

Probing art's furry edges: Simone Kennedy's *We are all Children of the Stars*

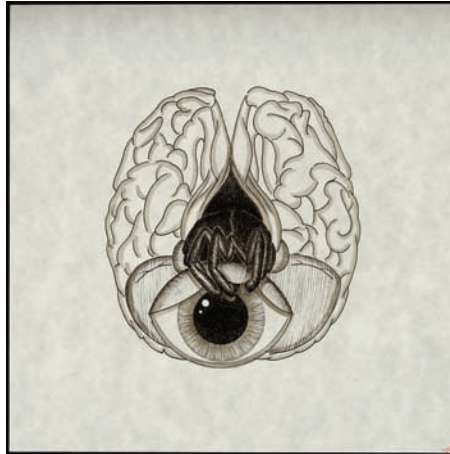
SERA WATERS

Simone Kennedy's project *We are all Children of the Stars* is spider-like in its dark fleetingness; the spider a motif used repeatedly in this body of work. Like an arachnid, inferences and implications dart into corners and out of sight. For those 'in tune' a presence of something lurking near can be sensed rather than sighted. And when encountered, however momentarily, the terrifying actuality of this creature, its abhorrence coupled with its vulnerability and your accountability, makes for an unpleasant confrontation. The wary, fearful reactions spiders can induce emerge as central concerns in this project. As with Kennedy's extensive practice so far, the unwelcome and psychologically ungraspable, namely the undesirable difficulties in human relationships, is rendered matter-of-factly as a reoccurring aspect of life; softly humbling and there.

We are all Children of the Stars attains its obscurity partly due to Kennedy's use of multiple manifestations, making possible differing encounters. In a four-month-long showing, an installation of a looming Perspex corner teeming with furry, folded spider motifs, twenty-six numbered lines of text and a series of ink drawings, transforms the foyer of Adelaide's Artlab Australia. A small publication marries the illustrations and text into a folkloric-type tale and, in typical contemporary practice, the documented project lives on through the artist's website. Each variation of this work has a similar sense of perplexing simplicity, a fastidious paring back to only the very essential elements. The publication and installation are in black and subtle variations of white (a departure from Kennedy's usual bright palette), visual language adheres to a symbology, and the lines of text are efficiently poetic. Yet in spite of this apparentness, *We are all Children of the Stars* speaks an enigmatic and unfathomable language which playfully confounds perception, narrative and the material and spatial expectation of the current 'art world'.

Kennedy's work probes the openness and inclusivity that theories of contemporary art claim. She makes art that hovers near 'art's' edges, its margins and boundaries that are theoretically dissolving but that occasionally, in pre-postmodern style, hang on. For instance, the placement of her artwork in the Artlab foyer moves beyond usual gallery-based reception to make way for unexpected interactions. Artlab staff noticed that visitors plagued by arachnophobia were obviously affected more than others. Yet Artlab has a critical link with other art institutions, staff and practitioners, and houses a yearly program of exhibitions for their foyer gallery site. Thus Kennedy's utilisation of this site is cheekily done, in that her work is posited intentionally within and beyond persistent margins, nodding knowingly to conventions while also pushing them.

Kennedy's use of visual language and concepts similarly toy with the marginal, pointing to the distant terrain of possibilities that post-disciplinarity allows. Her bold, illustrative and symbolic style is reminiscent of graphic design, her text and publication are not dissimilar to a children's book, and her spidery flocked wall patterns are intimately decorative and homely. Kennedy appears to evoke these visual and written languages most common to design



disciplines as a way into the 'everyday', as well as to bypass and challenge (like her selection of site) any material expectations within contemporary art. Notably, Kennedy is also trained as an illustrator so in applying this style of visual language she evokes her own 'everyday'. The 'everyday' as a theoretical undercurrent draws attention to aspects of life which are familiar but often overlooked. Renewed value is given to the ordinary, small gestures and non-monumental moments, taking in, it could be suggested, the 'decorative' (an often disparagingly used descriptor). The power of the decorative is the want to spend time with and be drawn to an image enough to adapt, repeat and even live with it. Ideas like 'everyday' and 'decorative' reign art into the day-to-day reality of repetition: the playing out of thought patterns, family routines, bodily habits, work schedules – replicated motifs to enhance living spaces or enable escapism. Kennedy's simplification of forms, reduction of colour, and honing of text could only have been found through a knowing that repetition, intimacy and time enable. Her personal symbology then has arisen from lived experience, from a repetitive working through and translation of actions and thoughts.

Kennedy's 'dead' and decorative installation, rows of black spiders linked from ceiling to floor, relies on such repetition, using gestures

of cutting and arranging over and over again. Reminiscent of wall paper, the spiders en masse not only speak of time but as symbols of fear fixed to an everyday environment. Like Aldo Iacobelli's wall paper paintings of 2002 which matched Laura Ashley-type floral patterns with written atrocities (and played with the notion of artist as decorator),¹ Kennedy draws attention to visions that are typically peripheral (spiders and wallpaper). Yet the repetition of the furry creature into a uniform pattern gives it innocuous, even unseeable, possibilities, which raise questions around the shifting affect of their presence.

Many of Kennedy's accompanying twenty-six ink drawings repeat the spider motif. However rather than being still and lifeless, the spider is shown interacting with symbolic representations of the human body, especially the brain and eye. On top of and within these centres of seeing Kennedy places the spider peeking, hiding, cowering, then finally folded upon itself deathly still. Paired with each detailed drawing is a line of text in which an emotionally dark narrative unfolds. Kennedy leaves much space between the visual and textual story to allow her 'girl', 'woman' and spider subjects to shift and change as they encounter the presence of one another through a 'window'. The bodily environment though returns the narrative again and again back to ideas around understanding, perception, and human ways of comprehending happenings; between girl and woman, spider and presence.

Kennedy's use of these time-laden spider motifs repetitively read as an investment of herself into difficult psychological reckonings and confronting investigations. Like many of her previous exhibitions, namely *The Orphans* (Greenaway Art Gallery), or *Learning to Speak* (also at Artlab in 2007), Kennedy here too explores parental relationships, particularly that of her absent mother. While *We are all Children of the Stars* gives shape to the artist's autobiographical recollections, it does also speak more generally about some discomfiting aspects of human relationships; unbridgeable divides and hurtful behaviour. So though Kennedy applies her own symbolic language to the visual and textual elements of this project, the use of familiar bodily depictions with fairytale-style text gives room to readings beyond intention. The story, or rather the concept of this project, importantly occurs between and amongst Kennedy's makings; between lines of text and symbolic images, between installations in foyers and home decor, and between perception and reception. As in life this story has no fixed state nor meaning; it is in constant flux, fleeting and just out of reach.

1. Sarah Thomas, 'Aldo Iacobelli: The Politics of Painting', *Broadsheet*, 2003, p. 27.

Simone Kennedy's *We are all Children of the Stars* was shown at Artlab Australia, Adelaide, 1 October 2010 to 1 February 2011. Kennedy is represented by Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide: www.greenaway.com.au

Sera Waters is an Adelaide-based artist, writer and lecturer.

1 + 2/ Elements of Simone Kennedy's *We are all Children of the Stars* installation in the foyer of Artlab, Adelaide, 2010-11, including an example from her series of ink drawings and part of her spider-filled Perspex corner/screen.