

Catalogue essay



The Young Girls

The bold and darkly surreal paintings of Simone Kennedy shiver with an emotional narrative, which is encoded, but nonetheless powerful. Characteristically inserting a shifting vocabulary of chameleon part-human, part-animal beings and other creatures into her vignettes, there are echoes of Paula Rego and of the metamorphoses of the female form of Hans Bellmer's fetishistic *Poupées*.

Writing in *Modern Painters* about the work of Paula Rego, Germaine Greer has observed the Portuguese-born artist's use of "animal motifs as a way of saying the unsayable."¹ *The Young Girls* series of paintings exudes a vulnerability which is achingly palpable and is nowhere more evident than in Kennedy's depiction on a perch, of a hybrid, bird/nakedly-human creature with youthful female breasts, truncated limbs and bare human back. A sense of exposure and more than that, of portent, is pervasive.

Alternately large/dominant and small/vulnerable, the lovebird is a recurring motif that assumes contrary active and passive roles, from the diminutive yellow bird of *The Yellow Chair* to the large, brightly plumed creature/tormentor *Razorback* and the earlier *The Big Sleep* (2001). In the nightmare-like tableau of *Soft tissue memory*, scale is manipulated and distorted for dramatic effect - a device also favoured by Paula Rego. By positioning a miniature lamb as helpless observer, before a swathed and partially obscured bird/mother figure awash with red, the impression of powerlessness is intensified. Paralleling the troubled narrative of her canvases, Kennedy, who frequently alludes to the subliminal impact of colour, employs a bright palette that has been adulterated - a muddy ochre/yellow, a dull chartreuse green, the uncanny pink of a phallic nose, the russet red of danger, passion, blood.

Kennedy titled her recent solo exhibition of one hundred and four drawings and soft sculpture at Adelaide's AIT Arts Gallery *The Absent Mother* and in that context the trio of blackly shrouded birds - in close physical but uncommunicative proximity in the background of *The Street* - acquires a particular and unsettling resonance. Dominating the foreground is a wide-eyed faun like creature - a childhood toy given at birth to the artist. Indubitably a sense not simply of aloneness, but of abandonment pervades the paintings of *The Young Girls*. The vaguely terrifying black-shrouded heads which recur in *The Street*, *Maude* and *The Yellow Chair* speak of a lack of communication, of a studied obliviousness that exudes hostility, and something indefinably more sinister.

Louise Bourgeois has referred in interviews to her sculpture *The Destruction of the Father* (1974) as a work of exorcism and ultimately catharsis, affirming the existence of art as an escape mechanism that facilitates a process which ultimately "means elimination."² The significance of process has also been raised by Victor Willing, the partner of Paula Rego. "Aggressions resulting from this dominance, provoke violence and in the pictures, violence against the personae of the story is matched or surpassed, by the violence done by the artist in achieving the final image of the picture."³

Within the implicit violence of Kennedy's body of work, there appears no figure of the redeemer, other than the self and it is the search for identity with its concomitant exploration of the role of motherhood which propels these compelling canvases. Of greater import than superficial similarities with the Freudian-Surrealist work of Bellmer, are the points of differentiation. As *The Absent Mother* series and its accompanying flip book also revealed, there exists the potential for revisualisation and the recasting of roles, in a fresh, post-patriarchal and sometimes even witty, discourse about maternity.⁴

Wendy Walker © August 2003

Endnotes

1. Greer, Germaine, *Modern Painters, Writers on Artists*, Dorling Kindersley, Great Britain, 2002, p 67
2. *Louise Bourgeois, Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, Bernadac, M.L. & Obrist H.U. (eds), Violette Editions, London, 1998, p 249.
3. Willing, Victor, *op.cit.* p.70
4. As Madelon Sprengnether notes in *The Spectral Mother* (Cornell University Press, NY, 1990, p. 216) Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray all indicate that there is "something special about a mother's discourse, hitherto repressed from culture."