



*"While to high Heav'n our fervent Thoughts arise,
The Soul all Earthly Treasures can despise!"*

'WORTHY HABITS AND MANTLES'

Photographs produced by
Rose Farrell and George Parkin
during their four month residency
at Griffith Artworks, Griffith University.

'WORTHY HABITS AND MANTLES'

Rose Farrell and George Parkin

Farrell and Parkin create a photograph which is, above all, an object in itself. It does, indeed, have a referant in film, political propaganda, art history, alchemy. Nonetheless, it stands free of such 'text'.

Urszula Szulakowska, *eyeline*, number 13#, 1990.

These photographs pursue the concern for the staged gesture that was present in their two prior exhibitions. *Film Noir* (1985) drew on comic book images of black and white mystery cinema. And *Red Squares* (1986) was modelled on communist propaganda images that call for labour towards the collective end. As *Film Noir* is a photographic rendering of mystery cinema, and *Red Squares* occasionally imitates the paintings of Komar and Melamid, *Repentance* is modelled largely on the works of El Greco. The reference which disciplines the realism of Farrell and Parkin is to staged representation rather than its source in life.....

.....Farrell's and Parkin's assiduous scene construction attempts an obsessive hold on the subject - nothing is left to accident.....a relentlessly Protestant attitude of material labour.....It suggests a devotional ethic that is as yet unvoiced in the labour we devote to staying in the 'real world'.

Kevin Murray, *eyeline*, number 9#, 1989, 31.

The context of these images (*Repentance*, 1988) remains ambiguous.....Like dramatic gestures the images evoke a response dependent upon their context for meaning.....The material scale and presentation of these photographs conforms to contemporary display conventions. Their context is the art institution: and any significance is purely secular.

Susan Fereday, *Agenda Contemporary Art*, issue 3, vol.1, Oct., 1988, 20-21.

Farrell and Parkin are creating a new alchemical text. They are engaging in a real alchemical procedure by concentrating on the **materiality** of their practice, that is, on visual form as it mutes between two and three dimensions (book, installation, photograph) - from life, to mind, to engraving, to stage-set, to light, to print. They are far from merely illustrating a text.

Urszula Szulakowska, *Ibid.*

.....their work is not trained for great theoretical insight. More truth can be got from their workings on the eye than their contribution to our understanding of appropriation.....

Kevin Murray, *Ibid.*

.....representations of the human figure are problematic. Images of people are so easily viewed with the human figure as dumb vehicle, mere addenda to a larger reference system. In most of the images the models hold 'neutral' expressions (mouth shut, deadpan), while in some they are easily read as bearing archetypal expressions of piety or despair, and in others as bearing the look of self-conscious awareness of the camera. This foregrounds a detachment on the part of the sitters, whose 'neutral' or 'expressive' masks clearly deny their interiority.....An object, a costume, a gesture, a figure, a face: all act as props.

Susan Fereday, *Ibid.*

.....the absence of back lighting causes the scenery to cast a shadow on the backdrop. The rejection of realistic illusion is reminiscent of the stylization of theatre sets, as are the yellowish tones of the imagery and waxy faces of the characters. They give the work an element of detachment which prevents romantic melancholia. Pensiveness could cloy and over-load the images. Since the alchemical visions are already so passionate in narrative, the artificiality of the photographs in colour, struck-poses, and drawn-sets is a welcome defence against an over-dose of alchemical super-realism.....

.....alchemy is a very private art form (albeit, a startling and dramatic one). Thus, a careful reticence is present in the photographs. Farrell and Parkin have left large sections in 'graphic' form as a three-dimensional translation of the original delicate contemplative text. Paradoxically, the images are more overtly theatre than the earlier Baroque rhetorical sets due to the use of painted plaster. The adding of a black frame to the alchemical images, incorporated as part of the shooting process, reminds us that they come from the pages of a book. They are meant to hang freely like a scroll within a box-frame. It suggests the discrete privacy of a book, also of an illuminated manuscript in a museum case. This is more appropriate than framing the alchemical photographs in the grand iconic manner of a public painting.

Urszula Szulakowska, *Ibid.*

The figures themselves betray a pleasing dualism. Each model has been scrupulously made up to resemble the painterly reference.....Yet the eye of the camera reveals details that escape the attempts to reproduce painting.....Farrell and Parkin's assiduous scene construction attempts an obsessive hold on the subject - nothing is left to accident. However, to the eye of the viewer, the lens of the camera defies their intentions. There seems some mileage in this. The conflicting planes of stage and body in these photographs create a defamiliarizing dynamic that is pleasurable at a formal level. It has the unsettling character which a viewer might find tinkering with the layered forms in 3-D images.

Kevin Murray, *Ibid.*

The source for the images (*Worthy Habits and Mantles*) is a very rare seventeenth century Rosicrucian poem, intended for private meditation, concerned with the aspiration to divinity. (Francis Quarles, *Emblems Divine and Moral: together with Hieroglyphics of the Life of Man*, n.d.) The text is illustrated with original figurative engravings which may be interpreted alchemically. The illustrations are quite unique to this poem. The text appears elsewhere with variant imagery. It is little known to scholars.(T)he central character is Mercury.....the Eros of alchemy, although as a **much** subdued, more poignant and contemplative experience, rather than the usual outrageous sexual battles.

Alchemists sought to 'evolve' matter by freeing the spirit, or Mercury, trapped in it (anima mundi or pneuma). Mercury mediates between heaven and earth. His function as the Redeemer of alchemy is similar to that of ChristIn Greek erotic myth Eros united matter to God....

Mercury has many contradictory significations. It is a purposely open sign indicating ambiguity and paradox, symbolizing the childlike nature of primeval matter in need of maturation.

This sign can be the chemical substance quicksilver. It can be one of the alchemical Trinity of Being (Moon-Mercury-Sun / Silver-Mercury-Gold / Materia-Spiritus-Anima). It may also represent the volatile spirits which are separated from the matter in the alchemical flask while both are purified through distillation and calcination. Or, Mercury may be first matter in its impure state.

Conversely, it may signify the end result as the philosophers' stone in its pure state as the union of opposites. Thus, Mercury may be the hermaphroditic child of the Sun and Moon in a resolution of their sexual conflict.

The images chosen by Farrell and Parkin are not intended to be read as a series. Each one expresses the same longing for perfection through following the higher Eros to union with God. Nonetheless, each refers to highly specific stages in the alchemical procedure.

The photograph of Eros/Mercury crucified is the most striking. The form is related to meditative Catholic crucifixions in which the Virgin Mary silently reflects on Christ's sacrifice. But, in the alchemical context it describes, first, Mercury (the anima) trapped in prime matter and, second, the 'killing' of prime matter (or mercury in its 'poisonous' state) in order to rid it of the impurities that render it base.

Most of the images describe the longing for union in terms of painful piercing or burning. The strongest of these is the figure personified as hunter/Diana (Moon goddess). Male or female is not specified. It has laid aside a mask, the symbol of false persona/hypocrisy/pride. From its heart arise four arrows (the four elements) aimed at God.....The image is an early stage of alchemy in which the opposites, spirit and earth, are totally set apart from each other.

To begin the process of union, Eros melts the heart of an androgynous child with the sweetness of his words. The picture signifies union of the Sun and Moon in base matter. In prime matter all the opposites are present but they are confused together rather than truly united: a childlike condition.....Elsewhere, the Poor Fool is begging for love and, thus, salvation from Eros (the longing for divine Being). He is drowning, being fished and being trapped at the same time. In this form he is still base matter (but also a Wise Fool for he will become gold eventually). Here the sea shows that matter has now been placed in the alchemical flask. The image may indicate the release or 'fishing-out' of spirit from matter in the distillation/circulation process in order to purify it.

Alchemy was sometimes compared to music because of the importance of right proportion to both arts. In pythagorean theory they both related to the singing celestial bodies and, thus, to astrology. Hence, the Muse proclaims that she sings to the greater Being.....The Muse is the Queen of alchemy, the silver producing stone. With its reference to gold coinage, the image describes the last stage of the process as the gold producing stone is worked. The withered alchemical trees are about to blossom again. On one of them hangs the laurel crown of victory. The birds on the shield refer to the volatile spirits of distillation and to the alchemical Trinity of Moon-Mercury-Sun finally nearing total purification.

Urszula Szulakowska, *Ibid*.

With grateful thanks to the authors of the above essays and the editors of *eyeline* and *Agenda Contemporary Arts*.

Kevin Murray, 'Repentance: Rose Farrell and George Parkin', *eyeline*, number 9#, 1989, 31. (extracts from article on 'Repentance' series)

Susan Fereday, 'The Moment of Sainthood', *Agenda Contemporary Art*, issue 3, vol. 1, Oct., 1988, 20-21. (extracts from article on exhibition at Girgis and Klym Gallery, Melbourne)

Urszula Szulakowska, 'Worthy Habits and Mantles. The alchemical photography of Rose Farrell and George Parkin', *eyeline*, number 13#, 1990. (extracts from feature article on 'Worthy Habits and Mantles')

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Place of Birth : Brisbane 1949. Lives in Melbourne.
 1969 - 1971 : B.A.S. from Queensland Institute of Technology, Brisbane.
 1983 - 1986 : Diploma of Photography (Fine Art), Photography Studies College, Melbourne.

GEORGE PARKIN

Place of Birth : Corowa, NSW 1949. Lives in Melbourne.
 1980 - 1983 : Bachelor of Arts (Graphic Design) Swinburne Institute of Technology Hawthorn, Victoria.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1983 : Swinburne Graduate Design Exhibition, ANZ Bank Headquarters, Collins Street, Melbourne.
- 1985 : "Thirteen Women Photographers", Victorian 150 Year celebrations, Melbourne.
- 1987 : St Kilda Arts Festival, Linden House, Melbourne.
 : National Photographic Exhibition, Albury.
 : Austausch Project: Melbourne-Berlin Photographic Exchange Exhibition, "Fehl am Platz", Berlin and Bremen, West Germany.
- 1988 : "Excursions into the Postmodern", National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
 : Group Show, Girgis & Klym Gallery, Melbourne.
- 1988/89 : "Australian Photography: The 1980's" (Touring Exhibition).
 Australian National Gallery, Canberra.
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
 Center for the Arts Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart.
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane.
 New England Regional Art Museum, Armidale.
 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
 The College Gallery, South Australian School of Art, Adelaide.
- 1989 : "Photography: Recent Acquisitions", Australian National Gallery, Canberra.
 "Brunswick to Devonshire", Syme-Dodson Gallery, Sydney.
 "Meta-Portraits", Blaxland Gallery, Melbourne.
- 1990 : "Works on Paper", Girgis and Klym Gallery, Melbourne.
 : "Twenty Contemporary Australian Photographers: from the Hallmark Cards Australian Photographic Collection." (Touring Exhibition).
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
 Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

- "Film Noir"
 1987 : St Martins Theatre Gallery, Melbourne.
 1988 : Girgis & Klym Gallery, Melbourne.
- "Red Squares"
 1987 : Girgis & Klym Gallery, Melbourne.
 : The Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney.
 1988 : Ben Grady Gallery, Canberra.
 1989 : Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Horsham, Victoria.
- "Repentance"
 1988 : Girgis & Klym Gallery, Melbourne.
 1989 : The Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney.
 : Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Horsham, Victoria.
 : Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide.
 : City of Hamilton Art Gallery, Victoria.
- "Miserable Pleasures and Glorious Mysteries"
 1989 : Girgis and Klym Gallery, Melbourne

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Kodak (Australasia) Fund, Australian National Gallery, Canberra.
 Margaret Stewart Endowment, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
 Hallmark Cards Fund, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
 Albury Regional Arts Centre, NSW.
 Griffith University Collection, Brisbane, QLD.
 Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Victoria.
 Art Gallery of South Australia.
 International Polaroid Collection.

PUBLICATIONS

"Fehl am Platz", Austausch Project: Melbourne-Berlin Photography Exchange Exhibition, 1987 (catalogue).
 "Australian Photography: The 1980's", The Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1988 (catalogue).
 Julie Ewington, "A Broad Australian Accent", Vogue Australia, August, 1988.
 Isobel Crombie, "Excursions into the Postmodern" National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1988 (brochure).
 Susan Fereday, "The Moment of Sainthood", Agenda Contemporary Art, Issue 3, Volume 1, October, 1988.
 "Artist Page", eyeline Magazine, number 7#, Dec, 1988.
 Richard Brown, "Excursion into the Postmodern", Photofile Summer Issue, 1988/89.
 Charles Green, "Australian Photography, The 1980's", Art Monthly Australia, March 1989, No. 18.
 Exhibition Programme, February - May 1989, The Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney (brochure).
 Helen Ennis, "Photography: Recent Acquisitions", The Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989 (brochure).
 Alan Cruickshank, "After 'Now'", European Photography, Volume 10, Issue 2, April-June, 1989.
 Kevin Murray, "Repentance", Eyeline Magazine, Issue 9, Winter 1989.
 Isobel Crombie, "Twenty Contemporary Australian Photographers: from the Hallmark Cards Australian Photographic Collection", 1990 (catalogue).

Acknowledgements

Rose Farrell and George Parkin exhibit with Girgis and Klym Gallery in Melbourne. Rose and George gratefully acknowledge the assistance during the Residency of the staff of Griffith Artworks, Information Services and the Griffith University Residences, Mt Gravatt Residence. Special thanks are extended to Manuela Alberti, Ray Beattie, Lyn Bennett, Margriet Bonnin, Ross Booker, Kathy Brennan, Sarah Follent, Angela Forrest, Kath Kerswell, Eva Lietzou, Janice O'Brien, Cindy Ranger, Jodie Ranger, Keith Richardson, Christine Sayer, Mary-Ann Secker, Michael Secker, Urszula Szulakowska, and Stephanie Wolff for their participation and support.

The Residency Program is supported by the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding advisory body.

Griffith Artworks is assisted by the Queensland Government through the Arts Division of the Premier's Department.

Cover Illustration: Image No 3, Untitled, 1990

