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Seductive Subversion

Petrina Hicks' is a technical master, using her photographic skills to camouflage the discomfort that underpins her compositions.

Carrie Miller speaks to Hicks about her forthcoming exhibitions.

PORTRAIT BY ZAN WIMBERLEY



Petrina Hicks had only recently moved house when photographer Zan Wimberley came to visit. She told Wimberley she “spends a lot of time people-watching from her desk while she works.”

From the moment **Petrina Hicks** made the switch from commercial photography to art photography, she had the makings of the singular style she is acclaimed for today.

After spending several years as a photographer's assistant and several more as a photographer herself she had developed a commercial visual vocabulary, the subversion of which, is one of the fundamental elements of her impeccably beautiful and uncanny artworks.

Frustrated by the lack of conceptual critique in commercial work and with the banality of ideas in the commercial world, Hicks's turned her focus to the possibilities of fine art photography. Importantly, this background gave her a technical facility that has become a perfect companion to her conceptual aims.

Since becoming a full-time artist, Hicks began producing a number of unforgettable images that combine her unique mix of a high-end commercial style with conceptual content, images that are simultaneously elusive and seductive. One such work is *Shenae and Jade*, which depicts a stationary moment of a child swallowing a bird – an image that's become familiar to many in the contemporary art world. It is typical of a Hicks photograph, combining dichotomous elements – bird versus human – that are often employed by the artist. It is also visually compelling, technically precise, and abstract in its meaning.

Indeed, all of Hicks's works sit between the idiosyncratic and the iconic. This ambivalent state that the images embody can be seen as a result of Hicks's approach to photography. As she says: "I've never used the camera in a spontaneous/documentary way. Making the photographs feels like creating sculptures in front of the lens."

This is precisely how **Robert McFarlane** describes Hicks's perhaps most compelling series of portraits; an albino girl called Lauren. In describing *Lauren* McFarlane says: "This is the closest I have seen photography come to slipping its two dimensional bonds to become sculpture."

Another aspect of this series highlights Hicks's original technique in the way she creates images where light and focus seem to almost emanate from the subjects themselves – unlike other art photographers who use commercial techniques to create slick surfaces.

This complication of the techniques of commercial photography is a purposeful one. As Hicks explains, "I held on to the aesthetic techniques I'd developed



1.
Petrina Hicks, *Shenae and Jade*, 2005. Lightjet print, 111 x 119cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND HELEN GORY GALERIE, MELBOURNE

2.
Petrina Hicks, *Venus*, 2013. C-type print, 100 x 100cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND STILLS GALLERY, SYDNEY

through working commercially, but it was the coding, language, sub-text I was aiming to subvert. I was aiming for these images to be misinterpreted as commercial images, by creating only slight ruptures to the surface of the image – by way of ambiguous meaning, lack of narrative completion to the image, or hinting at darker more subversive ideas – this worked to create a tension within the image. It worked in opposition to the pure and desirable surface aesthetic of the images. They were images that were hard to reconcile, or put in the category of commercial or art.

"So the images looked desirable on the surface, but I was aiming to corrupt this process of seduction. There are elements in my images that evoke desire and emotion, yet the images remain ambiguous, because the signs to decode them are absent."

This always leaves the viewer with a slightly uncomfortable feeling. Can they be sure what they are looking at? Is it even photography in the sense that we know it? Certainly the composition of Hicks's works makes you aware of reality as a psychological space – a place that can't be so easily represented by generic documentary-style

photography. At the same time, the work presents an otherworldly place, a place without context. As Hicks puts it, "The surface of the images are parading as commercial photographs, but the underlying ideas don't allow for the images to be consumed as such. I've always been drawn to the idea of creating images that are beautiful and desirable on the surface, that draw people in ... but then gently pulling the rug away, before they've realised it. These images promise satisfaction, but don't deliver it in the expected way, the way we are conditioned to read commercial photographs."

Hicks' latest series explores, among other things, the essence of photography – what sets it apart from other mediums, particularly painting. Again she has produced a knock-out group of works where dichotomies circulate in strangely elegant ways, meaning remains open, and beauty is not about benign perfection.

A survey exhibition of Petrina Hicks' work will be held at Helen Gory Galerie in Melbourne from 12 June to 13 July 2013. Stills Gallery in Sydney will also stage a solo show of Hicks' work from 4 September to 5 October 2013.





3.

Petrina Hicks, *The Hand that Feeds* (diptych), 2013. Pigment print, two parts: 100 x 100cm, and 100 x 110cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND STILLS GALLERY, SYDNEY

4.

Petrina Hicks, *Ghost in the Shell*, 2008. Single-channel video, 2min loop.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND HELEN GORY GALERIE, MELBOURNE

5.

Petrina Hicks, *New Age*, 2013. C-type print, 100 x 100cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND STILLS GALLERY, SYDNEY



Bronwyn Rennex

DIRECTOR, STILLS GALLERY

Stills Gallery has represented **Petrina Hicks** since 2004. Her artworks came to the attention of **Bronwyn Rennex** when they were included in the Gold Coast City Art Prize and the Citigroup Photographic Portrait Prize, where they stood out amongst those of her peers. Rennex said, “Her profile has risen dramatically since then. She has exhibited her work widely through both solo and groups shows in Australia, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, USA, UK, Japan, China, Mexico and Brazil. Recently, her work was selected for the 17th International Videobrasil in Brazil and the Pingyao International Photography Festival in China. This year her video work *The Chrysalis* was included in The Guirguis New Art Prize, a new national acquisitive contemporary art prize featuring a selection of Australia’s most exciting contemporary artists.

“Petrina’s works belong to various public and private collections including: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Queensland Art Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria and Artbank. She has been awarded various notable prizes and residencies including the *Josephine Ulrick Photography Award for Portraiture, ABN Emerging Artist Award* (2008), *La Cité*, Paris Residency and an eight month Fellowship with Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany.

“Petrina’s artwork has attracted many collectors of contemporary art both in Australia and abroad, who have acquired her work in depth and continue to support her work. We find that her images linger in peoples’ minds long after they have first seen them. Often people will come in to enquire about the availability of a work they had seen years before.”

Carrie Miller



Helen Ennis

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ANU SCHOOL OF ART

Helen Ennis has been an admirer of Petrina Hicks’ work for some time: “For me one of the sure signs of a successful work of art is its after-affect or to be more specific, what I see or sense when I shut my eyes. In the case of **Petrina Hicks**’s photographs and video works I am left with a great deal that I really value and enjoy. It’s to do with their concentrated energy, thoughtfulness and very particular kind of allure.

“Take as an example her video, *Ghost in the shell*, in which the camera circles around a young ponytailed woman, smoke emanating from her mouth. The endless, slow, noiseless movement around the figure is very satisfying, revealing yet concealing meaning. There is in fact a paradox in operation in much of Petrina’s work. By this I mean that many of her photographs, especially those produced before 2010, are empty in terms

of action and yet somehow seem full of import. There is something in them that is suggestive and significant though I cannot tell you exactly what it is and do not expect to ever be able to do so.

“I am also enjoying seeing the evolution of Petrina’s creative practice over time. Recently she has been using more saturated colours and even greater artificiality. What is consistent though, is her pared down, tightly controlled vocabulary and the elimination of extraneous details. Her compositions always appear straightforward, even when the set-up is the result of considerable effort.

“Petrina Hicks is one of the most exciting artists working in photography and video in Australia today. Her works stay with me because of their absence of agitation and the strange, empty space that they so successfully create,” comments Ennis.

Carrie Miller



4.

✧ **I’ve never used the camera in a spontaneous/ documentary way. Making the photographs feels like creating sculptures in front of the lens.** ✧ Petrina Hicks



5.

Petrina Hicks

Every Rose Has Its Thorn

Beneath the surface of Australian photographer Petrina Hicks' glossy hyper-perfect photos lie key questions about the seduction of things and human nature: How is it that so many of us fall so unwittingly for the pretty pictures of advertising? Why do we think we can buy, dress and shape ourselves into what we see in the magazines and then, finally, we will feel good about ourselves? A former commercial photographer, Hicks says of her experience: "Working on these (commercial) photo shoots started to feel like I was creating big bubbles of nothing/emptiness." In her latest series, *Every Rose Has Its Thorn*, Hicks subtly pricks holes in those bubbles, allowing the thoughtful viewer a glimpse behind the facade.

Clayton Maxwell: *Every Rose Has Its Thorn* seems like a departure from your earlier series: you use objects more and there are no children. What pulled you towards this shift in subjects?

Petrina Hicks: I was interested in the "perfect form" and shape of objects. One aim of mine, when photographing people is to create images that appear sculptural in form, almost like an object. Many of the portraits I take are "bust" shots of just head and shoulders—so they look more sculptural in form.

I'm always searching for a perfect singular form. I'm obsessed with the idea of creating images that look perfect on the outside, or aesthetically pleasing, that on closer inspection or reflection reveal ambiguous sub-text, explore issues associated with perfection, consumerism, beauty, or images that unsettles, or don't deliver a satisfying feeling, or leave the viewer feeling a bit empty.

I was also interested in selecting objects that were loaded with history, iconic, and had obvious symbolism attached.

CM: These images have a strong undertone of humour—they feel sly and satirical. Did you intend to be satirical or is that just something that evolved through the process of shooting them?

PH: To be honest, I never thought about humour

when creating these images, but I can understand why they may seem like this. My intention was not to be satirical, I think I was trying to create images that were really pared back advertising imagery, almost so pared back that only one singular perfect element remained, I was trying to create this sense of emptiness that I associate with consumerism. I have worked in the past as a commercial photographer, and this idea—of creating a false sense of perfection, using all the tricks of the trade with the aim to seduce or evoke desire amongst consumers, so they buy this product. Yet at the end of the day, it doesn't change their life—is of endless interest to me.

CM: Can you tell me more about what's going on in the still-lives like *Ripe* and *Dutch Plate*? Are you mocking still life photography and how they idealise objects? It seems like the choice to use grapes and blue china, two very typical objects in still-lives over the ages, is very deliberate. Could you explain that choice?

PH: For the image *Ripe* I photographed a perfect looking bunch of green grapes. I chose this type of fruit because it's highly symbolic (sex, fertility, Christianity etcetera) and has appeared in works of art throughout history. As mentioned before, I was interested in selecting images that were "loaded with history" and then just photograph them in a very stark, pared back, isolated, unbiased and objective way. Because as we know, it is in fact impossible for a photographer to take a truly objective/unbiased photograph, in this case I tried to do this in a physical sense. Yet, I selected an object that is so loaded with history and the ideas people associate with this object that it becomes impossible for the viewer to look at this stark image of a bunch of grapes in a purely objective way.

In this series, I also photographed this same bunch of grapes in a purely subjective and biased way (*Fertile*)—a girl in a pink sweater wearing just stockings and pink lace underwear holds this bunch of grapes directly in front of her genital area. I think the grapes also look like ovaries in this photograph. So I

was interested to play with this loaded object and try to present it in an objective and subjective way and show this comparison.

With the image *Dutch Plate* I also selected objects that were loaded with history, this time relating to art in Dutch history—the blue Delft porcelain plate, the lemon still life emulating the Dutch still life *Vanitas*. So, I wanted to take an image like this and present it in a very stark way, and also so it clearly looks very "2010" and quite digital, almost as if it could have been created entirely with 3D computer software. So, there is this feeling of time warp maybe.

CM: Objectivity is a funny one, too. With its perfect powder blue pitcher held by perfectly manicured hands that pose like a prissy game show hostess, it seems to boil the broad concept of physical materialism down into one pretty picture.

PH: Yes, that's correct, in this image I was also trying to evoke that feeling of emptiness I associate with consumerism and physical materialism. It's just a cheap blue pitcher bought at a flea market, but I wanted to sell it to the viewer as an object that should be idealised and desired, an object of perfection. I was also interested to play with that idea of subjective/objective. I wondered if this image would have a different meaning if the perfectly manicured hands were removed, or the gesture of the hands were different, or if it was a pair of aged, weathered man's hands instead.

CM: I love the images of the woman wearing the hyper-feminine pink sweater, pantyhose, and lace over her face. The fact that she is fully dressed from the waist up but wearing old-fashioned panties and panty hose from the waist down is amusing to me. How did you arrive at this particular vision for her?

PH: This image I think is quite oversaturated with female symbolism: pink colours, soft pink wool sweater, beige pantyhose, lace. I think I was trying to play



© Petrina Hicks – *Simone*, 2010 – Lightjet prints, Courtesy of the artist and stills Gallery

with obvious female symbolism here, almost to the point where it may make the viewer feel nauseous. But, actually, I find it hard to describe this image, or describe what I was trying to say. I did title this image *Every Rose Has its Thorn*, and then later decided to use this title for the whole series also. This statement alludes to the promise of perfection, and also, I think, I would like to make images that were like a hand that is offering a perfect red rose to the viewer, and

when they take the rose one of the thorns pierces their skin.

CM: Tell me about your colour palette. Why were you drawn to the vivid pinks and blues for this series?

PH: I have been obsessed with the colour pink for several years now, and I think I've got it out of my system now. I think I was just aiming for perfect looking

colour. When visualising a new series of work, I do come up with a colour palette prior to shooting, colour is very important for me, every item photographed (wardrobe, objects, backgrounds) is selected on purpose for its colour. And I generally try to work with only a few colours, perhaps no more than five per series.

CM: Through the lens and digital manipulation, a



© Petrina Hicks – *Objectivity*, 2010 – Lightjet prints, Courtesy of the artist and stills Gallery



© Petrina Hicks – *Fragrant Memory*, 2010 – Lightjet prints, Courtesy of the artist and stills Gallery



© Petrina Hicks – *Ripe*, 2010 – Lightjet prints, Courtesy of the artist and stills Gallery



© Petrina Hicks – *Beauty of History*, 2010 – Lightjet prints, Courtesy of the artist and stills Gallery



© Petrina Hicks – *Breeze*, 2010 – Lightjet prints, Courtesy of the artist and stills Gallery

photographer can create, conceal, disguise, fabricate. But how can a photographer also unveil truths? Could you tell me how you view photography's role as both deceiver and truth-teller?

PH: I find the vast spectrum of photography baffling. On one end of the scale you can have really raw documentary images that reveal the sadness, suffering, and horror of the human condition. And using the exact same medium (a camera) you can also create a perfect airbrushed image of a pop star or actress. As

a photographer, working out where to position yourself along this scale of possibilities is quite strange. Because I guess on the documentary end of the scale the photographer is a truth-teller (to an extent) and towards the other end of the scale, the photographer becomes more like a deceiver. Quite often I try to aim for ambiguity in the images I create.

CM: Do you mind telling me a little about your process? How much of this series did you conceive before you got to the studio? Or do the ideas/photos some-

times happen on the spot in the process of shooting them? How much is done on the computer?

PH: Generally, I will spend around eighty percent of my time conceiving the images; it can take several months. Then when I can see the ideas very clearly I will begin producing the photo shoots. This involves sourcing models, wardrobe, props, objects, backgrounds, and animals, deciding on lighting, techniques, and etcetera. Then the actual shooting stage, I think, is the shortest, once all of the elements are



© Petrina Hicks – *Whiskers*, 2010 – Lightjet prints, Courtesy of the artist and stills Gallery

arranged in front of my lens. Then of course, on the actual photo shoot day I can begin with the ideas in mind, but often have to adjust and vary them as I begin to see what is translating well as a photograph, and what doesn't. Also when working with models or animals, nothing can be controlled to a tight extent, and often things arise out of these shoots that were unplanned. I always shoot on film, using a Hasselblad camera, then get high-resolution scans made so I can finish the images in Photoshop. It's important for me to start with film, as it was film that inspired me to be

a photographer. And I find more satisfaction in working with film, than with a digital camera.

CM: Because of your other series of wan-hued, hyper-real images of children, you have been compared to Loretta Lux. Is that annoying or flattering or neither?

PH: I can definitely see why people make the comparison, as we both create images of children, in a hyper-real way. I think possibly that our intentions are quite different though, and so really the comparison is

probably more of an aesthetic comparison.

TEXT BY CLAYTON MAXWELL

©All pictures: Petrina Hicks

Courtesy

Stills Gallery, Paddington, Australia
www.stillsgallery.com.au