‘Subversive Pleasures’
Drawing on Myth, Mischief and Mayhem

by

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Abstract

This paper is written in four sections. Julie Rrap ‘The use of the self is almost like a ruse.’; Paula Rego ‘under the polished surface’; Angela Carter ‘No limits to useful stories for women.’; and Studio Practice ‘The Wild Domestic Scenes.’ In an attempt to clarify my own experience in this creative and theoretical research I will investigate the work of Rrap, Rego and Carter as they consider notions of a feminine identity. I intend to explore these artist’s examination of social and cultural boundaries and how they expose both their arbitrariness and their reversibility, through visual and written representation.

My research followed how these artists questioned the subjectivity of a feminine identity from different perspectives. Although they work in diverse practices such as Julie Rrap (b.1950 Australia) visual artist - multimedia; Paula Rego (b.1935 Portugal, Lives and works in London) visual artist - painting, drawing, etching; and Angela Carter (b.1940-92 Britain) writer – fictional tales; further study revealed connections between their objectives, strategies and theoretical concerns. Rrap consistently examines the relationship between artist, artwork and viewer, frequently using her own body as a subject and a stratagem. Her works exhibit an ironic humour and identity as an unstable performance. In Disclosures: A Photographic Construct 1982 Fig. 3 the photographic process and repeated images of the body alert the viewer to thegap between representation and reality.1 In A-R-MOUR 2000 Fig. 5-8 the artist

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1 Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 54
takes on various guises transforming and metamorphosing that results in destabilizing the feminine stereotype.

Rego works in the domain of the family and the domestic exploring complex human situations and conditions. In *The Soldiers Daughter* 1987 Fig. 9 the figures are fixed in the experience of domestic life, however, in Rego’s composition the central female protagonist emerges to challenge the interpretation of the situation represented. This visual narrative references the ordinary and the domestic creating conflict with the extraordinary situation presented. The series of works *Untitled* 1998-99 Fig. 10-15 openly deals with abortion an uncommon subject in painting. The female figures in the abortion series are represented in strong physical poses with determined facial expressions that do not suggest either hopelessness or despair. This series in fact makes reference to the political through the domestic. Rego’s artworks combine the real and the imaginary into pictures that confuse the boundaries of a fixed reality.

Angela Carter writes creative stories for adults through appropriation and adaptation of fairy tales. In culture fairy tales often function to enlighten and defend prescriptions placed on women in particular. In Carter’s stories cultural restrictions are wholeheartedly rejected as she focuses on female perspectives and features female protagonists in innovative and subversive retellings. *The Courtship of Mr. Lyon* one of Carter’s revisions of Beauty and
the Beast, Beauty is unable to escape patriarchy completely however Beauty refuses traditional characterization and limitations by making her own choices.

Rrap, Rego and Carter explore the terrain of gender, sexuality, domesticity and the everyday. The social and cultural relevance of their artworks engage audiences and most importantly stimulate discussion.

Investigation into these artists’ concepts, strategies and artworks has clarified my work in experience and practice. The series of paintings for my exhibition work has been named *The Wild Domestic Scenes Fig. 18-21 & 25-27* and are representations of the female figure that combine a performative element and narrative. In each painting I developed a central female character within a domestic space. Experimentation with composition, line, colour and form enabled distortion and selective exaggeration to take shape in the pictures. The images are rendered in a realistic manner together with some aspects that are illogical and humorous. The descriptive compositional process blended with the real and the fictitious activates an ambiguous visual narrative. The research into the selected artists and my painting practice has allowed for a clearer understanding of my own work and a deeper appreciation of a broader contemporary context.
Introduction

A feeling of solidarity: the ideological self-realization that a number of women - without being part of a group, working in different media and in different countries, addressing disparate concerns – are nevertheless able to speak surprisingly clearly of our collective agenda. Even if we have never met, we have become confident of the shared aims of our collective, and we have come to realize how one woman’s work or words leads into or enables the next woman to work or speak.

A sense of loss: The realization that women’s history is faintly written and must be continually written and must be continually re-inscribed before it is forgotten again. And then of course, as Gertude Stein knew, one always needs to repeat because, ‘Every time it is so, it is so, it is so.’

Jo Anna Isaak wrote these words in her ‘Laughter Ten Years After’ exhibition catalogue of 1995 and communicates a point of view relevant to today. The key findings of modern linguistics and psychoanalysis in academic discourse have dramatically influenced the understanding of how all signifying systems function. The impact for women has been an increased recognition of the importance in these recent developments in how meaning is generated and structured in culture. As Jo Anna Isaak emphasizes ‘the death of the author levelled the playing field for women.’

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3 ibid, 271