

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



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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



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© 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



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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

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