CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA WOMEN



Natalya Hughes The After Party

Natalya Hughes makes impeccable paintings and works on paper that reflect an ongoing interest in the aesthetics of decadence. For 'Contemporary Australia: Women', Hughes has created a perverted parlour room. This twisted version of a domestic space — beautiful from afar — is, on closer inspection, overflowing with icky imagery. The After Party 2012 is an immersive environment overrun with discomforting ornamentation — wallpaper features a colony of purple beavers gnawing at one another; paintings taunt us with suggestive forms and kooky patternation; and a bizarre dining suite sits plumply at its heart, both engorged and engaging. Drawing from art history and pop culture alike, crossed with the odd rococo flourish and intermingled with squidgy bodily references, Hughes moves seamlessly between florid, funny and out-and-out gross.

The title refers to Judy Chicago's controversial megawork, The dinner party 1974-79, an ambitious piece that captured the time with laser-like precision. Created at the height of the feminist movement — but when Feminism was still a dirty word — The dinner party honoured some of Western civilisation's most significant but overlooked women. Here Hughes riffs on the iconic work and, with tongue planted firmly in cheek, later criticism of it. While acknowledging its legacy, she also takes the piss out of theories associated with feminist art of that time — in particular, 'central-core imagery', which asserted that women artists unconsciously use vaginal iconography as a metaphor for the essence of womanhood. Hotly debated throughout the 1970s and 80s, the idea was dismissed by many as essentialist. Hughes's witty homage is riddled with euphemism hence the presence of beavers, innumerable pink bits and tacos.

Hughes's preoccupation with the body could easily be construed here as mouths or vaginas, or even a combination of the two — a Freudian vagina dentata. While Hughes would rightly reject such an interpretation as reductive, the larger idea remains. Given its scale, The After Party strongly references bodies, is inward to the point of being hermetic and resists interpretation though one can see its combination of humour, visual

intelligence and physicality. Nonetheless, as a perverse domestic space *The After Party* facilitates conversations between past and present: intermingling art historical and theoretical references, connecting with discussions about the body and the abject in art, and grounding it all in lived reality. Hughes seems to acknowledge the confusion of 'what came next' after Feminism's second and third waves: understandings of Feminism are much more complicated today — there is no single, unitary movement any more than there is a timeless, universal 'woman'. Hughes dips her toe into these complex waters with a work that playfully engages with feminist histories, as much as it builds on the idiosyncratic visual language she has accumulated over more than ten years.

Hughes's content remains consistent: sources are drawn from images that are already highly stylised and partially abstracted versions of the figurative, which she then deconstructs, reconfigures and rewrites. Following a method of elimination, Hughes sees how far her coded forms can be reduced before the content is lost. Here she teeters on the point of no return — the decorative excesses previously held in check by expanses of flat colour have instead been reproduced atop florid gyrating backgrounds. The whole work is a full-on defiance of logic: the artist leaves the viewer to interpret her parlour room of excess, stuck in a never-ending loop of purple beavers, fleshy protuberances and eggy rocaille details. The After Party thus marks something of a stylistic departure: her compositional style - which swings between figuration and abstraction, technology and tradition — has been expanded exponentially, and into three-dimensions.

Typically eclectic, Hughes's paintings mash together a mind-boggling array of referents. Taco Corsage 2011 for instance, features a bandy-legged taco, proudly bearing a neatly coiled arrangement of raw sausages. Its stockinged legs have been lifted from Hans Bellmer's *La poupée* 1934–35, while the squidgy pink sections, vaguely vulval and suggestive, are in fact carefully reproduced drapes and folds from the billowing skirts of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's central figure in The swing c.1767. This celebrated painting, now considered

Natalya Hughes

Australia b.197 Digital study for Left Delaunay 2011-12 Acrylic polymer on liner 66 x 46cm







the embodiment of the rococo spirit, was, in its day, highly controversial for its depiction of a nobleman getting a titillating view up a lady's skirt. In collaboration with Isobel Knowles, Hughes has also set *Taco Corsage* 2012 in motion. The animated version of the painting enacts a series of subtle tics and gyrations: disembodied legs kick spasmodically, and leopard-spotted protuberances pulse in what is perhaps the most discomforting element of all.

Another painting pays homage to the geometric abstraction of Sonia Delaunay's Rythme 1938, revelling in combinations of bold colour and geometric shapes, with the addition of an optically vibrating psychedelic backdrop. With a wink and a nod, Hughes reaches across time, perhaps in a bid to reinstate Delaunay's practice, which the artist has suggested 'was always written off as decorative'.¹ Nearby, another canvas alludes to Kiki Smith's *Tale* 1992 — a notorious sculpture featuring a naked figure on all fours, an epic turd trailing from the body like a tail. In Hughes's pastel-hued version, the faecal is imagined as something slightly more appealing and, embellished with a rococo flourish, it emerges from a pair of hirsute beaver legs. In no other artist's work do exaggeration and decoration meet as poignantly — albeit injected with a healthy sense of irony.

The plots Natalya Hughes weaves into her art are byzantine — complicated and irrational. Hers is a world of soap opera controversy, though this version of The Bold and the Beautiful is R-rated and soaked in LSD. Whatever its source, the tone of *The After* Party is unique, a product of her love of excess and ornamentation. Hughes crams her works with references to other artworks and artists, but you would never mistake her work for theirs. Instead, she riffs, rips, appropriates and reworks elements in a cumulative and entirely original way — identifying sources is not really the point. They simply add layers of imagery and meaning to a work that has an overabundance of both. No matter how funny, unpredictable, outrageous or lurid, there is always an idea Hughes wants to explore, usually several. The overall effect is literate, if not always legible: a swarming mass drawn from pop culture and art history mashed together and transmogrified into a three-dimensional Rorschach. Make of it what you will.

Bree Richards

The After Party (digital studies for wallpaper and carpet design, details) 2012
Wallpaper, carpet, dining suite, animation and six paintings

Endnotes

Here and now Julie Ewington

- See, among other sources, Terry Smith, Contemporary Art: World Currents, Lawrence King publishing, London, UK, 2011, especially pp.39–43.
- 2 Lucy Lippard, From the Center: Feminist essays on women's art, EP Dutton, New York, 1976, especially chapter 7; Lippard is particularly interesting as she was knowledgeable about Australian art, having made a lecture tour in 1975. See her 'Out of control: Australian art on the Left', in Get the Message, A Decade of Art for Social Change, EP Dutton, 1984, pp. 286–94; see also her The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art, The New Press. New York 1995.
- 3 Richard Bell has been the most important Indigenous voice taking issue with aspects of contemporary Indigenous arts practice: see his 'Aboriginal art is a white thing – 2002' in lan McLean (ed), How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art, IMA, Brisbane/Power Publications, Sydney, 2011, pp.308–11.
- 4 With Kirsty Bruce, we might reconsider Laura Mulvey's canonical 1975 text 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. See her Visual and Other Pleasures, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989. In the case of Louise Weaver, multiple texts in feminist theory about viewing and concealments are clearly sources, together with works by artists such as the late Louise Bourgeois. For the contemporary emergence of Aboriginal women artists, see McLean, cited above, for the section entitled 'Gender', pp.189–204, with texts by various authors, including Marcia Langton.
- 5 This early research includes, among many important texts, Linda Nochlin's pioneering work, especially her essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'. ARTnews January 1971, pp.22-39, 67; Germaine Greer's The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work, London, Secker and Warburg, 1979: Griselda Pollock with Rozsika Parker Old Mistresses: Women Art and Ideology, Routledge & Kegan, London, 1981; and Whitney Chadwick's Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, Thames and Hudson, London, 1985. In Australia, numerous studies and anthologies have been published, the earliest being Janine Burke's Australian Women Artists, 1840-1940, Collingwood, Greenhouse Publications, 1980. and the most substantial Joan Kerr's massive Heritage: The National Women's Art Book: 500 works by 500 Australian Women Artists From Colonial Times to 1955, Art and Australia, Roseville East, NSW, 1995.
- 6 See, for example, 1995 Catherine De Zegher (ed.)
 Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth
 Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine, MIT Press,
 Boston, 1996; Cornelia Butler et al., WACK: Art
 and the Feminist Revolution [exhibition catalogue],
 The Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press,
 Los Angeles; Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (eds)
 Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary
 Art [exhibition catalogue] Brooklyn Museum, Merrell,
 London and New York, 2007; elles@pompidou: women
 artists in the collections of the National Modern Art

- Museum [exhibition catalogue], Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2009; and in 2010, at Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art, Feminism Never Happened.
- 7 Australians Marie McMahon and Frances Phoenix (then Budden) worked on Judy Chicago's *The dinner party* in Los Angeles in 1978. See Frances Budden, *Our story/herstory? Working on Judy Chicago's 'Dinner party'*, Phoenix Artwork, Balmain, NSW, 1982.
- 8 See (ed. Barbara Caine) Australian Feminism:

 A Companion, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1998, especially pp.344–55 and, more recently, the Australian Feminist Art Timeline, was initiated by The View from Here: 19 Perspectives on Feminism, at Westspace as part of the 2010 Next Wave Festival. See also my 'Past the post: postmodernism and postfeminism', in Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970–90, Catriona Moore (ed), Artspace, Sydney, pp. 109–121, originally published in 1985. Associated with a major exhibition staged by Artspace, Sydney in August 1991, entitled Frames of reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art, this anthology is a valuable source for the period.
- 9 Numerous projects focussed on women working as artists: Lucy Lippard's influential lecture tour in 1975 for International Women's Year; the 1977 'The Women's Show, Adelaide', mounted by the recently-established Women's Art Movement; the campaign over 1977/8 for greater representation by women and Australians in general in the 1979 Biennale of Sydney; the NSW Women and Arts Festival in 1982 and the subsequent publication of the Australia Council's Women in the Arts report in 1984, to name only the most significant Australian projects of this kind.
- 10 Women's Art Movements were established in the mid-1970s in various Australian cities: in Sydney in 1973, in Melbourne with practical expression through the Women's Art Register (founded in 1975 and still housed at Richmond Library see www.womensartregister.org) and the publication of *Lip* magazine between 1976 and 1984; and in 1976 in Adelaide, with its original home at the Experimental Art Foundation and from 1978 in its own premises in the city. Artists involved included Vivienne Binns and Joan Grounds, together with Jude Adams and Toni Robertson in Sydney; Erica McGilchrist, Lesley Dumbrell and Elizabeth Gower in Melbourne; and Margaret Dodd and Olive Bishop in Adelaide.
- 11 See, among other recent projects, the CoUNTess blog, which analyses women's appearances in major Australian exhibitions; work by scholars such as Kyla McFartane, A Different Temporality: Aspects of Australian Feminist Art Practice 1975–1985 [exhibition catalogue], Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2011, and Melissa Miles, 'Whose Art Counts?', Art Monthly Australia, Number 224, October 2009, pp.5–8; and the efflorescence of artist-run initiatives and exhibitions investigating art by women, such as Rebecca Coates, Neo-neo Feminisms, catalogue essay, Neon Parc, Melbourne, 2008; Clare Rae and Victoria Bennett's The View From Here:19 Perspectives on Feminism: A 2010 Next Wave Festival project, Westspace, East Melbourne, 2010 and Brisbane's LEVEL (opened 2010). Longstanding curators

- such as Judy Annear in Sydney and Juliana Engberg and Natalie King in Melbourne are also notable contributors to discourses around women's work as artist.
- 12 See Art and Australia, 'Women', March 2012, vol.49, no.3, for my 'Think big, and be loud: Three generations of Australian female artists', pp.448–55; the journal also published a special issue on women in 1995, see Art and Australia, vol.32, no.3, Autumn, 1995.
- 13 The dinner party is now permanently housed at the Elizabeth A Sackler, Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, New York.
- 14 The key recent text is Judith Butler Gender Trouble, Routledge, UK, originally published in 1990; and, in the visual arts, see Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (eds.) Performing the Body: Performing the Text, London/ New York: Routledge, 1999; Tracey Warr, and Amelia Jones, The Artist's Body, London: Phaidon, 2000; and Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, Art and Feminism, Phaidon, 2001, reprinted 2006.
- 15 See Donna Haraway's influential Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, Routledge, New York, 1991.
- 16 Feminism is not entirely a dirty word today: see Granta, issue number 115: The F Word published in the European summer of 2011; see also The F-Word: A Day of Global Feminist Debate, a forum at the Sydney Opera House on 4 March 2012 with feminist icons Germaine Greer and Naomi Wolf, journalist and poet Eliza Griswold, and journalist, blogger and SlutWalk champion Clem Bastow, chaired by journalist Jenny Brockie.

I can hear her breathing Emily Maguire

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- 2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Gender Indicators, January 2012, www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/ Lookup/by%20Subject/4125.0~Jan%202012~Main%20 Features~Contents~1, viewed February 2012.
- 3 United Nations Statistics Division, The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics, unstats.un.org/unsd/ demographic/products/Worldswomen/WW2010pub.htm, viewed February 2012.
- 4 Ed Pilkington, 'SlutWalking gets rolling after cop's loose talk about provocative clothing', *Guardian*, 6 May 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/06/slutwalkingpoliceman-talk-clothing, viewed February 2012.
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- 6 Carmen Calill, 'The Stories of Our Lives', The Guardian, 26 April 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/apr/26/ featuresreviews.guardianreview2, viewed February 2012.
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Amata painters

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- 3 Raft Artspace, 2011.
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Rehecca Baumann

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- 2 See Yoshihiro Tanabe and Kunihiko Kaneko, 'Behavior of a falling paper', *Physical Review Letters*, vol.73, no.10, September 1994.
- 3 Rebecca Baumann, telephone conversation with the author, January 2012.

Kirsty Bruce

- 1 Kirsty Bruce, email conversation with the author, 8 December 2011.
- 2 Kirsty Bruce interviewed by Bree Richards, Assistant Curator, Contemporary Australian Art, Queensland Art Gallery, 12 December 2011.
- 3 Robert Leonard, Feminism Never Happened [exhibition catalogue], Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2010.
- 4 Christine Morrow, 'I walk the line', in I Walk the Line: New Australian Drawing [exhibition catalogue], Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2009, p.2.
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- 10 Cole, telephone interview with the author.
- 11 'Bindi Cole's verdict on Andrew Bolt', *National Indigenous Times*, 12 October 2011.
- 12 Cole, telephone interview with the author.
- 13 Kylie Northover, 'Black rage, white guilt: Cole has had a skinful'
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 3 Francis Bacon, quoted in David Sylvester, *Interviews with*
- Francis Bacon, 1962–1979, Thames and Hudson, London, 1980, p.12.

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- 7 Michael Peppiatt, 'Francis Bacon at work', in Francis Bacon: A Retrospective, Elaine Stainton (ed), Harry N Abrams in association with the Trust for Museum Exhibitions, New York, 1999, p.36.
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Natalya Hughes

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Ruth Hutchinson

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- 2 Robert Graves, 'Perseus', in *The Greek Myths: Volume One,* Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1966, pp.237–45.
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Deborah Kellv

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Justine Khamara

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- 6 Salvador Dali, 'The stinking ass', in Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), 2nd edn, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2002, p.487.

Anastasia Klose

- 1 Throughout history, artists have transgressed social norms, and performance and media artists are no exception. In 1974, American sculptor Lynda Benglis (b.1941) photographed herself with a large phallus between her legs. The following year American performance artist Carolee Schneemann (b.1939) made Interior scroll, in which she stood naked on a table painted in mud while pulling a scroll from her vagina.
- 2 Anastasia Klose, 'GOMA talks young minds: What is in store for our creative future?' hosted by Richard Aedy, uploaded by QAG 29 September 2011, www.youtube. com, viewed 19 November 2011.
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- 4 For this work, Klose also found inspiration in Sydney-based four-piece collective The Kingpins and the work of the Guerrilla Girls; Anastasia Klose, email to author.

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