

The Petrified Flesh: Welcome to the quiet control of Petrina Hicks

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Ubiquity. It's not only images and their overdrive (or is that overkill?) in the 21st century that we are swallowing. At our fingertips is the x,y,z of virtually anything that may perk our interest, spark our imagination, fuel our fascinations. Yes, the daily uptake of information, image or otherwise is unparalleled, yet the question begs: How do we digest this excess of data? Do we partake of the overabundant platter and, embarrassed, chew on the data bone? Or do we accept delight, boldly even, in the delectable data array before our eyes?

When we look at Petrina Hicks' images: What are we looking at? How do we feel? Why do we see what we see? What does it leave us with?

The artist seems determined to deny any fixed meanings. The realms of her investigation are not uncommon – the examination of the sexualised female body and the interrogation of a commercially styled and sanitised photographic image. So what is it that makes her images so compelling? Is it their quiet perversity? Is it their familiarity? Is it that the images hold a tension in which the world is thrown delicately off-centre and strange object relations are set into high focus? Regardless, we are subject to an unsettling sensorium, in which the world we see every day is a cold and highly controlled two-dimensional dystopia disguised in the clinical beauty of a sci-fi utopia. Hicks provides a series of specimens awaiting consultation in a doctor's surgery, for the contemporary ailments of a society in mortal panic.

In the flesh, Petrina Hicks is not dissimilar to the willfulness she creates in her fine art constructions. On an initial glance and immediate communication, she is familiar, accessible. Yet as time passes, a controlled austerity emerges, and you realise you're likely asking all the wrong questions. The air imperceptibly presents a fissure. Can't touch this. The impetus to scratch away at the space, visual, aural or otherwise, is an act of reduction. It feels like a quiet dichotomy. Hicks framed and over-referenced. Yet the atmospheric rendering in her work defies ambivalence.

Figures abound in Hicks work. The figures typically feel as though their pulse has slowed. They are not dead but pallid and silent, articulating inaction, not vitality. The bodies are often deliberately cropped to mimic sculptural busts. Her early work of an albino girl, Lauren, 2003, one of multiple images exploring perceived flaws in beauty, seems to have informed the artist's palette for flesh. It is as if the blood has been drained out of her figures over centuries through a penetrating, interrogating gaze and the thing left under that gaze is more object than human.

Hicks' gaze, her mind, thinks through a social culture in which the world is paradox, the world is full of noise and the world offers emancipation as the golden promise. As demanding as the world we live in, Hicks' research method is insistent, along with a concentrated effort to reduce the clamour, racket and clatter in our super-noisy sphere. As Hicks states, "It is a very image-oversaturated world. It is hard, I think, for artists who are working with photography to distinguish themselves among all the imagery."

Hicks' process to distil and reframe particular aspects of our culture at this point in time requires a substantial amount of her time. Her methodology relies heavily upon the systematic scouring and digestion of thousands of pictures sourced from online image portals. She intuitively navigates and consciously interrogates the quietude and brilliance of past masters. Take, for example, the coolly composed glamour rendered in her latest body of work, The Shadows.

Informed by Botticelli's The Birth of Venus, Hicks confidently and with a healthy dose of subtlety explores "reduction of the feminine" in the aptly titled works The Venus and New Age. While the fair-skinned, nubile femme is present in The Venus, she is barely perceivable, for a conch shell claims the place of her face, obstructing her eyes, lips, nose and cheek. Botticelli's exquisitely beautiful and super-iconic original is skillfully reworked – a reboot of classical imagery whereby Hicks seems to create a two-dimensional wax museum. Hicks muses, "Obviously the conch shell is symbolic in many religions and cultures of the female reproductive organs ... she is holding the shell up in front of her face in a kind of way to say, 'Is this all I am reduced to?' or 'Is this how I am?'"

Similarly, in the delicately composed work *New Age*, a light white, jagged, crystal lies in place of the pubis. The classic site of penetration becomes a crystal palace of sensual potential the eye cannot penetrate.

In my first draft of this article, my favourite sentences were the ones that didn't quite make sense, perhaps mirroring the shade that emerges throughout communication with Hicks. She boasts a kind of surety in uncertainty. After a sweaty dose of musing, I found only one authentic way forward. Forgive me, reader, you may have already noticed that not every sentence I write will at first achieve sense, or indeed make any sense at all. But sense is inevitably an enigma, a puzzling continuum that we can only attempt to elucidate.

Here we see the practice of yoga as a necessary grounding force in a potentially, aching, soulless world. Yoga as antidote provides Hicks with an additional pulse; something definitive that initiates breath and grounds it, causing a surge of blood that may have been drained through the assault of the gaze. Hicks speaks of yoga as a force that centres and aligns: "It definitely makes me feel more content when I do yoga, and that is a good feeling, as well, to work with." Yoga is an assertion that the body and the mind can find strength, self-awareness and clarity in an otherwise frenetic world where data, image or otherwise drains our authentic imagination and character.

Hicks does not speak of the perverse, which surprises me. The closest we get to some sense of perversity is a discussion of how horror in film has desensitised us to gore. Her body of work is an eerie response, perhaps, as the body is no longer visceral and electric. Even in the work, *The Performance*, where a teenage finger touches an open wound, drawing on the penetration of the wounds of Christ quoted from Caravaggio's 1602 masterpiece *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (or *Doubting Thomas*), it feels as if this flesh does not bleed. Hicks' reinvention presents a copy in which life has long been drained from the image.

It is refreshingly reassuring in an age of art-speak for a dialogue with an artist to not essentially add anything to the work. Hicks speaks delicately about not knowing and allowing instinct and the subconscious to flow through a play of objects, not tightly buttoned up into a dress shirt of language. The questions and the power of the images are housed in the works themselves, not some corpse of required reading that will elucidate mysteries. Hicks embodies confidence that the meaning of the work will become resolved in the mind of the viewer, or for herself, over the course of time. She seeds an idea, investigates her elements, assembles motifs and shoots them with a kind of sparing control. And it is up to us to fill in the spaces.