INTERVIEW WITH SIMONE KENNEDY

Ken Bolton: Simone, your last exhibition—White Weld at Greenaway Gallery in late 2006—was stunning. That was the show of institutional interiors: a series of large-format paintings—of details of these interiors (corners, entrances to stairwells etcetera) that might have been old hospitals, railway stations, rather penal orphanages, schools perhaps. I think your catalogue statement identified them as stations or schools.

Simone: I’m glad you liked them. Specifically, the interiors were of the London Underground and of my primary school in East London. I took photographs of these places back in 1992 the last time I visited the UK. Going back to these places meant I was able to explore the actual physicality of these sites that were so familiar to me as a child. When I was younger I always felt really important traveling on the Underground—it fascinated me: I loved the buzz of the place which was at times overwhelming and other times completely still. My school had a similar presence to it. That whole time in reality was treacherous and dark but for the most part I was quite happy. I believe I am by nature a positive person. I remember running across the concrete playground, arms outstretched, believing anything could happen, that it was a place of magic.

KB: Those paintings seemed at first—I mean from a distance—almost photo-realistic, though very different in intent & affect, one soon realized. As I remember, a number were paired mirror-images of each other, one image reversing the other, symmetrically joined, like rorsach blots.

We’ll talk about them more later. What I wanted to ask first was, What continuities have existed through your work to date? I remember an exhibition of mutant, dodo-ish animals, on neutral grounds in rather day-glo colours; a flip-book animation of a child-in-egg, that hatched & walked as it grew. It seemed to joke about Muybridge & those illustrations of evolution in which the walking chimp gradually straightens & grows, becoming ape-like, then neanderthal, homosapiens, &, finally, bland metrosexual. I know that for a good while you’ve been immersed in Balthus, Paula Rego, Klossowski.

Are there connections between these bodies of your work? They look very different.

Simone: All the works are strongly connected in that they are deeply personal, relating mostly to my childhood which is a continuing
theme. The flip-book drawings are from a dream and illustrate a child being born of a brain. The child then grows and develops as it walks etc. It refers to a type of cyclic conditioning, of patterns repeated. It illustrates the thin line of action versus consequence, attributable in this case to absence.

I admire Rego for the complex violence in her work and especially for her animal paintings from the eighties. I look at these works and want more every time, they are addictive, so human, I relate to every detail.

**KB:** Yet your own work is fairly deliberate, even ‘cool;’ in style—though you’ve moved through a few styles. Rego always seems to me sort of muscularly expressive (without being exactly expressionist).

**Simone:** Yes, she has these interesting blurred borders of technique that she appropriates for each body of work. The animal paintings were executed quickly; the line is spontaneous, managing successfully to convey all of those raw emotions in what seems like a direct exchange of ideas. Her pastel works on canvas, portraying women with the fundamental characteristics of the dog are more ambiguous and have a strong psychological edge. Her ideas are almost geometric on the positioning of the body, they are quite sculptural.

As to my own work—well, while I don’t generally make formal studies, prior to painting I tend to draw on the canvas and sketch separately the proportions of the work. Most of the time it is deliberate, as there is often a narrative to each section, that is to say every element of the work is ‘symbolized’, made symbolic or emblematic, meaning deepened & condensed. It becomes a process of transferring meaning to the work. I associate the motifs so as to work a story and formulate ideas for a long time before they are finally executed.

**KB:** Which works are we talking about here?

**Simone:** The painting *Blue Moon* is a good example of how I like to work. The *Underground* series was different in as much as colour was the symbolic underpinning, specifically yellow and black.

**KB:** *Blue Moon* is like a weird odalisque that turns out to be… the minotaur, or something spooky. And its looking at you is the great trick. There’s the sexual, pubic seeming hair motif on the right, led into by the red patterns that begin to seem also comic-book style
Simone: I started work on *Blue Moon* in 2005 and finished April 2006.

KB: When you say this is an example of how you work, you mean that the symbolism has been very deliberately condensed & combined? How intuitive is it? A process of lots of sketching? And is there much theoretical research involved—for particular bodies of work, I mean? (I mean, I guess you are curious enough to be reading and thinking most of the time when you can, a little Lacan here, a little Irigaray there?) What was behind *these* works?

Simone: Interesting question. Yes, I would say the symbolism is condensed and combined—that’s a nice way of putting it. *Blue Moon* is a self portrait—and is quite condensed, although it could be more so. There has to be some spatial relativity in the composition.

KB: “Relativity”? I know you don’t mean E=MC Squared. Do you mean ‘give & take’? uncertainty? flexibility? or a sense of relation between parts, or between image & overall composition?

Simone: I mean between the image and the overall composition—a sense of proportion between parts is important and this, of course, is ultimately determined by the allegory, every aspect is symbolic.

KB: Got it.

Simone: I’m quite obsessed with symmetry, so often there will be sketching (on the canvas) to get it to the point where it feels comfortable. Change occurs naturally through the narrative, though at some point the work is given over to an unexplainable set of rules.

There is always a kind of ‘life’ that occurs later in the work, and perhaps this is the intuitive stage, but I bring a lot of different things to an individual piece.

KB: This occurs as you’re doing them: you mean that the work begins to exceed or grow away from its originally intended destination or statement? At what stage, technically, does this happen? I ask because, again, the paintings seem very deliberate, or deliberate.

Simone: Technically the work is ‘open’ until it has ended. I try to resolve as much as possible before I paint, and this is a very structured way to work and to a certain extent for me this is a natural way. Then again, my background is in Illustration and design, so it is
logical I would utilize the training I have in this area. Everything feeds into everything. With the *Underground* series I had very firm ideas of what I needed to establish through colour. With those particular works the black was the challenge.

In the past I have over-deliberated on some paintings and as a consequence the main idea is lost, only to ‘loom’, in essence, and return to other works stronger and more defined.

On occasions ideas have happened in a single hit and this is always special: they invariably convey a sense of assuredness, of a natural trajectory.

As to research: well, something I’ve read, listened to and been inspired by, or something I’ve seen, will instigate deeper thoughts that in turn will be transferred. I treasure this aspect of the process. You see, the narrative is the ‘experience’, for me this is the intellect: it’s about emotion that’s crammed full of experience. It’s always there, available, a constant, simply waiting to be utilized and reinvented for the very human purpose of communicating. I have a real need to communicate, it’s a drive and a responsibility that I both love and hate.

I tend to source books on other artists most of the time, but Cixous interests me, and that whole idea of deconstruction, as does Husserl and his thinking on phenomenology. I always need more time to read but producing the idea generally dominates.

With every painting I complete I see a part of myself that would not exist otherwise. It is there, something more, something deeper. I see this in the work of Bourgeois, particularly *She Fox*, the black marble sculpture that so violently speaks of absence and fear. This is without question her seminal work on the mother but then, there came those spiders…

**KB:** I find it interesting that you say you are concerned with ‘communicating’. To me your works carry a fair amount of emotional & psychic charge but are also rather hermetic, unyielding—at the same time as they intrigue & so invite decipherment. To me it might be less that they are about the personal (or about what is personal for you) than that they derive impetus & strength from that area. I’d have thought that, in a sense, what they finally offer (via a knotted formula, or dense symbolic condensation, say) is offered not so much as autobiographical than as generalisable proposition: on alienation, on notions of self & other. They seem impersonal & objective. Those *White Weld* paintings particularly. Not expressionist, not messily
confessional, but rather clinically curious & sharp about the only subject you have full access to. Which is ‘you’, of course.

**Simone:** Absolutely. I think you’re right. The work stems from a history of abandonment—that’s where it gets its strength, from the felt absence of others. I expect I’m working through a kind of psychosis associated with absence. It’s still about control—but then again if it wasn’t controlled it would become destructive. Perhaps that is why there are hermetic and objective qualities in the work, put there rather as a sense of salvation.

**KB:** Yes. I didn’t mean to suggest that there was no heat in your work either. Not that you would mind, perhaps, but that wasn’t what I meant at all. The mother—probably that should be treated as a category, capitalized & given scare quotes. The ‘Mother’ is a theme linking different sequences of your works?

**Simone:** The ‘Mother’ appears in *The Young Girls* series—and every one of the beads sewn into the brain element of *The Absent Mother* series is the ‘Mother’; the same applies to the ‘absence’ in the *White Weld* series. The ‘Mother’ is inextricably linked to everything I work on. It’s at a subconscious level. I play and manipulate a scene to expel a whole manner of truths.

**KB:** “Expelled” for you maybe. Do you then think, *Well, that’s one way of looking at it?* Or, perhaps, *So that’s what I think!?* And then ‘move on’—which may just be a circling of the problem, looking for another angle?

For the viewer they don’t necessarily come across as ‘expelled’, so much, but as ‘focused on’—very, very sharply: hence the works’ much-remarked intensity.

**Simone:** I like the idea of transferring life into work, that the work ultimately has to carry force and that it’s able to convey this across to the viewer.

I recently made a study on paper for a painting and the whole image fell into place. It is such a direct symptom of what I have experienced and in that sense it is pure.

It is not always clear to me what it is I am saying in the work and I do think I circle the same issues. Sometimes that is very much a conscious decision. I have certainly had a great deal of confusion in my life over the years which in turn has made me a complicated person and I realize there is no single answer for any given situation,
that just simply doesn’t exist.

Ultimately what’s important is what I am able to give out: whatever it is matters, because it gets me closer to myself. In truth I have lived by myself for all my life: my mother has been absent to me emotionally and psychologically and I have never got along well with my step father, so consequently I am a product of then and now, a sum of parts lived.

Visualizing and executing these thoughts reveal subtleties of my existence that would otherwise be lost. Perhaps this isn’t important in a broad sense but I believe everything is significant. It is important to have an opinion.

**KB:** The yellow in those *White Weld* or ‘Underground’ paintings is at first simply ‘attractive’. But pretty immediately it registers as more interestingly ambiguous: a slightly jaundiced, distempered amniotic—listless, inattentive, baleful, unkind. The areas depicted by the paintings are institutional & suggest maintenance of *minimums* of civil care, of civil use, & conventions of use, a roughly democratic sharing—people keeping to the left, say, behaviour being kept ‘discreet’ or considerate. And they suggest rules, an unseen authority (the (government, the railway, the hospital, the school, the welfare system). This is Society filling in for the Absent Mother, yes?

The Mother is not the class of mothers, and is not your own mother? Is it the mother as a force, & a source of affection & care & succour & security?—& a source of *threat* as possible withholder of these things?

**Simone:** I find it difficult to look at yellow for too long: it starts to dissolve in front of you. It’s almost impossible to keep a hold of and, within the paintings, its long-held associations with cowardice pose as a likely metaphor for absence and The ‘Mother’.

Consequently I generally adulterate yellow with blue violet as this prepares me (psychologically) to initiate working the concept. Essentially this is to permeate the image with emotions that I experienced as a child, putting a face to fear I think. Yellow is connected to the deeper confusion felt, leading to question the ‘Mother’ (my mother) and, in a broader sense, ‘Mothering’.

**KB:** The black you spoke of as difficult. How did it function in these paintings? To the degree that the paintings are monochromatic (or duo-chromatic: dark modelling on a yellow ground—or is it *within* a yellow ‘atmosphere’) then the black might read as incident *within* a
yellow state or existence, or as structure within a yellow inchoateness?

**Simone:** The black was the challenge. It's difficult to explain and not easy to classify but could be as simple as producing a presence through absence (through yellow into black or vice versa). For me yellow and black could easily be one and the same (psychologically), in many ways it has become a state of being working with that colour (yellow).

Development in what I really want to achieve. It will continue to be elusive because as I change there is always more to say, always more understanding. I can only know myself so much today and tomorrow. I despise that limitation—and I know there is fear, fear of seeing. I got close to that with the last series and I stopped myself and started writing instead. It was interesting… to have that break. It was necessary, but at every turn I need to take things further and I'm always excited by that.

**KB:** Simone, how does your art fit within a map of recent Adelaide art, do you think? (Maybe you don't think about this in any case.)

**Simone:** The painting and producing of the early foetal forms—with the follow on of *Lifeline* and *The Young Girls* series—were all obsessive, highly motivated periods with not much concern for what was currently being shown. It was always going to be just what it was, the whole subjective trip, its purpose to bring a sense of truth to the viewer. Upon reflection it just ended up being cryptic (to the viewer I think).

There are some interesting artists here. But I just assume everyone is driven to do their own thing regardless.

**KB:** Are there artists locally whose work is at all comparable? Not the installation crowd, perhaps—but Sarah CrowEST, Anna Platten? Nic Folland works a heavy symbol or metaphor sometimes

**Simone:** Well I identify more with the work of Nicolas Folland, (the chandelier at Paul [Greenaway]'s stayed with me for quite a while) than I do of either Sarah or Anna’s. Others I like, not all of them South Australians, are Adam Cullen, Sally Smart and Bronwyn Platten as well as the late Bronwyn Oliver, and Richard Grayson’s text paintings—and Juan Davilla (a definite favourite).

But I don’t compare myself with anyone. Most of the time I feel a form of alienation but it’s not something I put a microscope to (unless I'm
painting) and at this point in time there are no answers to this reality which is why it is crucial to invent another. This is naturally redemptive for me.

Generally speaking, though, I feel drawn towards artists such as Bacon, Bourgeois, Larry Clark, Beuys. Including most of those Brit artists from the 90’s, especially Gillian Wearing. I saw a catalogue just recently of the work of Greg Geraghty at Greenaway Gallery which I thought was very interesting in a DADA sense, Sally Smart has that too I think.

**KB:** Did you come through the Adelaide TAFE art school—or UniSA? Not Adelaide Central School, or were you from interstate or self-taught?

**Simone:** When I first arrived in Adelaide, from the UK, I wasn’t aware of TAFE, instead I studied Design at the SACAE (formerly South Australian College of Advanced Education), Underdale.

**KB:** That’s the Art School, sure enough!

**Simone:** In the eighties there was hardly a computer in sight and it was very hands on, designing book covers, choosing fonts and working with Gouache. The design studios overlooked the art rooms on the ground floor and I often felt that things were more interesting ‘downstairs’. Upon reflection I didn’t fit in with the design culture and I guess that was the beginning of a serious shift.

In answer to your question though, I don’t feel as if I belong to any sector. My education in England having been very much a hit and miss affair—I barely attended my senior school in the UK—I decided to go back to study at Uni SA. Being at the University was important for me at that time. It was grounding and I rediscovered artists like Bourgeois, Magritte, Gillian Wearing, Bellmer, Balthus and Rachel Whiteread. Halfway through the course I ‘realized’ ‘The Absent Mother’; and I met a few people who were special and understood the complexities of what I wanted to do and where I wanted to head.

But—How does it fit in with recent Adelaide art?

**KB:** Another time, another place for answering that, I think. But the paintings in the White Weld series—done from projections, or more freely composed?

**Simone:** Actually both, although I never use projections just black and white enlargements which I then transfer to the canvas using a graphite tracing paper. Prior to this procedure I include or omit various
things from the composition. It is yet another deliberation but a very stimulating one, shuffling elements, formulating ideas. I find it contributes in a very direct sense exactly what I want to put across to the viewer.