that made this installation so successful. Analogous to the hitching process, the filming and recording may have been deliberately unprogrammable and unplanned, but the culling down and selection of material from endless hours is palpably considered.

Then there's the landscape of the title, with great chunks of the stuff used in a diorama, as well as caught on film, flash-lit during a lightning storm in the Northern Territory. It's an Australian landscape we are familiar with and also utterly estranged from, clinging as we do to our narrow strip of coastal conurbations. It's a landscape most of us experience as we do a film – fleeting sequences of images tearing past our eyes too fast for any one image to leave its trace. Hitching by contrast, with its inevitable periods of abandonment, is an opportunity to slow things down and get closer.

This is not however, a romantic illusion of communion. We are a far cry from what Ansel Adams would describe as the "deep personal distillation of spirit and concept which moulds these earthly facts into some transcendental emotional and spiritual experience".<sup>1</sup> What was being explored here was a social terrain. It is in fact, what becomes of the wilderness after we have taken possession of it. In place of Adams' Yosemite Canyon, there's a petrol station. In place of Wordsworth's Edenic rolling hills there's a disembodied voice that echoes through the gallery, reciting the names of objects in a landscape. "I see a car, I see a shack, I see an intersection, I see a telephone pole, I see a tree", a perpetual prosaic naming of singularities like a shopping list.

But despite the show's resolute resistance to transcendence or some latter day resurrection of the sublime, *Human Machine Landscape* had a meditative quality which transformed this inner city basement gallery into a 'tardis' of sorts. We were momentarily stranded in the dark; time slowed, senses were sharpened and the scale of things was less easily determined. It was a shift in focus which transformed the commonplace into something larger than life. Not a 'non-place' as Marc Auge would have it, but a place exuding *genius loci*. It made me want to get out on the road myself, or at least get out the Kerouac.

<sup>1</sup> Ansel Adams, *Our National Parks*, Bullfinch Press, Boston, Toronto, London, 1992: 113

Andrew Mackenzie