

TRANSITIONAL BODIES

Review by Pam Sinnott

Rapt and Branded titled Julie Bartholomew's submission for a Doctor of Philosophy at the University of NSW. It comprised of both an exhibition (at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Art, Sydney) and an accompanying thesis which provided the context for the body of work produced in the exhibition.

The investigation examined the relationship between "female body change practices" and consumer culture. It is Bartholomew's contention that the postmodern body is becoming increasingly 'malleable' due to the influence of visual media which pervades and bombards our daily lives. Implicitly this media is Western biased in its relationship to gender, ethnicity, class and colour.

Investigating her proposition, Bartholomew spent three months in Tokyo, Japan. Here she found overwhelming supportive material mostly in the form of visual media. It was from this experience and resultant findings that Bartholomew developed the most significant body of work in her exhibition. This was the installation titled *Transitional Bodies*.

In this work Bartholomew's underlying motivation is clarified: "Body presentation remains central to my work because bodies are permeable entities embedded within our technological environment signalling social and cultural change."¹ Inherently the installation highlights the dominance of Western consumer culture and its effect on other cultures. Countering this unsettling position, the installation also seeks and expresses alternatives to this dominating force.

The form of the installation has four life-size ceramic women sitting on a simple bench. All four are naked and white. Upon them is projected a series of images which rhythmically move sideways. Sound accompanies the images and regulates their movement. It had been recorded from Tokyo's Yamamoto inner city subway which continuously loops the major commercial suburbs of Tokyo. As the sound of the subway train moves between stops and starts, the progression of images mirrors the sound of this movement.

In developing this work, Bartholomew observed and even photographed the passengers on the Yamamoto subway. She noted that many passengers would close their eyes for their journey, instinctively awakening at their stops. As with the real passengers, Bartholomew's ceramic figures have their eyes closed, their body gestures implying relaxed repose. However, the figures provoke an unsettling dissonance as they are not quite authentic in their rendition. Pure white hard ceramic surface is oppositional to the soft resilient flesh of the original human from which the sculptured form was derived. In addition, the figures are unashamedly naked with segmented body parts indicating mannequin attributes.

In the installation Bartholomew has provoked what she believes to be necessary discourse in relation to her observations. She has done this through disrupting the actuality of the

¹ Julie Bartholomew, *Rapt and Branded*, thesis submitted 2006, 158

true record so that her message can be made clearer. The projected images and the figures themselves in their provision of metaphors traverse two diametrically opposed forces. One references 'homogeneity' and acceptance, the other invokes 'individuality' and resistance.

In the urban Tokyo environment, Western global forces of commodification have been successful in the extreme. There has been an overall trend to embrace the myriad of designer products and ideals. One of the areas that is becoming increasingly accepted, as in Western cultures, is that non-Caucasian women are seeking surgery for purely aesthetic reasons. As Bartholomew indicates, the most disturbing aspect lies with the fact that operations pursued by non-Caucasian women conform to Caucasian standards of beauty. Even if the extreme of surgery is not realized many Japanese women adopt Western ideals in their choice of make-up. The dominant beauty ideal is clearly Western focused caught within "a voracious world of advertising and marketing attempting to colonise body/selves".²

In opposition to this movement however, there are individuals and groups who do not submit to these prevailing pressures. There exists a resistant subculture in Tokyo whose proponents use body presentation as a means of visually disturbing the dominant ideologies of consumerism. Although some groups and individuals use more extreme approaches to "disrupt", there are those who do not. The extreme is exemplified by body tattoos, piercing and scarification. The more restrained approach, yet equally as effective, is to simply reveal, rather than to erase, the lines of life's experience etched in the form and surface of the natural body as it ages.

The digital projections in *Transitional Bodies* illustrate examples from both of these opposed divisions. In one series the images exemplify an embracing of the ostensibly commodified environment that she examined. These manipulated billboard images were derived from 'real' products and brochures found in the female cosmetic sections of department stores in Tokyo. The models in the images have white skin and the text incorporate "white". Examples of this text are "white plus", "white protect", "essence whitening" and "whitening source".

In the opposing series of projected images - those that provide options to the consumerist trend, there are two aspects. One aspect is drawn from the subcultures of Tokyo that manifest unconventional hairstyles, make-up, clothing, body piercing and embellishments. It presents a radical form of the young female 'beauty' that is unconventional and inspirational in highlighting an alternative.

The other consumerist alternative can be found in the projected images of 'mature' women who Bartholomew met in Japan. As Bartholomew relates, "the traces of veins, wrinkles and irregularities disturb the normative circuits of commodified bodies". These are 'real' and unadulterated women who are complete in their own bodies and are empowering as a consequence.

² Julie Bartholomew, *Rapt and Branded*, thesis submitted 2006, 165

For Bartholomew, “bodies express both the adverse affects of an excessively commodified environment, but they also disclose signs of resistance and difference”.³ The two dimensional projected body images show both the commodified versions as well as the resistant/disruptive forms. These two discordant positions are echoed in the three dimensional forms of the cast bodies as well. The mannequin-like assemblages suggest a compliant willingness to adopt the consumerist mode. However, alternatively the closed eyes and relaxed gestures imply passive resistance to the plethora of advertising media.

Bartholomew’s installation is important in its message. It serves to highlight the saturating omnipotence of Western consumerist culture and its deleterious effect. As a result of the gained knowledge and understanding of this ‘forced predilection’ for consumerist consumption it is possible for individuals and groups to interrupt its momentum. Resistance and the provision of alternative choices have a far more positive benefit to humanity than ‘homogeneity’. It is these “new possibilities for embodiment and the positive value of difference”⁴ that Bartholomew searched for and found in the Tokyo environment. The installation *Transitional Bodies* provides serious insight into the forces of consumer culture, however, it also provides an alternative perspective for individual and group choice.

Transitional Bodies in both its content and execution is an extraordinary accomplishment on the part of Bartholomew. Significantly this work has been acquired by Shepparton Art Gallery, Victoria for its collection.

Pam Sinnott is an Associate Professor in the School of Drama, Fine Art and Music at The University of Newcastle, Australia

³ Julie Bartholomew, *Rapt and Branded*, thesis submitted 2006, 162

⁴ Julie Bartholomew, *Rapt and Branded*, thesis submitted 2006, 189