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ACQUI STOCKDALE SEES the human body as a multitude of interchangeable parts. In papercuts and bloodlines, her collage series at Perth's Venn Gallery, the human frame contains snippets of photos, blocks of abstract detail, and organs which are a tangle of polka-dot balloons. The figure in *crouching tiger* even pulls open her belly and invites us to examine its contents, which include a string of skulls and two Chinese tigers. To top it all off, every character in this series is wearing some kind of mask: an opaque face that is detached from the body, and might consist of a scrap of paper or the head of a Mexican devil. Stockdale has always incorporated masks into her work. Fiendish and mocking faces appear in these pictures, but no matter how savage they look, we know that their emotions are pre-determined: they express rehearsed anger, token outrage. In several images, the face projects less personality than the props. The woman in *to return* has her head obscured by a screen. The strongest identity in this work belongs to the mischievous doll tucked under her chin.

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Let's talk about your interest in masks and dolls. For years you've gathered items from Mexico, India and China, which you incorporate into collages, paintings and photographs.

I was a cabaret performer in Tasmania, and I always created and collected masks. They weren't designed for art; they were specifically for performance. Over the years I've used masks in art and in my life – I put them on children, in photographs, take them to workshops to facilitate learning. There is a certain energy to each of the masks I choose. They've generally been used in dancing, death rituals, or at the Mexican Carnival – some kind of event that involves transformation and renewal.

You've also created an animation called *hello world* in which masks and body parts float around, forming new identities wherever they land.

The idea was that all of these body parts have independent life, so that even a chopped-up watercolour takes human form. You can assemble your own family from these diverse ethnic links. When you start working with masks and costumes to invent characters, the combinations are endless, so it's hard to stop.

How do you make the decision to stop?

I think it's a question of balance. When I look at a work and don't feel disturbed by it, I can say that it's finished and that it has equilibrium. There's harmony and relief in looking at it. In art you have infinite choices, so sometimes I leave a piece for a few months and come back to see if I'm still happy with it. Maybe it's too crowded and I have to reduce it, or maybe one element is too dominant, so I need to add some foliage or a pattern. For *beauty and the bogan*, the central pink body was too strong so I added some decorative plant life to counteract it. Patterning creates a balance for the eye, softening the image. I keep trying until I've nailed the personality of the figure.

It's interesting that you don't, for instance, use exquisitely made Chinese ornaments in your work. You choose mass-market products, such as costumes from Chinatown and cheap joss paper.

I get pleasure out of recycling something that was designed to be impermanent. At temples in Hong Kong they were burning pieces of joss paper by the thousands. There were streets of shops selling paper moulded into microwaves, jeans, designer sneakers, even shark's fin! I bought piles of them; I was in heaven. But rather than just consuming a mass of objects, I hope I'm doing them justice by using them to tell a new story.

Is the use of commonplace materials a way to add a generic element to your work, which is otherwise extremely intricate?

My life is a combination of elements which are mass-produced and objects which are dear to me. On an aesthetic level it works to contrast something ready-made with something finely detailed. It's that issue of balance again. I used part of a joss paper sneaker to create the fire underneath the character in *crouching tiger*. So even though this is a spiritual being, it's powered by a fake Adidas shoe!

When one of your figures holds a mask to her face, she is literally giving us a manufactured look instead of a spontaneous expression.

Some masks can be incredibly strong and I don't want to tamper with their effect. I want the figure to be drawn into the feeling of ritual.

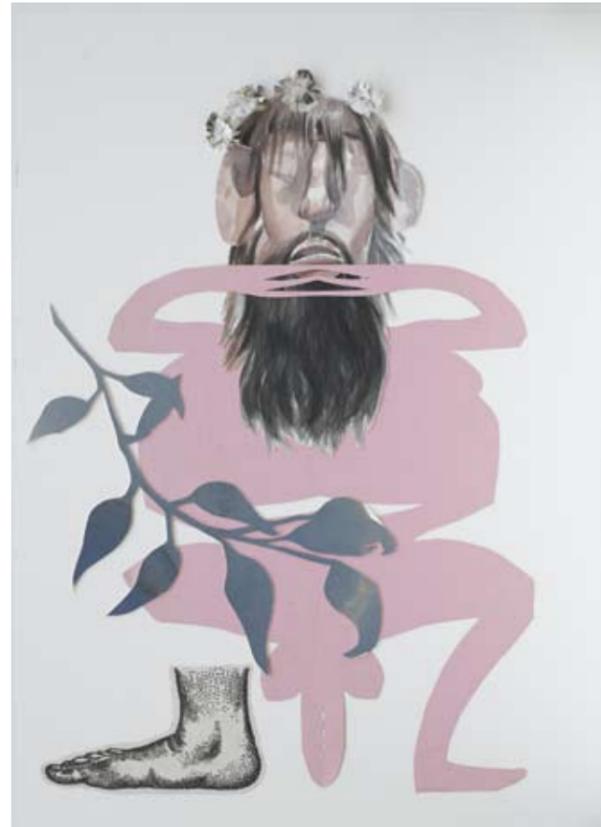
In previous shows, you've featured gorgeous nudes wearing masks. There's something eerie about these naked bodies with blank smiles. It's as if they're saying, "I'm showing you everything, but I'm giving you nothing." They're toying with the idea of confession but not revealing anything.

The mask adds an element of mystery and humour – otherwise it





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would just be a naked woman standing there, a typical Victorian lady. But, in general, I don't think of my characters as models wearing masks. I'm making an entirely new, hybrid creature.

Why is there a desire to mute the face, and let the body do all of the talking?

I can't resist pulling the heads off creatures. I love decapitating dolls. Maybe it's because there's too much information in a face: the gaze is so strong that it unbalances the picture. My aim is to show a body that is the sum of its parts, so that the head is just another interchangeable feature. I especially like placing new heads on self-portraits I created 15 years ago.

The male figures in your new series of paintings, *The Oneness of Man*, have expressions which are equally difficult to read. They look a bit bamboozled.

They're like the toy tigers you see in some of my works. They're trying their best to look angry and fierce, but at the same time there's this vulnerability. Here's a Mexican devil mask which is attempting to look scary, but it can't because it's got flowers woven into his hair.

Since these bodies contain so many disparate parts, I'm guessing the reference to oneness must be ironic?

I was thinking of the Cole's Funny Picture Book which I had as a child. E.W. Cole had this manifesto of the "oneness of man", believing that if everybody spoke the same language there would be world peace! Obviously it was ridiculous, but I enjoy playing with that notion of the federation of the world. It relates to globalisation and the inability to retain the individuality of different cultures.

How do you perceive the figures in your works?

Sometimes I think I'm creating the same identity over and over

again, but using different features to represent it. When I lived in Tasmania in the '90s, I knew a lot of artists and we used to come up with a range of characters by taking on different voices and costumes, learning new instruments. In a way I'm constructing versions of all those characters we invented back then.

When you discover a new ethnic mask, do you try to investigate its history? Or is the idea to cut off its appearance from its context?

In the beginning I'll research and visit the places where masks are used. But after that there's a point where I leave that behind and work on a more aesthetic level. These masks are used in transformation rituals and, if they are doing their job, they can transform themselves in the context of my "exquisite corpse" portraits. I might cut up a Day of the Dead mask so that it's unrecognisable.

Are there any Australian emblems you would consider using?

When my brother married a woman from Nashville, they created a piñata which was half kangaroo and half eagle, and then everyone danced around it. That was a modern ritual! The piñata was smashed during the wedding, but I saved it and turned it into a mask, which I asked my niece to wear in the photograph *Skip*.

Your Day of the Dead skulls don't seem specifically Mexican; they mesh effortlessly with the Asian artefacts. It's almost as if the ethnicities of your figures are interchangeable – they can switch races either by swapping masks, or by wearing an ambiguous face that could be Native American, Latin or Asian. We're unsure of their bloodlines.

With *careful she might hear you* I used red and green joss paper from the gown of a Chinese emperor. But the moment I put it down on the page, it became a little bit Carnival – the colours took on



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a Mexican feel. Depending on what you put it next to, a Victorian bodice can have a Spanish quality. Just one change can result in an entirely different ethnic association. Some of the Mexican masks even remind me of Ned Kelly!

The title *papercuts and bloodlines* also relates to your fondness for cutting up your own work. Some of these images contain fragments of your earlier canvases.

When I cut a piece from one work and drop it onto another canvas, it immediately morphs into a new idea. Cutting is a much more fluid process than painting. I tend to paint in a fine academic style, and don't make a lot of changes on the canvas, but with cut-up art there's constant editing and the element of chance comes in. And when the masks get old, instead of throwing them away I cut and paste them into another work.

What happens when the body is cut into pieces? At the base of *beauty and the bogan*, there's a paper foot I recognise from a previous installation! What is that doing under a bogan?

The bogan's pale pink body was too ethereal, so I balanced it out with the strength of the foot. Now he's sturdy, sure-footed. You can't have a strong man's head and tiny ankles! But I only added one foot, not two. Sometimes if a picture is too symmetrical, you need to throw it off balance by subtracting or adding a part.

Your show at Venn Gallery features a huge mobile sculpture with dangling heads. All of these heads are many-faced masks: bright blue planes from one angle, pastel sketches from another. The viewer can stand underneath and watch all these identities swirl around.

The masks in that installation are all original works. I was excited about working in three dimensions for the first time, so I wanted to create face upon face upon face. With this sculpture I'm able to bring together the different ways I work – realistic painting, fine watercolours, pure experiments with colour and texture. It's like an

extended family tree where body parts are progressively added and removed. There are family resemblances, but because the heads move all the time, you never see a face the same way twice. ■

Jacqui Stockdale is represented by Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne
www.helengory.com
www.jacquiestockdale.com
www.venn.net

EXHIBITION
 March 2011
 Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne

- 01 *Bandit Queen on Horseback*, 2011, oil on linen, 152 x 122cm
- 02 *crouching tiger*, 2011, collage elements on paper, 100 x 70cm
- 03 *beauty and the bogan*, 2011, collage elements on paper, 100 x 70cm
- 04 *to return*, 2011, collage elements on paper, 76 x 56cm
- 05 *This Mortal Coil*, 2010, oil on linen, 184 x 240cm
- 06 *The oneness of man #2*, 2011, oil on linen, 46 x 40cm
- 07 *The oneness of man #3*, 2011, oil on linen, 46 x 40cm
- 08 *Antipodes*, 2010, oil on linen, 195 x 165cm

Images courtesy the artist, Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne and Venn Gallery, Perth