

## Berlin Burghers Microwave Monet

### A yeti for the times

Until quite recently Justene Williams was best known for her luscious photographs which moved between abstraction and figuration. Swank trucks, shiny buxom dancers and the iconic *Bunny Boy* (1999) were produced along with gestural splashes of bubblegum colours including the major floor work, *Translucent Picture Sculpture* (2002), a response to the work of Margo Lewers.<sup>1</sup>

In 2005 photography became a component in the medium of video and Williams experimented with various approaches. In *Photo Me* a suburban-looking Williams eats and regurgitates her own photographs; *My Bridge* is a blurry meditation on the legacy of the iconic photographer Edward Muybridge, but in *Blue Foto, Green Foto, Red Foto* her installation of three large video projections, Williams established her new direction in video.<sup>2</sup> In this ambitious three channel work she introduced several features, each equally startling, which have become hallmarks of her recent video practice: her idiosyncratic choreography, the elaborately costumed 'yeti' character and the shaggy, diaphanous 'constructions for camera' (both terms are the artist's).<sup>3</sup>

In 2008 the Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibited her masterful *Bighead Garbage Face Guards Ghost Derr Sonata*, an installation of eight large video projections inspired by the artist performers of the Cabaret Voltaire.<sup>4</sup> In 2009 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery showed *Femmzoil*, two videos evoking another woman Futurist Valentine de Saint Point.<sup>5</sup>

In Lewers House Gallery, Williams unveils her latest body of work, *Berlin Burghers Microwave Monet*, seven video works intended both as individual pieces and as a single entity.<sup>6</sup> This exhibition's points of departures are a handful of travel photographs of the artist, a unique visual archive of Justene Williams' personal history. Although an avid photographer for more than twenty years, very few photographs of Williams exist, mostly this handful of travel snaps. The recent loss of all but one of these pictures sparked an extraordinary artistic response: seven beautiful, if sometimes nightmarish, videos.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Translucent Picture Sculpture* (also known as *Super Concentrated Dream Fever*) was originally made for Lewers House Gallery in the exhibition *Williams and Walter*, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *Blue Foto, Green Foto, Red Foto*, Mori Gallery Sydney, 2-26 November 2005

<sup>3</sup> Justene Williams, conversations with the author, March – April 2010. All unannotated quotes from the artist in this essay are from this period.

<sup>4</sup> *Bighead Garbage Face Guards Ghost Derr Sonata*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 19 February – 14 June 2009

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Williams is not the performer in *Femmzoil*.

<sup>6</sup> Several works in this exhibition were previewed in *Justene Williams - Aeroplane Humping Machine*, Peloton, 11 March 2010 - 3 April 2010, Peloton, Chippendale, Sydney.

'A favourite photo held on a microwave with a wad of Blotak (which) depicts two old lovers staring at Monet's *Waterlilies* in the Orangerie' is the origin of both *Pulp Action* and *Aeroplane Humping Machine*. Photographs of the artist in Berlin and Amsterdam are the basis for *House Boat Problem*, while a photograph of the Rodin Sculpture Garden begat the video *Berlin Burghers*. Williams says the 'videos really don't resemble at all the photographs, which are catalysts for memories which trigger emotions and bring other images and ideas to life. It is the process of looking back to understand and make sense of the now'.

In their painterly grain and compositional riches, these videos are reminiscent of Susan Norrie but the gritty texture of the mostly paper and cardboard materials Williams re-uses in her costumes and constructions for camera points to the Grunge aesthetic which dominated the Sydney scene of her early years as an artist, and also to Arte Povera which she has always prized. And while it looks and feels very different from the earlier video works, this astonishing exhibition is a continuation of other Williams' tropes, especially her interest in optical and perceptual processes, repetitive action and consumerism.

These works are sumptuous. Each construction for camera is laboriously intricate and most are all enveloping. They are conceptualised to work seamlessly with the yeti costume, and the results are visually spectacular. The construction for camera in *Shake it and Bake it* and *Aeroplane humping machine* looks like a mad 70s disco/television cooking show set/space ship environment.

As the yeti moves in front of the fringed paper backdrop in *Pulp action* and *Swing*, we see what looks like a moving impressionist painting; the suit (of eyes cut out from magazines) and the construction of fringed recycled coloured paper function like paint daubs. In *Pulp action* Williams plunders painting's canon to create a white lower landscape of the boot, suitcase and cardboard 'hill/bridge' resulting in a moving Morandi bottom note to counter the sparkling pointillism of the wall work and suit. A similar pictorial strategy is used in *house/boat problem* and *Remember to forget*, where white cardboard is used for the structure.

In *Berlin Burghers* the multicoloured recycled paper wall work is the backdrop for a cluster of freestanding cardboard sculptures based on Rodin's famous sculpture. In this work post-production techniques combine with Williams' fringing to enhance the optical effect of Impressionist pixilation.

An experienced dancer, Williams' choreography is compelling. She favours repetitive actions, usually mundane and awkward but physical grace is also part of her palette. The action in these works ranges from fey to manic. The endless cooking task of *Shake it and Bake* becomes almost unbearable; the propeller-like motion of the suitcase in *Swing* comes very close to self-harm. In the agonising, claustrophobic, *Remember to forget*, the listless yeti jumps up and down in the house/boat, hitting its head and endlessly chanting. In

contrast, the swaying yeti in *Aeroplane Humping Machine* has a comforting clown-like quality – think Humphrey Bear - and the rings undergo a wondrous trajectory from many rings bouncing on both yeti arms, to all rings bouncing off one arm, and then the arm is covered with rings again. Magic!

In *Berlin Burghers* the yeti, wearing a translucent plastic suit and headpiece, dances back and forth through the sculptures like a deranged Telly Tubby, eventually wrapping the sculptures with red string. With its fading somnambulant yeti, this may be the most elegiac video of the suite.

Who – or what - is Williams' yeti? In *Blue Foto, Green Foto, Red Foto*, Adam Geczy saw an 'odd cretinous techno beast', a 'fembot', an 'automaton dressed-to-the coloured-nines [who] moves aimlessly, but with concerted seriousness, on the spot'.<sup>7</sup> But while the yeti in *Shake it & bake* is clearly (and cursedly) female, and the artist regards the character in *Pulp action* as male, but usually the yeti is sexless, its dilemmas universal. It is masked (often in ways which recall classical Greek theatre), heavily clad in outfits crafted from recycled materials (with the constructions for camera, creating a clear anti-consumerist message). The yeti is a strange human, free from conventional notions of vanity and physicality and instead perplexed by its own burdens and problems.

Indeed, Williams' strange characters do seem trapped in never-ending ludicrous tableaux but where Geczy sees stupidity I see existential courage and human tenacity. There is both absurdity and gravitas to the tasks enacted in *Berlin Burghers Microwave Monet*. Life, this exhibition seems to suggest, is about ridiculous and difficult things we do again and again. Perhaps Geczy is correct to conclude that the videos *Blue Foto, Green Foto, Red Foto* characters 'suggest a distrust, an antagonism, a tiredness, maybe even a fear of context and circumstance' but there is much more than post post modern despair in *Berlin Burghers Microwave Monet*. Rather than an artist who is 'condemned to make art; condemned because art no longer saves, no-one listens much, art is just art',<sup>8</sup> Justene Williams is an artist who uses a multi-disciplinary, many layered arsenal of high and low art to speak to the times – and the masses.

Anne Loxley  
April 2010

---

<sup>7</sup> Adam Geczy 'Blue Foto, Green Foto, Red Foto', *Eyeline Magazine*# 59  
Summer 2005-2006

<sup>8</sup> Geczy, op cit