

semiotic robin hoodism

The work of Julie Bartholomew

"Commodity fetishism is ... the penetration of capitalist power-over into the core of our being, into all our habits of thought, all our relations with other people."

Seeing Julie Bartholomew's work, *I am Vuitton, I am Manolo, I am Coco*, which recently won the 25th Gold Coast International Ceramic Art Award, a phrase coined by Naomi Klein – 'semiotic Robin Hoodism' – springs to mind. Bartholomew uses the semiotics of elite branding but disrupts the veneer of perfection by exposing something sinister.

Immaculately conceived both technically and conceptually, the work is comprised of a porcelain Louis Vuitton handbag exposing its disturbing contents, namely, a disembodied foot, nipples, lips, nose and fingers; a pair of Manolo Blahnik shoes with painfully distorted toes, and a pair of Chanel gloves that morph into the real fingers of work-worn and unmanicured hands.

The work deals with issues of high-end consumerism and elite brands which adorn the body and are sold to us through ubiquitous advertising as autonomous enhancements to beauty and status, a status anxiety promoted and preyed upon to feed the insatiable commodity fetishism of an increasingly insecure public.²

Bartholomew's work functions as a form of 'culture jamming': *"the most sophisticated culture jams are not stand-alone ad parodies but interceptions – counter-messages that hack into a corporations own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended ... uncovering not an opposite meaning but the deeper truth hiding beneath the layers of advertising euphemisms"*.³

In her thesis, Bartholomew makes reference to 'sweatshops' in this work. Where elite brands have outsourced production to cheap labour markets, an impoverished labour force (usually women) is exploited and dehumanised in the service of the profit imperatives of multinational corporations. The work could thus be read as an analogy for the embodied violence of exploitation that has become synonymous with elite branding. Disrupting the conventions of status advancement, adorning the body with Bartholomew's style of elite branding, may give one all the status of a transvestite 'Jack the Ripper'.

There is a wonderful irony in Bartholomew's winning of the Gold Coast Award of \$10 000: her parodies of the original elite objects have been awarded more than the originals would be worth. And in the spirit of advertising imitating art (subsuming transgression and rendering it impotent), I guess we should all be on the lookout for dismembered women in suitcases in Viutton's next advertising campaign.

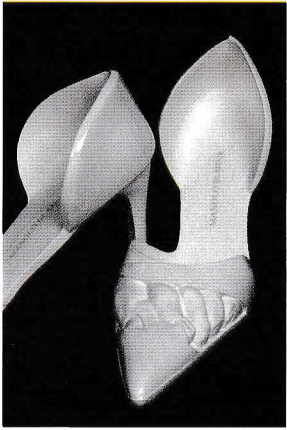
The *I am* series is part of Bartholomew's PhD exhibition *Rapt and Branded* held at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in Sydney in 2006. Another aspect of this exhibition is an installation entitled *Transitional Bodies* – four full body casts in porcelain overlaid with digitally projected images of Japanese women and Japanese cosmetic advertisements. Bartholomew continues her interest in mass advertising and for this work located herself in Tokyo, Japan, a city whose population is bombarded with advertising, arguably more so than any other city in the world. Bartholomew spent three months in Tokyo researching globalised marketing strategies and consumer culture and photographing and interviewing women – ordinary middle-aged women as well as young dissidents who vehemently reject the impossible ideals of beauty sold to them on every building and on every train journey in the city. She also photographed billboards promoting cosmetics.

Where Bartholomew uses Japanese advertising in her installation, complex issues of gender, race and

[political, satirical, moral]

I am Louis Vuitton, I am Manolo, I am Coco; 2006, porcelain, 50 x 50 cm area





I am Manolo (detail); 2006, porcelain, h.18cm, w.25cm, d.10 cm

Opposite page: Top: *I am Louis Vuitton*; 2006, porcelain, h.18cm, w. 25cm, d.10 cm
Bottom: *I am Coco*; 2006, porcelain, h.20cm, w.15cm, d.7 cm

power arise. Photographs of advertisements for skin-whitening products alongside images of Japanese women who appear to reject society's pressures to conform, can be misinterpreted in a Western context (as when exhibited in Australia), a misinterpretation that I projected onto the work. It is here that we must tread most cautiously. My own misinterpretation of the Japanese advertisements for skin-whitening products, as a desire to emulate Western ideals of beauty, illustrates just how easily a divorced context interrupts meaning. Mikiko Ashikari informs us however, that skin-whitening is a gender specific aspect of Japanese Nationalism and everything to do with Japanese cultural heritage.⁴

Bartholomew insists on an ambivalence in the postmodern body, but a study of Japanese ideals of beauty or rejections of those ideals within Japanese subcultures is neither ambivalent nor objective. There is an underlying presumed authority in this position where, in the light of the Western academic discourse of 'Orientalism'⁵ one must question 'who speaks for whom'. 'Orientalism', a term coined by Edward Said, is described as 'a powerful European ideological creation which is a reflection of Imperialism and its values.'⁶

Orientalism designates 'otherness' as a fetish that always defers to a position of Western authority. Postmodern forms of Orientalism rear their head "*in the political and cultural unconscious of the West, [where] Japan has come to exist as the figure of empty and dehumanised technological power. It represents the alienated and dystopian image of capitalist progress provoking both resentment and envy.*"⁷

There are other aspects of this work where I find myself again questioning representational politics. Where Bartholomew (an outsider as an Australian) uses images of young Japanese dissidents similar to punks or 'goths' in Western society, I am reminded of the subjects of Japanese photographer Shoichi Aoki in his publication *Fruits*.⁸ He photographs the fashion subcultures of Tokyo's Harajuku district, not as an outsider but with the perceived authority of cultural relevance and specificity rather than objectification. Once this is packaged by Phaidon Press however, it is consumed in the West as a glamorous ethnographic coffee table book where we may give authority to the images based on our own ideas of cultural authenticity. I wonder if Bartholomew's work grapples with a similar conundrum. She states in her thesis that she designed *Transitional Bodies* with "*the intention of creating an ambiguous and discordant visual play between commodified and resistant female bodies*". Here she acknowledges the tenuous and ambiguous position she occupies. She goes on to say that, "*They are neither consumed by an overwhelming visual media culture, nor completely immune to its powerful forces ... Marginalised, innovative and distinctive body/selves, which do not conform to dominant body ideals, are disruptive but at the same time they are also part of the larger consumer capitalist-driven ideology of consumption. Disruptive bodies are troubled by entrenched relations of power while they so spectacularly contest them.*" These 'entrenched relations of power' extend to include the roles of the artist and her subjects.

I think Bartholomew's work is most successful where she forgoes representational authority and accepts input from her subjects. Lisa is a prime example; her portrait focuses on tattoos and body modifications including scarification as an inscription of her denial of imposed cultural conventions. Where Bartholomew's full body cast of Lisa has, through the making process, toned down details, Lisa has stepped in to reinscribe her replicated body and redefine her body markings. As Bartholomew states, "*even her 'reproduced' body needed to be 'reclaimed'.*" The power given over to the subject in this instance, negates the artist's authority in representation (or misrepresentation) to create a work that is collaborative in the truest sense.

[political, satirical, moral]



This subject/object inversion leads me to a quote by John Holloway discussing Marx's Capital, "*In capitalism there is an inversion of the relation between people and things, between subject and object. Things (money, capital, machines) become the subjects of society, while people (workers) become the objects. The commodity takes on a life of its own in which its social origin in human labour is extinguished.*"⁹ This point is most succinctly illustrated in Bartholomew's work where the handbag wears the exploited labourer and the shoes wear the distorted feet.

Holloway goes on to say that, "*Although people are, in their species-characteristic, practical creative beings, they exist under capitalism as objects, as dehumanised, as deprived of their subjectivity.*"¹⁰

The miracle of Bartholomew's work is that, being fully aware of her position within a disenfranchising capitalist society, she resists the pressures to become a worker/object (a performer of meaningless tasks) within a commodity culture and, instead, confronts these very issues as an exemplary craftsperson.

This is in itself, perhaps, a position of dissent. ■

Bartholomew's PhD exhibition will be showcased at the Shepparton Art Gallery from 20 April to 27 May 2007. She has recently been awarded an Australia Council 'New Work' grant in recognition of this work.

Laura McEwan is a freelance writer and ceramic artist based in Lismore, NSW.

Contact: lauranorda69@yahoo.com.au

1 Holloway, John, 'Change the World Without Taking Power', Pluto Press, London, 2002, p 50.

2 De Botton, Alain, 'Status Anxiety', Hamish Hamilton Ltd, London, 2004.

3 Klein, N., p 281.

4 Ashikari, M., 'The memory of women's white faces: Japaneseness and the ideal image of women', Japan Forum, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2003.

Bartholomew noted, in response to this paragraph, that the contemporary Japanese ideal of beauty, which dominates advertising imagery in Tokyo, cannot simply be defined as an aspect of Japanese Nationalism nor, as I read it, as a desire to emulate Western ideals of beauty. Her research, which sourced Ashikari and many other Japanese and Western sociologists, pointed to a notion that the Japanese ideal of beauty has become the Eurasian 'everyday white face', a consequence of interchange between Western and Eastern forces and values since the Meiji Restoration. In her research, she acknowledges Ashikari's position but also challenges it.

5 For a concise text on the evolution and development of the theory of Orientalism, see: Sardar, Ziauddin, 'Orientalism', Open University Press, UK, 1999.

6 Said, Edward, W, 'Orientalism', Penguin Books Ltd, London, 1978.

7 Morley, D. and Robins, K., 'Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries', Routledge, London, 1995, p 170.

8 Aoki, Shoichi, 'Fruits', Phaidon Press Ltd, London, 2001.

9 Holloway, J., p 46 and 51.

10 Ibid, p 78.