

EDUCATION COLLECTION NOTES

INVESTIGATING KEY WORKS OF ART IN THE GALLERY

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ART
GALLERY
NSW

PETRINA HICKS SHENAE AND JADE

Shenae and Jade 2005
lightjet print
85.5 x 80 cm (image)
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Purchased by the Viktoria Marinov Bequest 2006
© Petrina Hicks, courtesy Stills Gallery
318.2006



ARTIST STATEMENTS

'I like photographic images that are beautiful to look at and ones that are genuine and truthful in their approach, and ones that evoke some kind of emotional response.'

'... the primary goal of my portraits is not the traditional sense of portrait photography where you are trying to reveal the person's essence or identity. Sometimes the person's identity is secondary to the ideas I'm trying to explore.'

Petrina Hicks interviewed by Jason Lingard, *Nothing Magazine* #12, Melbourne 2008

'I like to create a dream-like state in these portraits, these images are often ones that I have pre-conceived in an intuitive or dream-like state. I like order and clarity and form, so try to bring these aspects to the portraits. I treat these portraits like sculpture, which is why I will often only photograph people from the chest up so they resemble sculptural busts.'

'Aside from making a photographic portrait of the sitter I'm primarily concerned with defining, portraying or translating photographically a particular feeling. Not a feeling that's easy to express, one that is abstract and one which the following words could describe: eerie, isolation, anticipation, sickness, doom or terror. I then try to soften this feeling by creating images that are soft in colour and tone and resemble perfection so a subtle tension between these opposing forces can be created.'

Petrina Hicks 2006

CRITICAL STATEMENTS

‘The portraits of children with their pets, such as *Shenae and Jade* and *Jackson and Tiger*, both 2005, play interestingly on the dynamics between the two. The suggestion that either animal or child could do something destructive induces a sense of foreboding ... In *Shenae and Jade*, the girl’s painted eyes are closed. Her pet bird’s body rests neatly at the opening of her fine white top, its head caught in the girl’s mouth. The tension between soft and hard is almost excruciating ...

‘... Hicks is such a practised manipulator of the image that we simply can’t tell what is truth or fiction in her work. The fact that her subjects may not always look directly at us is largely inconsequential, for if we could see their faces they would only reflect back our own anxieties about what we might be looking at.’

Judy Annear, ‘Blank face’, *Art & Australia*, vol 46 no 2 summer 2008, p 280

While she primarily works with people, [Hicks’s] works transcend the boundaries of portraiture as she finds beauty in perceived imperfections and renders idealised beauty strange. Her images of adolescents elegantly capture the ambiguities of youth. Whilst she uses digital interventions, they are almost imperceptible, creating instead a polished hyper-reality. These subtle contrasts within the image play with photography’s dual capacities as both a revealer of truths, and a perpetrator of lies. Hicks’s photography embraces the scope of what it means to be human ...

... In an interesting departure, *The descendants* includes a series of video portraits. Hicks further confounds the real and hyper-real by employing a visual convention used in computer 3D modelling, a 360-degree view of a static subject, slowly rotating before the camera/viewer – but in this case her subjects are real rather than computer generated.

Stills Gallery website
www.stillsgallery.com.au/artists/hicks/index.php?obj_id=about&nav=0
(accessed Oct 2011)

PETRINA HICKS

SHENAE AND JADE

Born in Sydney in 1972, Petrina Hicks studied photomedia at the Canberra School of Art, ANU and now lives and works in Sydney. She has won several prizes including the 2008 ABN Amro Emerging Artist Award. She has most recently been exhibited in *Timelines* at the National Gallery of Victoria (International), Melbourne and *Present tense* at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra.

[Hicks's] work hovers in an unsettling place, between allure and strangeness.

A survey of Hicks's photographic practice suggests a preoccupation with unblemished young people on the cusp of adulthood. Seemingly flawless adolescents with polished skin, shiny hair and clear eyes are photographed in static poses and clinical surrounds which recall the slick surfaces of advertising images. On a closer look, however, each of her subjects has slight, or not so slight, flaws. Dry lips, albinism, a lazy eye, a missing arm. The flaws are disquieting. In the context of the glamour and airbrushed perfection of the glossy magazine-like image, however, each of these flaws is almost seamlessly incorporated into the desirability of the subject. Albinism or one-armedness becomes aestheticised, desirable. The image fascinates; the viewer is intrigued, at once attracted and repelled.

It is this tension, the forces of beauty and anxiety poised in a suspended moment, that intrigues and unsettles us when contemplating *Shenae and Jade* 2005. This photograph, one of a series of portraits of young people with their pets, portrays a young girl lightly holding her bird's head in her mouth. The bird has penetrated the integrity of her face; we think of the sharp, jabbing beak in close proximity to her soft tongue. At the same time her teeth envelope the bird's fragile neck, they could slice and crush. The potential violence inherent in this moment and our unease at the beaky, feathery presence in the mouth's sanctity, hold us transfixed. The two are poised in a moment of mutual trust.

This evocation of a suspended moment reflects Hicks's interest in portraying teenagers in her work. Adolescence is itself a threshold moment, the transition between childhood and adulthood when strong forces are concentrated within a young body and mind, and occasional ruptures occur. The formation of identity, the struggle between how you look and how you want to look, the self-conscious invention of how to be in the world, echo a metamorphosis suggested in the transitional beings of Hicks's images. Despite the gloss and highly polished surfaces, there is a visceral quality to her imagery in the meticulous depiction of flesh, hair and veins. Her subjects are both flesh-and-blood and digitally rendered construction, bringing into question what it is to be human at this time in history.

Hicks has a successful career in the world of commercial photography and draws on its tropes and methodologies in creating her fine art photographs. Her images are alluring, hyper-real and crisp, they seduce the eye with lush and impervious surfaces. She uses the seductive techniques of advertising; static, stylised poses, pristine locales and almost undetectable digital manipulation, but the strength of her work is in the way she subtly shifts this paradigm with a series of slight ruptures, disrupting our comfortable response to images of seduction and consumption.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Describe your emotional or even physical response to *Shenae and Jade* 2005 by Petrina Hicks.

Analyse the photograph in terms of colour, lighting and composition as well as the girl's posture, and list words to describe the mood of this image. Articulate the different forces suggested by the extremely intimate relationship between the two subjects.

Animals and children are a familiar motif in Hicks's work.

Compare this image with others in her body of work such as *Jackson and Tiger* 2005 and *Lambswool* 2008. Discuss how the inherent tension or implied violence in these images of young people and domesticated creatures is created. Consider the role of trust in the image. Investigate the role played by images of animals and children in art history.

Discuss the differences between fine art and commercial photography.

Petrina Hicks is a successful commercial photographer as well as an artist. Research Hicks's bodies of work in these two fields. Identify ways in which her commercial practice may influence or inform her art making practice. Consider subject, meaning, interpretation, audience and the contexts in which each kind of work is received.

Can these photographs of people truly be called portraits?

Hicks's photographic practice focuses almost exclusively on the human subject, yet she has said that she is at times more interested in creating a mood than in representing the identity of an individual person. Consider the ways in which she uses the face as a sign or a tool to communicate her ideas.

Research the history of photographic portraiture.

Create a timeline tracing its beginnings in the 19th century, when recording a likeness and physiognomic representations were the prevailing factors, through the modernist period to the latter part of the 20th century. In this latter period representations of the face reflect new ideas of the self as a construction influenced by systems of language, race and gender. Assess Hicks's representations of the human face in relation to your findings.

How does Hicks suggest that her subjects exist somewhere along a continuum between human and cyborg?

'This kind of imagery reminds me of a "futuristic world", where due to advancements in medicine and science all physical imperfections have been bred out of the human race. I like to highlight the subtle imperfections in people's appearances and show the beauty of these aberrations.'

Petrina Hicks, exhibition brochure, Stills Gallery 2006

Research Hicks's suites of work in photomedia, film and video and identify recurring themes and subjects. Consider and discuss the above quote in light of your research. Think about her creation of hyper-real and slick imagery and the use of techniques such as digital manipulation often used in advertising. Compare Hicks's work with that of other artists in the Gallery's collection who create far more overt hybrid beings.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Publication

Annear, Judy. 'Blank Face', *Art & Australia*, vol 46 no 2 summer 2008, pp 276–285

Websites

Stills Gallery www.stillsgallery.com.au

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Acknowledgments

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