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PEOPLE,
RELATIONSHIPS
AND PLACE



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gaze

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REDLAND ART GALLERY, CLEVELAND
12 DEC 2010 — 30 JAN 2011

Gaze features paintings, photography and ceramics by a group of emerging, mid career and established Australian female artists chosen through a collaboration between the Queensland gallerist who represents them, Bruce Heiser and Redland Art Gallery Director Emma Bain. *Gaze* offers a unique exhibition strategy, complementing the commercial and intellectual imperatives of both Heiser Gallery and Redland Art Gallery. *Gaze* is both a curatorial experiment and an example of the collegiate relationship that exists between the public and private realms in contemporary art. Importantly it showcases the outcomes that can be achieved through meaningful collaborations between the sectors, to mutual benefit.

Cherry Hood's practice has for some time inverted the notion of the male gaze. Hood is unashamedly drawn to young male beauty. She paints male subjects, specifically young men and boys rendered in watercolour. Indeed, earlier in her career, Hood's depictions of young males were the subject of controversy. She was criticised for objectifying her subjects and betraying their inherent innocence, a charge she refuted, although it was perhaps her mode of painting that provoked the comments.

The watercolour pigments Hood employs blend and pool creating the appearance of bruises or abrasions, almost as though the subject has been abused.

Hood's works featured in *Gaze* are a stylistic departure with their velvety black backgrounds, though they are still portraits about the gaze, the idea of the subject as reflected in the gaze of the viewer. Imbued with pathos and an aching awareness of the march of time and the fleeting nature of youth, these new works are drawn from old black and white and sepia photographs of the people in her community, and were inspired by 150 year old photographs and glass slides of Hood's relatives. Quite specifically, they are about relooking at old images through the lens of time and painting.

Kristin Headlam's works are similarly drawn from photography, although Headlam's source material is more disparate. She frequently works from images sourced from newspapers for example, drawn to the surprisingly fascinating and elusive aspects of these quite random, essentially transient and disposable images. With a painting such as *Sweet baby* (2007) she imbues gravitas to an essentially everyday and unremarkable image of an infant. It is markedly different from Hood's treatment of youth yet it also describes the contemporary concept of the gaze: the way in which we devour images that appear in vast and rapid profusion in the media, often according them equal intellectual value and time.

Thus Headlam's appropriation of the iconic image of Brezhnev and Honecker kissing reads as a quirky anomaly but emerges from the artist's enduring fascination with images of male politicians who by virtue of their positions are seemingly inured to the public gaze. Headlam observes they seem to be as "unselfconscious as babies in front of cameras". *The golden bed* (2008), which depicts the showroom of a lighting shop near the artist's home, is as beguilingly simple as it is sinister. Subject-wise Headlam's paintings appear obtuse and perhaps unconnected, yet it is the artist's characteristic style of painting that collectively lends the work a narrative cohesion, as though we were looking at a scrapbook of ephemera rescued from obscurity by the artist's careful selection.

The only photographer in the exhibition, **Jane Burton**, makes work that is remarkably painterly and characteristically Gothic in sensibility. Drawn from the photographic suite *motherland* (2008), the images are inspired by the artist's childhood spent partially in the Victorian countryside on a small farm, a time she describes as emotionally free, as well as melancholic. Her images are redolent with romanticism, about landscape and the innocence of female youth. The young girls at the heart of Burton's *noir* images – stand-ins for the artist herself and her memories – are simultaneously at one and at odds with the natural world around them. Nature, the Australian bush, appears both as threat and nurturer, the other subject of so many fairytales. The bush has appeared historically in Australian literature and film as the site of both sinister and benevolent dramatic developments. In Burton's work the tension is always drawn cinematically tight. In *motherland no.7* a young girl lies prone in a circle of scorched earth, appearing almost as though in a dream. In *motherland no.1* and *no.9*, the subjects – silhouetted against the landscape outside a farmhouse and reflected in a mirror respectively – are meditations on looking and being seen.



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“The larger conceptual thread is a broad exploration of the concept of ‘the gaze’ as an art historical trope.”

Karla Marchesi's painting practice deals lovingly with the unloved, that is, the detritus of society that has been discarded, relegated to curbside collection, or the rubbish dump. Marchesi's choice to render this chaotic waste (as depicted in *As good as gone* (2010) for example) painstakingly in oil paint is poetic and compelling. A curbside collection is literally the private made public, the airing of one's dirty laundry. They are not picturesque images of suburbia, yet Marchesi's treatment lends this accumulated contemporary waste an emotional pathos and curious beauty.

These paintings form part of the artist's investigations into the relationship between objects, identity and the home as site of meaning. She describes these studies of the rubbish produced inside the home and accumulated outside as 'anti-still life', that is, "arbitrary, disordered and abstract groupings of objects which occur within everyday life". While art historically still life refers metaphorically to a moral decay and the frailty of the mortal human condition, Marchesi's anti-still life works are the literal evocation of *memento mori* painting's declaration, "remember, you too shall die". The discarded objects that once played an integral part in the everyday human drama are already expired and irrelevant.

Celeste Chandler's work also explores the private and the public realm, although Chandler is more interested in describing intimacy. In the series *love is homesickness* (2010), a couple play out a strangely slow and awkward ballet, as though mired in mud. They may be wrestling or embracing, engaging in an elaborate foreplay that is at once sensual and dangerous. Chandler's interest in the human body and the intimate moment laid bare is evident, though here we see flesh through a skin of mud the artist uses as a blurring lens. In the series entitled *Lustre* (2010) Chandler uses her own face to create a series of haunting portraits that are both

beautiful and ugly. The series melds a fascination with images of contemporary facial reconstructions made possible through advanced medical technology. She also researched historical documentary photography of the horrific facial deformations with which WWI veterans returned from battle. The latter are gruesome and extremely difficult to look at, and yet Chandler tries to find the humanity within the horror. Smearing her face in custard she empathetically enacts a disfiguration of her own visage, choosing to defiantly meet the gaze of her audience and challenge preconceptions.

Julie Fragar's latest work continues her practice, which melds the autobiographical with a grander universal narrative that seeks to destabilise the voice of the author. Her paintings are constantly in flux, caught between the personal and the public. The picture plane becomes a performative ground on which to play out a number of fractured stories or ideas. The larger meanings are never inherent but shift constantly. When Fragar herself appears in her imagery it is as an avatar: she is in her own words, "interested in playing with the extent to which the viewer perceives intimacy and distance, with the author, the subject and with the surface itself".

Thus *Self-portrait as prickly pear* (2009), as the title suggests, offers up the artist but at a remove. The prickly pest is a metaphor for Fragar. Physically it is suggestive of the human form. Fecund and fleshy, its spiky exterior hides a juicy edible interior. The prickly pear is unapproachable and reviled, yet highly aesthetic. Is this Fragar keeping the viewer at a metaphorical and physical distance? As a pictorial device Fragar literally shatters the picture plane, overlaying images in order to further obfuscate and disrupt the connection between author and subject. The gaze thus in Fragar's work is constantly disrupted: the viewer, confused, must constantly refocus and look again, to find a meaning and or a subject.

Images

- Cover Karla Marchesi, *As good as gone* (detail) 2010, oil on board, 113 x 122cm
- 1 Cherry Hood, *Thomas, brother of Samuel* (detail) 2010, watercolour on Arches paper, 150 x 101cm
 - 2 Kristin Headlam, *The golden bed* (detail) 2008, oil on linen, 100 x 120cm
 - 3 Jane Burton, *motherland no. 7* (detail) 2008, type C photograph, edition of 5, 75 x 75cm
 - 4 Karla Marchesi, *Undergrowth* (detail) 2010, oil on board, 103 x 122cm
 - 5 Celeste Chandler, *love is homesickness 3* (detail) 2010, oil on linen, 152.5 x 137.5cm
 - 6 Julie Fragar, *Self portrait as prickly pear* (detail) 2009, oil on board, 60 x 40cm
 - 7 Dai Li, *We are family* 2010, stoneware, 24cm (height)
 - 8 Fiona McMonagle, *Schapelle* (detail) 2010, ink and pencil on paper, 55 x 45cm

Images courtesy of the artists and Heiser Gallery.

The work of artist **Dai Li** strikes a humorous chord in the context of *Gaze*. Her sculptural ceramics are at first glance curiously quirky. They operate as odd objects that are difficult to place in a contemporary context, neither object nor sculpture. By virtue of their three-dimensionality the works ask us to engage in a phenomenological way, to experience them in the round. Dai Li's work is largely about the relationships between people, animals and objects in everyday life. She seeks to capture life's unguarded moments, to reveal the small gestures that ultimately expose our true natures. As such her tableaux are vaguely reminiscent of fables and stories, as in *Bridge story II* (2010), although she prefers to retain an ambiguity about the meaning and narrative so that the viewer may ultimately arrive at their own, more personal meaning. *Play with a bird* (2010) and *Steal a cat* (2010) are redolent of childhood innocence and cheeky wit; the animals may be metaphors for humanity's foibles.

Fiona McMonagle's new work explores celebrity as phenomenon. Contemporary culture has a seemingly voracious appetite for the famous, infamous and increasingly, the not so famous. McMonagle's latest portraits are an examination of the transient nature of fame and how the media can transform a 'nobody' into a 'somebody', seemingly overnight. Fame, it seems, is easy to attain while longevity is considerably harder. The pen and ink drawings in *Gaze* depict the Corby family, Schapelle, her sister Mercedes and mother Roseleigh. Schapelle had

fame foisted upon her when she was convicted of drug trafficking in Bali, where she is currently incarcerated. Fame was not her choice: she has been the subject of both vitriol and passionate support; such are the swings and roundabouts of the public eye. She has been able to use the fierce gaze of the masses to advantage at times, while her sister too has used the attention to launch a dubious career of talk show rounds and appearances in girly magazines. McMonagle has drawn her images directly from the media. Her treatment of the subjects is loose and spare, she reduces them to a few simple lines masterfully conveying emotion and gravity to these faces with which we are so familiar, even though it may take a while to place them.

While the work in *Gaze* is disparate in theme, stylistic approach and medium, the larger conceptual thread is a broad exploration of the concept of 'the gaze' as an art historical trope. The gaze is the subject of treatises by scholars and theorists such as Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Laura Mulvey, who famously identified a male gaze in relation to theories about film. Mulvey posited that femininity is a social construct in which the female appears as the subject of desire for the male. It is the work of this latter theorist that springs to mind in the context of an exhibition about the gaze by women artists, and yet, while some of the artists choose to explore women as a subject, we might also say this exhibition is simply about looking, as well as seeing. It offers many approaches with which we may see art.

Alison Kubler
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Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland
Cnr Middle and Bloomfield Streets,
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Monday to Friday 9am – 4pm
Sunday 9am – 2pm
Admission free

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