

VAULT, Issue 12, November 2015

Written by Andrew Gaynor

Petrina Hicks: The Longevity of Myth

<http://vaultart.com.au/ISS12/hicks.php>

For Sydney artist Petrina Hicks, the echoes of mythology, history and symbolism make for rich and fertile ground.

The first few years of this new millennium witnessed a burst of activity in Australian photography that left us a suite of remarkable images of the human experience. Three of the most enduring are Darren Sylvester's *If all we have is each other, that's ok!* 2003, Jane Burton's brooding *Badlands* 2001, and Petrina Hicks' *Lauren* 2003, a series of haunting portrait studies of an albino girl sitting alone against a blank background. With her eerie alt-beauty presented in a glossy advertising format, Lauren is elevated to a position of disturbing presence and desirability, commodified yet unattainable, fragile yet impervious. The series is a remarkable statement and heralded the arrival of a distinctive new photographic talent on the local scene.

In the interceding years, Hicks' fascination with flawed or alternate beauty has continued through unsettling images such as *Shenae and Jade* 2005, where the model holds a budgie gently in her mouth; *Lambswool* 2006, which again features Lauren, turned away from the camera whilst cradling a huskie who bites on her arm (described in the catalogue as 'an uneasy pairing'); and *Emily the Strange* 2011, an arresting shot of a frank-eyed girl holding a hairless sphinx cat. It has been a strong and consistent trajectory which has seen the artist gain many significant awards as well as residencies in Berlin, Paris, Mexico and California, with the last two falling in 2015. This years has also seen solo shows in Berlin, Sydney, Melbourne, and at the VOLTA art fair in New York, multiple group shows, and, as if that wasn't enough, Hicks is also completing her MFA at Sydney College of the Arts. VAULT chatted with Hicksturn to Australia after the California residency.

Vault: What were the ideas which contributed to your breakthrough image Lauren?

Petrina Hicks: I was fed up with how females were represented in glossy media. Having worked as a commercial photographer myself for 8+ years, I found the fixed idea of beauty to be nauseating and banal. Perfect beauty is just not interesting, and presents such a narrow and constricted view of life. It is in the imperfections that sustained and real beauty can be found. Commercial media hypnotizes people, creating this narrow lens where their definitions of beauty become the accepted norm, unquestioned by most people.

V: In most writings about you, much is made of the glossy production values of advertising and its inspiration on you. As this particular aesthetic now seeps into innumerable forms of contemporary photography (even when in opposition to it), would you still list it as an inspiration or do you view it now in other terms?

PH: At the time I began creating those early works, I was just venting my frustration with commercial photography. My inspiration was to somehow subvert commercial/advertising aesthetics whilst simultaneously posing as it. Also, this style of glossy production was really my only medium developed through my years of commercial photography. It wouldn't have felt true for me to create images with low production values, given the technical knowledge I had. But these also operated as a foil, causing a dichotomy (or polarity) between the surface aesthetic and an underlying content/ambiguity in the imagery.

V: Your recent series *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* includes allusions to mythology and archaeology through the use of props but also through titles – *Minerva* (presented by her familiar, the owl) and *Persephone* (a statue of three struggling figures entwined with live snakes). What has sparked your interest this territory?

PH: Myths, symbolism, archetypes and history have always been of interest. I am fascinated by the immediacy of symbols and longevity of myths, reinterpreted through lens of history and culture over and over again since origin. As the writings of Jung and Joseph Campbell point out, there is a pool of symbols we continually draw upon and reinterpret.

V: Milan Kundera's book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was an entwined love story of morality and amorality set against the political turbulence of the Prague Spring of 1968. Was it actually an influence on this body of work or did you just like the title?

PH: With this work I was interested in the dilemma of the 'human condition', of spiritual beings trying to transcend their bodily existence, the notion of the lightness of spirit (weightless) struggling with heaviness of the physical body (burden). We are all spiritual beings trying to transcend our primate ancestry. With our high-tech pristine environments, we now aim to live as long as possible through medical/technological advancements, avoiding the fact that our bodies are temporary and are supposed to decay and die. We wish for our bodies to be preserved and become immortal like sculpture. Kundera was speaking to Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the 'eternal return' – that all things in existence recur over and over again for eternity, hence giving more weight and burden to human existence. "Life which disappears once and for all, which does not return" writes Kundera, (is) "without weight...and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime...means nothing." So whilst my reason for choosing the title was not for the same reasons Kundera, his book did come to mind due to these oppositional concepts.

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V: You have previously used animals – dogs, crows – but the snake in particular is a symbolic and, for many people, unnerving creature. Snakes also do not feature in classical accounts of Persephone yet they appear in your image of that title. Can you discuss what they represent for you?

PH: The image Persephone features a copy of sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini depicting the rape/abduction of Persephone (also known as the Rape of Proserpina) by Hades. I have always been fascinated with this sculpture, it depicts a rape/abduction yet if you were to isolate Hades hands gripping her thighs, it almost looks loving and passionate. The snake/python/serpent symbolism has been of interest over the years, representing the shadow aspect of life, the darker force necessary to create the dualities of existence. Snakes also represent renewal and re-birth, and have been imbued with symbolism since beginning of time, across all cultures.

V: What were your particular interests in the recent residencies in California and Mexico?

PH: Residencies are really beneficial, working outside your comfort zone with exposure to different environments. It pulls the rug from under you, destroys any stability (or stagnancy) and widens the inspirational lens of perception. I find Mexico's pre-Hispanic culture fascinating, and could have spent weeks solely at the Anthropology museum in Mexico City. Their collection of artifacts is mind blowing. Mayan, Aztec & earlier cultures all display an interest in the human-animal connection with the animal acting as a spirit guide/power animal. So many amazing figurines of hybrid human-animals blended into one creature. Plus the equal respect they pay to both the light and dark forces in life, understanding that one can't exist without the other. They also don't shy away from the macabre.

In California I made some images of wolf-hybrid dogs belonging to a family that raised them. They had two teenage daughters who I photographed interacting with the wolves and I also photographed some beautiful snake skeletons held by a young girl. All these works are currently in post-production for my next exhibitions.

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