



synthetic/aesthetic

Exhibition dates: Saturday, 28 April – Saturday, 2 June 2007

Curator: Danielle Johnson

synthetic/aesthetic explores the intersection of the body, fashion, photography and art in an exhibition timed to coincide with Rosemount Australia Fashion Week 30 April – 4 May 2007 (formerly Mercedes Australian Fashion Week). The exhibition aims to counterpoint the mainstream event, challenging existing notions of beauty and physical identity in Australian society. The works in this exhibition explore serious personal and conceptual concerns and are beautiful and alluring, but in unexpected and sometimes confronting ways.

Art making (particular art which represents the body) and fashion are intrinsically tied to identity. Identity is a complex and unique layering of many facets of ourselves. Sometimes we chose these layers – for example fashion, and in particular, labels help us to create our identity we present to other people. **Shane Dunn's** work *FRIFE* sets up a theatrical and humorous dilemma. The dress he has created is fashioned from the very exclusive labels that are so familiar to us. We associate these labels with quality, longevity and craftsmanship. While Dunn's creation certainly demonstrates craftsmanship, it has impermanence and fragility that sits at odds with the labels from which it is created.

Biljana Jancic's work also reminds us of impermanence – in this performance she creates an ethereal vision by encasing herself in a backlit construction made entirely from inflated freezer bags. Jancic comments that 'somewhere in the process the bags lost some of their function and I lost my body in their containment. My main concern is the material and there is a compromise reached between the material's utility and physicality and my intention to make the material transcend its materiality.' These bags do transcend their materiality, they also cocoon Jancic acting as a barrier between the viewer and the artist, however, as the bags are transparent they allow us to catch glimpses of the artists within her construction. Perhaps, rather than a barrier, this synthetic layer could be seen as a conductor or pathway, just as it captures the light, it may help us begin to capture the artist and her aesthetic and conceptual concerns.

Like Jancic's work, **Tim Richardson's** creates the suggestion of themes and gestures and movements beyond the surface. In Richardson's case, his work references the confines of the tradition of fashion photography. In *The Descent* the feminine figure and its pictorial/historical context is filtered through Richardson's use of modified digital media. The photographs, conceived for a fashion designer, reference Duchamp's *Nude Descending A Staircase*.

Despite their definite break with conventional fashion photography, there is a feeling of lightness in Richardson's work that sets up a stark contrast to **Owen Leong** and **Monika Tichacek's** photographs set beside them. The journey we take in building and discovering our identity is very rarely straightforward or painless. Leong and Tichacek create analytical and contemporary versions of the self-portrait, which challenge the limitations and expectations of the body's appearance. Both artists employ the theatrics and the charged impact of costume in their work. Tichacek's image, from *The Shadows* series, may be at first seem abject (when we imagine the physical pain of her laced skin) and yet we are inextricably drawn to the strength and beauty of her physical presence and perseverance. Similarly with Leong's works, which present a haunting and fragile re-birth in *Internal Contradiction 2* and *Internal Contradiction 4*, and a gaping and oozing void in his work *Hole*. Leong's use of eighteenth century British clothing in *Hole* examines the nature of the contemporary body within post-colonial Australia. Leong's work continues to explore the layers of his identity as an Australian with Chinese heritage.

Belinda Lai's fashion pieces form part of a collaborative work with **Alice Wesley-Smith's** black and white photographs. Lai's first piece (in the series of garments), reminds us of fragility, beauty, pain and birth all at once. She presents us with a pale apricot silk shift, embellished with dressmaker's pins. This reference the labour involved in fashion making, an element behind the scenes. The series of uniquely fashioned garments (all based on the one pattern) represent stages and events of a woman's life, she wears these experiences through her life and her identity is embroidered and built from them.

While Lai's works builds layers, Wesley-Smith's photographs reveal them. The subject of her photographs starts with the self we present to the world (when we are "on stage"), and gradually and poetically reveals, layer-by-layer, the self we are without these layers or props.

Todd Robinson's work also involves a pairing back to essential elements. His works, influenced by his career as a fashion designer, literally unravel the essence of fabric in his piece *loomstate*. This work, like Wesley-Smith's, demonstrates beauty and simplicity via its honesty. It also reminds us of the labour involved in the making of garments.

In Robinson's video *sightlessness (Mez)* we are predominantly presented with a moving piece of deep red velvet – (Robinson tells us that it is a blind woman who touches and agitates the velvet). The result of this information, and the video itself, is an emphasis on tactility and the sensuousness of the material, because the audience too are immersed in a dark space, free of other stimulation, they can almost feel the softness and richness of the velvet as it moves on the screen. **Robinson's** work encourages us to think about how the subject of the video experiences the fabric and how important or unimportant the colour and appearance of the velvet (or fashion) may be to her.