

compulsive beauty¹: del kathryn barton's composite portraits

*'I have a face, but a face is not what I am. Behind me lies a mind, which you do not see but which looks out on you. This face, which you see but I do not, is a medium I own to express something of what I am. Or so it seems till I turn to the mirror.'*²

Del Kathryn Barton's suite of obsessively detailed portraits responds to the basic human impulse to look at faces and imagine the character behind them. What do these childlike girls reveal with their overblown faces and conceal with their innocent stare? Adorned and embellished with flourishes, tiny dots and patterns, these images display a compulsive beauty in their infinite detail. With technical dexterity, Barton's labour of markings in pencil, acrylic and gouache derive from a foundation in drawing. In doing so, she skilfully integrates disparate working methods with infinitesimal precision. Carefully crafted strokes consume the picture plane as do the sitters who gaze beguilingly. Here subjectivity and representation are taken to dizzying extremes and disconcerting intensity. Barton's unique sense of line and form deploy female faces as a repository of human thoughts, fantasies and emotions.

Invoking a delirious realm of fear and wonder, Barton creates fictions based on the narrative of inner worlds. Her fastidious surface treatment of inscriptions with its revelatory qualities is '...something about surface subterfuge, that the anxiety sits beneath the surface - how we lie with the surfaces of our bodies... which in turn relates to the children who are less able to do this i think... all my work connects to aspects of the self, of myself that i am most uncomfortable with.'³

On the cusp of adolescence, these girls expose an aesthetic of desire with their burgeoning sexuality, parted lips and flushed faces. With eyes like those of frightened animals, their haunting faces are posed at close range. The exaggerated, large eyes, with their luminous glint, recall Bambi's cartoon cuteness and vulnerability transformed into the worrying stare of girl as owl. A predatory, nocturnal bird, the owl is brooding and melancholic with a disturbing, watchful presence while over scaled eyes are a trademark of Japanese animation. In particular, Osamu Tezuka's anime characters conveyed intense feelings. Best known for Astro Boy and Kimba the white lion, Tezuka's fantastical and furry animals are invested with emotions. Barton's animal and human forms are more capacious revealing a preoccupation with '...the idea that beauty seems to lie very close to the wounded places.'⁴

Flowers, birds, bunnies and patterned fabric are part of an ongoing repertoire of flora and fauna. Interestingly, Barton grew up on an alpaca goat farm in a semi-rural outer area of Sydney. Childhood accoutrements such as a strawberry necklace and balloons appear as a patterned skirt in untitled drawing for girl as sorcerer. Here, Barton has stitched the paper with fringing and lace trimming as if adornment has extended beyond the frame yet the body is like a skeleton with sparse flesh. In a state of wonder, her red and blue eyes

look into the distance, somewhat dazed and preoccupied. Budding breasts are exposed and enveloped by the perky ears of a tiny grey kitten. In girl as mountain, her bleached face and bloodshot dark eyes suggest frailty further enhanced by a tiny, fragile bird perched on her extended fingers. Its beak almost presses onto her cheek while she clasps an oriental lily, its petals curled with delicate pink stripes.

At times, more sinister elements are apparent with claws slowly sinking into the flesh of ...she appeared as a lover might... while a slender thread binds various body parts such as bulbous ears. Looped, curled and sutured through hair and fingers, this ribbon entwines various physical elements suggesting violent binding and woven tendrils. There is a sense of emotional longing, nostalgia and mysterious beauty as we glimpse into this creature's fanciful domain. A companion painting, thank you for loving me, with its perverse physiognomy of a hermaphrodite is reminiscent of a character from a foreboding fairytale.

A type of composite portraiture, Barton inflects this traditional genre with corporeal sensuality. Hands are carefully positioned, sometimes barely clasped with knuckles exposed in a vulnerable gesture that recalls early Renaissance portraiture.⁵ Barton's female figures are either consumed by bodily inscriptions or left barren by unadorned space. What are the social and cultural coordinates on these portraits of solitude? Individuality, body and gender all become matters for speculative exploration. Each has their own personality - she appears disturbed, preoccupied, enigmatic, macabre or even ecstatic as her head is tilted and eyes averted. Ultimately, we are lured into her disarming world of fabrication and masquerade.⁶

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1. This title is borrowed from Hal Foster's reappraisal of Surrealism in *Compulsive Beauty*, The MIT Press, London, 1993; André Breton writes about the idea of 'convulsive beauty' in *Mad Love*, 'Convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will be not.', University of Nebraska Press, USA, 1987, p. 19.

2. Julian Bell, Introduction to *500 Self-Portraits*, Phaidon Press, London, 2004, p. 5.

3. Correspondence between artist and author, 4 August 2005.

4. *ibid.*

5. *ibid.*, 'i was in italy earlier this year and spent most of my time there looking at pre-renaissance and renaissance painting... the relevance to my current practice really surprised me and has certainly been present in my mind making the second half of this body of work.'

6. For an historical overview of portraiture from Hans Holbein to Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura see Shearer West, *Portraiture*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2004. I am grateful to Rachel Kent for sharing this reference.