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BEYOND REAL

PART 1 DRESSING UP

Curated by Alasdair Foster

PETER BURKE, RAY COOK, BERNARD FAUCON, MARCUS LEATHERDALE, GEORGE PLATT LYNES, CHRISTOPHER MAKOS, RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD, POLIXENI PAPANETROU, MAN RAY, LUKE ROBERTS, LUCAS SAMARAS, CINDY SHERMAN

While the concept of the realist document established itself as the dominant virtue of photography in the 20th century the practice of constructing and staging images for the camera has enjoyed a series of vagues.

The photograph is essentially a fiction - a two-dimensional arrangement of particles that we have learned to relate to our lived four-dimensional world of perception. However, the apparent verisimilitude of the photograph and the sense that it is "something directly stenciled off the real", as Susan Sontag described it, has engendered an essential duality in the medium. In the early decades of photography, it was understood as an extension of the art of drawing and so questions of whether or not an image was set-up before the camera or relied on effects achieved using tricks such as multiple negatives was not considered of great significance. Towards the end of the century, the increasing affluence brought about by industrialisation and the decreasing stability of European politics saw the medium developing on one front as a dispassionate tool of science and on the other looking longingly back to the aesthetic forms of the beaux arts and a romantic notion of the past.

It took almost a century to disentangle the new medium from the concepts of the older visual arts and, like the child who makes his way in the world, while it struck out on its own path, it carried within it the traces of its antecedence.

In focusing on the past 100 years this exhibition draws on works which, for the most part, grew out of the modernist ideals that dominated the disillusionment and forward-looking dynamic that followed the carnage of World War I. In the period between the two world wars the anarchic and anti-authoritarian tenets of Dada and later the Surrealist fascination with the unconscious and the irrational fueled a new form of avant-garde photography. The works of Sigmund Freud offered a platform from which to break free of the double standards of the 19th century bourgeoisie to more openly explore and celebrate sex and particularly the female body, while the archetypes of classical mythology found fresh application through the theories of Carl Jung and a more circumspect expression for less acceptable erotic foci.

In the fifties and early sixties, a period of rapid economic growth coupled with a broadly conservative moral and political attitude seemed to subdue the artistic

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aspirations of photographers. The medium became, primarily, an instrument of information rather than change, illustrating the achievements of an increasingly affluent society (as it was described by the economist John Kenneth Galbraith) and the wider world opening up through the nascent industry of tourism.

The period from the mid-sixties and through the seventies was one of idealism, experimentation and the struggle for personal liberty. There was an unprecedented focus on the individual, especially when defined as part of a minority counter culture, and a newfound interest in the subconscious, this time in terms of the hallucinogenic and the spiritual. These were heady decades for photography as it hitched its cart to the art-world wagon once more, initially reveling in the rediscovery of the photo-art of the past and optimistically exploring the potential of the medium before negotiating the somewhat bumpy byways ahead.

Within the paradox of postmodern thinking meaning became highly relativistic, subject to context and interpretation, while counter-culture idealism congealed into a series of increasingly doctrinaire, and at times mutually conflicting, political stances. Constructed images became either the tools of instruction - illustrating literary ideas of the time and thus lending themselves to easy written deconstruction - or assertions of diversity from a variety of competing singular perspectives.

With the shift from colonialism to globalization at the turn of the millennium, the rapid growth of computing technology and communications networks, and the eclipsing of the products of consumption by an abstract notion of the brand, the mores and preoccupations of the most recent generational cohort have changed again. With the breakdown of any clear divide between the real and the hyperreal (virtual gaming, reality TV, high-concept brands and on-line relationships), the dual qualities of photographic realism and artifice have ceased to seem paradoxical. They have simply become a manifestation of the norm. At the same time the pursuit of meaning which, in postmodernism all-to-often became didactic, has been overtaken by a fascination with the affective and the abridged accelerated impressionistic narrative format of the movie trailer and the video clip. And where critique remains, it is focussed not so much on material of world affairs as on its mediation.

The practice of an individual artist does not, of course, fit neatly into the tidy generational demarcations and socio-cultural currents mapped out above. But, taken collectively, the styles and preoccupations can be seen as they ebb and flow across the photomedia tableaux of the past century. More importantly, what these works reveal, aside from the passage of social conditions and philosophical paradigms, is the variety of often-complex sometimes-subtle human experiences that can resonate in the gap between the convention of photographic realism and the intrinsic nature of photographic artifice.

Man Ray (1890-1976)

from *Résurrection des Mannequins* 1938/1966 artist book Collection of the National Gallery of Australia



Man Ray worked in a variety of media including painting, crafted objects, photography and film, and was greatly influenced Dada and later Surrealism. He was fascinated by the female body and eroticism in general, spurred on by the surrealists' valorizing of the work of de Sade and the new ideas on psychology described by Freud and Jung. The decorated mannequins photographed here combine this fascination with a range of bizarrely random fashion accoutrements from dining forks to a birdcage. In one image, the trappings of soldiery - the spirit stove, the tin helmet etc - parody war in an echo of the earlier Dadaist anarchic reaction against World War I.

George Platt Lynes (1907-1955)

Various mythical tableaux 1936-39 gelatin silver prints Collection of the National

Gallery of Australia



Made in a similar period in the USA, George Platt Lynes' camp, anguished evocations of classical myth and legend stem from an erotic fascination with the bodies of men. Abandoning youthful literary aspirations, he opened his first photographic studio in 1932 and, for a time, became one of the most sought-after fashion and portrait photographers in America. However, it is for his male nudes that he is now best remembered. They began in the guise of characters from classical mythology, both veiling their erotic focus and alluding to the angst of repression. After the war, Lynes became involved with Alfred Kinsey's researches into human sexuality and his work took on a more modern style while nonetheless retaining its brooding introspection.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925-1972)

from *The Diary of Lucybelle Crater* 1970-72 gelatin silver print Collection of the National Gallery of Australia

If Lynes looked back to classical Greece, Ralph Eugene Meatyard's later works are Gothic in style. Born, ironically enough, in the Illinois town of Normal, his most celebrated work was made at the very end of his life. Using the simple device of dime-store Halloween masks Meatyard posed family and friends in standard snapshot groupings to create *The Diary of Lucybelle Crater*. It's a creepy evocation of mid-western grotesque that succeeds despite the very obvious ploy involved, simply because the poses are so natural and seem so familiar. Meatyard is sometimes mistakenly claimed as precursor of postmodernism, but his creative roots are much more closely allied to the inter-war fascination with surrealism and exploration of the subconscious.

Cindy Sherman (1954-)

four untitled photographs 1981-02 type C prints Collection of the National Gallery of Australia

Postmodernism is the province of the baby boomers. And while constructed imagery finds another vogue in the works of artists such as Cindy Sherman, Bernard Faucon and Calum Colvin it is with very different ends in mind. Sherman came to prominence not long after graduating from art school with her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80). Presented as black and white 10 x 8 glossy prints in the manner of movie publicity, she took on not characters but female stereotypes of popular culture. In due course she moved on to larger colour work with less staging and more focus on lighting and facial expression, examples of which are included in this exhibition. Sherman's images operate as both self-deconstructing object lessons and as a kind of feminist trap. Stripped of narrative detail the images lay bare the mannerisms of gender stereotyping for those with eyes to see, while the artist reserves her contempt for those unreconstructed male viewers who simply find the images sexy.

Bernard Faucon (1950-)

from *Les Grandes Vacances* 1979-81 carbon Fresson prints Collection of the National Gallery of Australia

Bernard Faucon came to fame in the late seventies with his beautiful but disquieting images of boys at play, most of whom are performed by shop dummies. At first glance, the images are seemingly nostalgic for childhood past and, indeed, Faucon remembers his own childhood fondly. But the images are laced with a sense of the ominous at odds with childlike innocence and the fixed, overdrawn expressions painted onto the mannequins seem far from the spontaneity of youth. A philosopher by training, Faucon's works suggest a sense of the poetic and the metaphysical yet the images remain ambiguous and strangely dislocated from both the realm of memory and that of direct meaning. Questions to which no answers come.

Lucas Samaras (1936-)

Photo-transformations 1973-04 modified SX-70 Polaroid prints Collection of the National Gallery of Australia



Born in Greece and living in the United States, Lucas Samaras began as a sculptor before discovering the Polaroid - with its unique, self-developing prints. The works included are all self-portraits made using the SX70 system which, because of its envelop construction, permits the image to be physically modified by pressing hard on the clear plastic of the upper surface. The resulting distortions create a grotesquely expressive effect through direct contact, and while the resulting Polaroid is certainly a photographic image, it is also a sculpted object.

Christopher Makos (1948-)

Altered Image: Five Photographs of Andy Warhol 1982 gelatin silver prints Collection of the National Gallery of Australia

Christopher Makos played a seminal role in the New York's art scene in the eighties. He was a close friend of Andy Warhol who called him "the most modern photographer in America". As a young man Makos had worked as an apprentice to Man Ray and in these stark portraits of Warhol in wig and make-up one can see the same direct approach and overt use of props that characterise Man Ray's mannequin images. Indeed, Warhol presents himself to the camera as a kind of knowing mannequin both self-parodic and strangely absent - a bizarre tabula rasa on which the viewer may write their own narrative.

Marcus Leatherdale (1952-)

from *NYC Photographs* 1985 gelatin silver prints Collection of the National Gallery of Australia

Marcus Leatherdale first came to prominence in New York in the mid-eighties - part of a set of fashionable artists focusing on the male body that included Robert Mapplethorpe. Typical of the period, these images have little interest in the details of character or narrative, existing primarily as erotically charged but formally executed archetypes. The dusty body paint is characteristic of other photographers of the nude from this period such as Victor Skrebneski. If Mapplethorpe's pneumatic, shiny, hairless musclemen suggest polished metal, then these gritty surfaces evoke the texture of cold stone or rusty metal.

Luke Roberts (1952-)

Close Encounters series 2002 lithographic prints Courtesy of the Paul Eliadis Collection, Bellas Milani Gallery, Brisbane and Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide



Considerably more involved are the many forms and strategies of the Australian artist

Luke Roberts. Like Cindy Sherman, he performs the roles central to his work, but unlike Sherman, his alter egos are idiosyncratic evolving characters rather than ideologically charged generic types. In a practice that spans painting, performance and photomedia he has taken on various roles including Frida Kahlo, Andy Warhol and Jesus Christ. Here he portrays his most famous creation: Pope Alice. An enigmatic obverse to another of his characters - the hedonistic voluptuary, Alice Jitterbug - the extraterrestrial female pontiff hails from the outer reaches of the solar system. She is the Spiritual Leader of the Lost Continent of Mu and self-proclaimed World's Greatest Living Curiosity.

Polixeni Papapetrou (1960-)

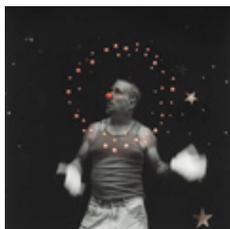
from *Dreamchild* 2002-03 type C prints Courtesy of Stills Gallery, Sydney and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art, Melbourne



While Faucon's images hark back to childhood past, those of Polixeni Papapetrou explore historical tastes and ideas through present-day games of dress-ups with her daughter, Olympia. Here the tableau becomes a theatre of possibility in a game of What-If? as different genders, races, historical stereotypes and characters from fiction are briefly tried on for size. It is a true collaboration in the sense that neither participant knows the full story. The child, while intent upon the game and the impetus behind many of the sessions, cannot fully understand what it means to portray these characters in the context of the artwork as it passes into the wider world, and the mother can never fully know the mind of the child. Both act, as parents and children have throughout the ages, on trust and intuition. And the images never completely settle, remaining vivid and open encouraging us into a silent dialogue.

Ray Cook (1962-)

from *Not With a Bang But a Whimper* 2004 toned gelatin silver prints Courtesy of Queensland Centre for Photography



Brisbane-based artist Ray Cook has made constructed tableaux imagery for many years. His earlier work sat somewhere between gothic netherworld of Joel Peter Witkin and Arthur Tress' theatre of the mind, but here in his newer images we see a more direct and personal approach. The works respond to the changing context in which he finds himself as a gay man, with AIDS no longer the certain death sentence it once was and the mass media entertainment embracing the homosexual male character as something other than the lonely, diseased outcast, albeit replacing the stereotype with that of the affable clown. And, like the rest of us, Cook is getting older. In these images, he becomes the self-deprecating tragi-comic clown reflecting upon his life, survival, vanity and aging.

Peter Burke (1963-)

Honesty™ and *Relevation*™ 2004 billboards Courtesy of Shelly Innocence™



If Pope Alice inhabits the extraterrestrial and the pontifical then Peter Burke's creation, Shelly Innocence™, is firmly a woman of the mass media. An international athlete, supermodel and retail in-store demonstrator, Shelly Innocence takes high concept marketing to the limit with a range of pre-packaged human experiences ranging from Happiness™ and Desire™ to Trust™ and Integrity™ (but not Commitment™ or Revolution™, which are both discontinued lines). To bring Shelly Innocence into the gallery is, in effect, to trap a jet-set butterfly in a cultural jam jar, for her natural habitat is the wide world of the billboard, the glossy magazine spread, the glittering celebrity event and the e-commerce website (www.shellyinnocence.com to be precise).

This exhibition is presented under a Partnership Agreement with the National Gallery of Australia. The NGA Partnership program aims to provide greater public access to the Gallery's collection and marks the continuation of an alliance with ACP.

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- Man Ray from *Resurrection des Mannequins*, bound book c 1938 Collection of the National Gallery of Australia
- George Platt Lynes *Cyclopes* 1936-39 Collection of the National Gallery of Australia
- Lucas Samaras *Photo-transformation 2/9/74*, 1974 Collection of the National Gallery of Australia
- Luke Roberts *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS IV: Rotorua Aotearoa/New Zealand 2002*, 2002
- Polixeni Papapetrou *Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Xie Kitchin as a Chinaman (off duty)*, 2003
- Ray Cook *Reconfiguring the Constellation in the Night Sky of My Youth* 2004
- Peter Burke, *Innocence™ Revelation™ - Wake Up to Yourself* 2005 (Photo Cath Barcan)

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