Exquisite Corpses

Kurt Brereton

The KGB, FBI and James Bond love doing it. *New Idea* and *Who* magazines can't seem to kick the habit. *The Bulletin* did it to Jeff Kennett on the front cover. In our more perverse moments of private fantasy we transpose someone's head onto someone else's body. We collage, genderbend, crossdress and polymorph *exquisite corpses* out of media and advertising personalities, then use them as fantasy aids in the cause of our mundane desires.

As I was growing up the now esoteric game of Exquisite Corpses was often played at parties. It involves handing around a piece of folded paper amongst a group of people. The first person draws the head, the second person fills in the torso without seeing the head, and so on. [I'd do a drawing for you if I had a pencil handy, but I don't...] The resulting portrait always produces a humorous account of both the polymorphic subject and also of the psychological state of the artists involved. Exquisite Corpses, in its pure analog form, is still played amongst a small band of nomadic dope-smoking poets and university lecturers trying to loosen up a little over the Xmas break.

Having been driven almost to the point of extinction by the MTV epidemic, this age-old artform is enjoying a digital revival by the grace of the computer graphics revolution.

Identity grafts

Seamless joins, faithful lighting angles and sympathetic resolutions are all hallmarks of the graphic facelift. Identity grafts, psychic panel beating, bio-robotics, eugenics me Tarzan. In such a hyperreal world of airbrushed truths, the chances are growing thinner of meeting someone, male or female, who hasn't had a touch of body restyling performed on them. Daily news photographs undergo the same treatment. Yesterday it was the steady hand of the darkroom retoucher, now it's performed with the magic wand and lasso tools on your portable laptop with a modem hooked up to head office. News photographs (not to mention articles) routinely get a nose job, location transplant, a few hormone implants - and look 'n feel a whole lot better for it too. After all it's the story that really

counts, and everyone knows the real event is always a disappointment. Just ask anchorman Mike "mmm..." Moore of ABC TV's *Frontline*.

Digitally mediated identities

The dissemination of digital editing software such as *Adobe Photoshop*, *Specular Collage* and *Fractal Painter* into first, the entertainment and media industries, and now into the domestic market has provoked a rash of photographs with smiling politicians sporting the bodies of Elle or Arnie. Trailing behind these mutant mediatrons, can be found a critical and theoretical debate about the political, ethical and philosophical implications of digital image manipulation and publishing.

Manipulating photographic representations has been integral to the discourse of photography since its invention in 1839. While the mythology of journalism speaks of objectivity in order to distinguish itself from fiction or art, anyone born with a remote control in their hand knows that the media is also in the highly political business of manufacturing consent, providing entertainment in line with advertising seduction strategies and ratings economics. This important philosophical and cultural shift in reading images as constructed fictions rather than dumb facts has meant that where we once looked for meaning *in* images we now look at who is constructing the images *and* who is reading those images. In short, we see images as sign systems given currency (or not) within a multicultural society of competing histories and political voices. Digital communications only leaven this semiological process a little faster, as more people become active producer-consumers of images via the desktop and mobile communications networks.

No one bats an eyelid any more when a hyperreal hamburger metamorphoses into James Dean, or a pencil-drawn cartoon character marries into the real world and wins a divorce settlement within a time frame of 30 seconds. While the commercial world has embraced digital art, most high art museums and commercial galleries have been slow on the uptake. Artists are going online and museums are going off the wall. The introduction of broad

Alan Cruickshank.
Leisure: Bondi Beach
1992, digitally
manipulated archival
photograph.

band digital communications, cheaper more powerful computers and more available graphics friendly (yet still not so cheap!) networking services as well as the good 'ol Internet all promise to drop art - as well as entertainment into our laps.

An increasing number of up and becoming artists are skidding like dogs on lino in their enthusiasm to jump from analog to digital media. Two contemporary Australian artists, Hou Leong and Alan Cruickshank, draw on digital imaging technologies as a means of challenging our ways of seeing. Both artists play with the conventional modernist (19th century) idea of photography as objective record that still persists within the forensic industries such as journalism, medicine, the police and military.

Hou Leong

Represented by Rex Irwin Art Dealer in Sydney, Leong is a Chinese artist who has been working in Australia since

Alan Cruickshank.
Construction 1992, digi-
tally manipulated
archival photograph.

1989. Leong has wasted little time adopting the great Aussie tradition of playing the larrikin. Honing in on 'classic Aussie' tableaux that traditionally have only been inhabited by non-Asians (heroes of the bush, surf and football field) Leong lops off famous heads then glues on his own in their place. Leong's satirical works carry on a tradition of art parodies from Dada (1920s) - Duchamp, Man Ray, Max Ernst through Pop (1950s-60s) - Blake, Rivers, Hamilton to contemporary post modernists such as the male Japanese artist Yoshimura who dresses-up as famous Western icons such as Suzon, the barmaid behind the bar in Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882). Such reverent send-ups of sacred cows tend to go down well in Australia as witnessed by Leong's rapid rise to fame. We all love to see Paul Hogan lose his head for a change or a Chinese Bronco score the winning try.

The degree of our disbelief at seeing 'an Asian face' on an Anglo's body is a measure of our racist attachment to the power relations of cultural rituals of masculinity that have traditionally excluded faces like Leongs. Cultural shock value is also the unique selling point of the long-running Mr Okimura TV ads for NEC that no doubt paved the way for Mr Leong. His choice of contemporary images as source material only serves to heighten the shock value by siphoning off the currency value of the hot fashion picture, ad or film poster before it has had a chance to cool like concrete into an Aussie icon. Leong's smiling face says he is happy to be on the bike, on the field or in the bush. He invites us to identify with him in the role he is performing - as a winner, hero and crocodile-strangling he-man. The joke is on those of us who are in the habit of seeing Asians under "a mantle of invisibility ... erased of all traces of their subjectivity" as American critic Bell Hooks phrased it. Leong is not an object, 'an Asian face' but rather a known subject 'the artist' actively addressing us with his gaze, his masculinity and his sense of irony that foregrounds the brittle rhetoric of white supremacy, Blokedom and Ockerdom.

Alan Cruickshank

Cruickshank is an Anglo-Australian artist from Adelaide who has been exhibiting since the late 1970s. In his body of work titled *The Arcanum Museum*, he has focused on manipulating popular historical photographs from the 1920s and 30s. Recently rediscovered by the public through new digital archival processes like CD Rom, photographs like the much publicised Sam Hood collection in Sydney's Mitchell library now serve as the value-enhanced visible history of our past. Cruickshank's doctored versions of these photographs are in turn "images without analog, of a history without events" to borrow art critic Catharine Lumby's words from the catalogue essay (1992). We now sit down at the computer-mediated photographic image and find ourselves speculating on its status as historical record. Our own self-image is, like the digital image, no longer of an innocent, natural or politically inert being. We are pixelated amalgams, pastiches and parodies of our previous analog selves.

Sutured Selves

Grafting surgically marries head with body by suturing or stitching together two alien tissues. We can use this botanical procedure as a digital production metaphor. You sculpt your ideal self on screen before you go under the knife. Technically speaking, design choices aren't bound by class, race or gender. Culturally it's a different story. Dolly-mixed bodies tend to be read as biological, political and ideological mistakes - unless, of course, you're the hyperreal Michael Jackson. If the operation is a complete success no visible scars are left to tell the story.

The medical suture helps wounds to heal. Reading the sutured-collages of Leong and Cruickshank an ideological catharsis is set in motion. Performing a double-take (*stitchuation* joke) on history gives some light political relief from racist and sexist dramas. In all three Cruickshank images leading men stand Superman-like; braced, iconic and monumental. Heroic blue collar worker on top of the Bridge; Olympian icebergs by the pool or those magnificent men in their flying machines all standing erect, static, defiant. Yet these statuesque men are also pathetic in their need to strike the pose. Pathetic because in eternally seeking to defy the terrors of flaccidity and languidity, masculinity holds rigid against a liquidity that might prove more sympathetic with the task at hand, be it libidinal or political.

In a perverse sense the underlying ideologies of class, race and gender are paradoxically reinforced by the sleight-of-hand move that is commonly called role reversal. Suturing the head (object) of an anonymous 'traditional Aborigine' or 'Asian' onto a known identity's (subject) shoulders, might at first glance appear as a strategy of subverting the racist politics of the exclusive, or exposing some whites-only club in all its ruthlessness. Yet here we see a desperate desire to once again manufacture differences (of colour, race, gender, employment) predicated on a constant investment in the construction of the Other.

Torgovnich, the American cultural theorist, argues that, within the process of iconising the 'primitive' as a strategy of dealing with the fear of the unknown or the narrow limitations of the known, there is a desire to mask a deeper politics of colonialism:

The West seems to need the primitive as a precondition and supplement to the sense of self: it always creates heightened versions of the primitive as nightmare or pleasant dream (1990: 244-246).

Here a Pitjantjatjara or Chinese face is cut out then pasted as a supplement to the authenticity of the historical photograph or contemporary news story. In its extreme form such a manoeuvre also displaces and diverts critical analysis from racist ideologies onto the disorder and incongruousness of the supplementary sign.

Both Leong and Cruickshank employ a political strategy of graphic *evocation*, that is, they occupy and appropriate a source image then collage new images into the scene in a fashion that appears to be consistent with the denotative codes of perspective, lighting, grain and focus. While there are some significant differences at work, both at the level of political motivation and strategies of persuasion between Leong and Cruickshank, the sympathetic message promoted across both series of images is their desire to bring into stark contrast, the cultural narrowness and exclusiveness of what it is to be and be seen as 'an Australian' of some standing. Embedded within the emotional and semiotic shock of spotting the difference, the odd sign out, is the realisation that you have been taking *stock* both denotatively and connotatively of the historical fact turned almost instantaneously into fantasy. The act of taking *account*, to use Marcia Langton's term, of such representational and aesthetic statements by non-Aboriginal or non-Chinese readers, works to turn subjects into objects. Langton, notes that:

The audience, however, might be entirely unaware that they are observing an account, usually by the authorial We of the Other. The creative efforts of film makers, video producers, broadcasters and artists to represent some particular Aboriginal 'reality', even if there is an attempt at involving the Aboriginal subject in the production, is always a fictionalisation, an act of creative authority. (1993: 40)

These images are not historical facts (this really happened), rather they are anti-historical parodies that stress fictionality. The fictitious histories are drawn to sharpen attention on real events. While what you see did not really happen, the fact that it could not happen is an indictment of the racist, sexist patriarchal society that fights to prevent it happening. A closer analysis, however, raises issues of hegemony versus resistance when playing the multicultural game. In an ideological and political sense, the assimilationist desire to see Chinese or Aboriginal subjects adopting the poses of Anglos always produces exquisite corpses since vital cultural differences will always produce different creative strategies and tactics, different positions of speaking and different power relations between subjects and objects.

Cajoling the phallic

Leong and Cruickshank are concerned with gender as much as they are with race. In almost every image we see men playing out dreams of 'real men', however ridiculous, repulsive or impossible they seem. Gender issues are as important as racial issues in the construction of identity.

How effective are these images in subverting or upholding myths of manliness? Do these images threaten or cajole a phallic order that sustains selected masculine identities while oppressing others within patriarchy? And finally, how does the white male yobbo, ugly old bloke, young guy, cool dude or PC snag identify with these men as Australians, blacks, whites, bosses, workers, Aborigines, Asians or Anglos? It is in the process of forging answers to these issues that some sense of identity is hammered out. Every act of reading must be an act of repositioning yourself, of representing yourself in the world in relation to others - lovers, family, colleagues, friends and strangers. Notions of what it is to be masculine in some way or other, just as it is to be Aboriginal or Asian, all depend on an ongoing intersexual (cross gender) and intercultural dialogue, or struggle as the case may be, between orders of masculinity and femininity; gay and straight; Koorie and non-Koorie; Asian and Australian. The presence of images such as those by Leong and Cruickshank serve as mediatory reference maps to be read, interpreted, imagined and argued over. Their work forces us to ask what informs male egos, behind or in front of the camera? □

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