

## Seductions and Tyrannies

By Ffion Murphy

There is explicit agony here, and another, quieter kind. Perhaps it is the old fact of death. The aged word bows, weary with implication. And robbed of its promise. For technology, the primary motif of contemporary civilization, its new religion, defies finality, negates distance, perpetually lies. We are immersed in pretence where the dead speak and the future is imaginable.

Confronting this artist's passionate and contradictory relationship with death threatens to override these too-pervasive fantasies, these unlikes, unrealities; to evoke an anti-technological, pre-literate, fundamentally emotional response.

We enter a primordial place, free of culture. Paradoxically, because in this place, cultural and personal mythologies are replete with female/migrant experience, indeed could be produced only by a female, 'ethnicised' consciousness. Cultural dualities resonate; personal and familial (collective) history not only informs the images but determines them.

So how can the 'experiencer' feel moved beyond culture: that she unlearns, revisits virginity, resumes naivety. Perhaps it is explained by the artist's willingness to embrace the possibility of utopian imaginings, her inchoate appeal to humanness, which transcends difference and underlies it. We are reminded that though individuals and even cultures may come and go, 'as in a moment', the death of art, sex or religion is impossible; these flourish necessarily and propagate the myths that sustain us.

There is, in the face of our terrible destructibility, an intrinsic need for human community, for shared myths. The fracturing of community and dispersion of cultures is at the root of intensified (post-industrial, post-colonial) searching for identity. Yet ironically, in post-literate/post-modern times particularly, our translatability suggests that cultural/mythological 'baggage' can be cast off (since it is constructed, rather than 'real') – but we choose to cling on, to wear it like clothing, as protection against the possibility of sameness, or 'lack' of uniqueness, against banality and by implication, futility. Our separate values and 'meanings', our differences, encoded as language or visual 'signifiers', are quickly deciphered, interpreted, assigned value. It is in translation and interpretation that we err, often stumbling into chasms of misunderstanding, of 'mistranslation'. Meaning, suffused with ideological implication, becomes cultural conceit, a game of hierarchies, a politics of identity 'valuation'. Images of cultural collision - rubble, destructed building sites, Hollywood excess, animal slaughter - are metaphors of failure. Our essential humanness, our translatability, has been forgotten, overwritten by modern catastrophe. As the possibility of real homelands, of true community recedes, we can at best inhabit imaginary ones.

What can we make of emotionalism as artistic state, as conjured space—pre-language, pre-identity. An artist's state is one of exile from ordinary society and utilitarian work, but it is not a static place, for the artistic process is continuous journeying inward which results in (re) discovery and (re) production of self(ves) which are then palpably exposed or exhibited.

In this discourse the body is our primary locale, our heartland. But the body as locale suggests also the body as palimpsest, a 'place' staked out as (often contested) homeland and subject to continuous writing and revision. And herein lies one of many contradictions. Homelands connote identification, suggest knowledge, familiarity, and (potential for) comfort. Yet for this artist, as for many of her sex, there never was any comfort to be had from the body. The female body has not been well-nurtured in societies which believed women should be the only nurturers. But it has served admirably as repository of fear and loathing; a vessel to be inhabited in its youth by men and babies, and sloshed off in old age. The female body has been the problem, the cause of injustice, the seducer of men, the inhibitor of feminine spirit and intuition. This same body is entreated to revel in its capacity for pleasure, to celebrate its coveted sensuality. This homeland, which is our primary source of identity, is always in jeopardy; its disputed territory, like other frontiers in colonised spaces. The body is both a contestant in and the landscape of, the gender war. Not that this exhibition offers overt

feminist discourse. It is in the silences that we locate the problematical nature of gender dialectics - in the absence of bodies. Even the family portraits deliberately avoid realism: they are primarily symbolic in nature, essentialising. We perceive humanity at specific historical moments, backed by images of destruction and bordered, literally, by fragments. It is all much larger than (individual) life.

The body, as initial homeland, is a transitory place both in terms of change and mortality. It is a site of ambivalence because these twin properties are inherently unsettling. It remains, nevertheless, the self's ultimate border—spatially and temporally delimited.

Our other homelands are less definitive. The past, for example, is everywhere and nowhere, my place and yours. For each of us the past incorporates broad histories deemed our own by ancestral rights, embraces nations no longer lived in, localities no longer recognized, houses no longer homes. The past defies closure, is supremely borderless. The body is characterized by constraint and desire; the past lacks restraint, is the consequence of desire unleashed, of evil. In parable, Europe is our past, Australia the future. Colonisation wrought a violent collision of time, past and present, and in the process, the future (Australia) was irreparably tainted - at least at its edge. This artist implies though that utopia is still discoverable, through art, by imaginings. And further, that Europe, though corrupt, is not doomed. It continues to seduce the artist with tradition: for her it is sacred ground; ancestors are buried there.

Utopia is, for this artist, a promiscuous entity. She goes where the winds carry her, and though she may prefer the antipodes, is often courted elsewhere. Imagination recognizes no borders. Colouring-in black and white photographs of a troubled Poland provide these shadowed spaces with Utopian moments. In colour, in imagination, present and past meet and nations intersect, pleasurably. The images, often evoking personal and historical calamities, are supremely satisfying artistically. This may be because we enjoy a sense of recognition (like a homecoming), of disjunction itself: it is our cultural inheritance. Concepts such as gender and nationalism would otherwise be impossible: there must not only be difference, but incommensurability.

The artist's use of clothing, layered, heavily textured, or singularly splayed, nailed to (bill)boards, like woman to man, is suggestive of countless sexual and other complexities. One senses the artist would be hard pressed to abandon the metaphors of art - an essentially pre-literate realm - to shift her visions into words, to write the unwritable, to, in a sense, clothe the body. What we have here is disembodied culture. What this implies once more is the persistence of history, the transience of individuals.

Certainly there are multifarious readings (not definitive explanations of course, only allusions to possible meanings). For red read power, blood, death, menstruation, deflowering, defilement, war, hope...for petticoats, bras, lingerie, read submission, sensuality, disguise, effacement, enhancement, compromise, deception...for jackets and shirts read fashion and warmth, culture and progress...for profusion read complexity, obfuscation, surfeit: cultural excess.

These vivid 'clothescapes' are impossibilities, pure artifice (culture), they confute nature's laws, they are unnavigable. They may or may not serve as metaphor for our seemingly confounded search for Australian national identity, or provide an ironic comment on this 'Johnny-come-lately' continent's necessarily antithetical inheritance. They do, at any rate, ironically subvert our propensity to colonise 'landscapes', to claim them as homelands through a reductive process of taming - mapping, describing, naming. These confronting 'land' masses resist definition while inviting creative response and certain awe. This is, we surmise, the kind of 'viewing' Australia demands.

The artist's most recent work subverts again—but this time by reconfiguring her own artifice. Clothing fragments are isolated from the mass, particularised and made central. The brassiere, usually a sub-text of the fashion story, stretches into new forms, is reinvented, demands to have its singular story told. It gets out from under, gets seen, gets on top. The most intimate garment proclaims itself. This garment, the 'other' of body politics, the sexualized and forgotten, has emerged. And analogies are glaring.

But this is only one reading. What we inevitably do is ascribe meaning, develop interpretations compatible with our own experience or knowledge. It seems the artist, newly liberated from a historical and personal disenchantment with her own body, playfully contorts old images, former misconceptions. The old bra is the old order. The new version brings new understandings that come not only from having the (female) body generally (and her body particularly) affirmed - loved and adored - but from taking this affirmation on board, internalising it, rather than (habitually) denying its very possibility.

But it seems the body's proclivity for sensuality and capacity for integration, though certainly apprehended is, largely, only remembered, or construed. In this artificial (exhibited) landscape, the body is nowhere. Its reinvention belonged to a specific encounter in a particular (exoticised) place, namely the expansive red landscape of central Australia. In relative terms the body (in ecstasy) was knowable in a way the landscape could never be.

In any case, the observer may not be predisposed to seeing bras as symbols of sensuality, intimacy, femininity; indeed historically they have been associated with women's repression, manipulation and discomfort and were made to burn in hell for it by the women's liberation movement. If we resume our word association games, we might think of them as controlling, confining, hiding, revealing, deceiving, distorting, figuring, or disfiguring, as pushing-up, pushing-out or holding-in. Or we might delve beneath bras, to breasts, acknowledging their function as baby's tucker box, as opposed to their objectification under the sexual gaze. But strangely, the bra as image seems to have little to do with the breast. Perhaps it is too potent a symbol in itself. It has been said that the technique of art is to make familiar objects appear unfamiliar, to provide a sphere for new perceptions. Here we are confronted by disruption to familiar modes of presentation and context, and become travelers in familiar territory made strange.

Contorted almost beyond recognition, the bra becomes a symbol of dislocation and disorientation. This has less to do with generalised feelings of displacement and unbelonging than it does with matters of the heart (the bra being the garment closest to that esteemed body part). First the severing of lovers, then the untraversable distance between them, provides a new twist in a story of journeys made, unmade, unmakeable. It is a tale as old as time, lost love, but if it is true that art is a form of (repeatedly deferred) desire, then unfulfilment is its modus operandi.

And then there's those verdant, luminous oases in vast deserts of red. This goes beyond the artist's recent associations with Australia's centre, and exceptional rains which turned rust to green, or even her confused feelings of at-oneness with indigenes and her own merging with the landscape. These conceptions were necessarily illusory and impermanent. Rather, green fragments suggest disruption, momentary release—from the pursuit of identity and the persistence of history; from self-conscious fashioning of cultural duality and indeterminacy and concomitant rejection of nationalism and other monolithic discourses. It is an unnatural shade, which cannot be utterly suffused with environmental associations, with foliage and fecundity, though this is part of the story. It not only suggests birth, rebirth, continuity and development but absolute newness, difference, diversity - of form more than content.

Yet this is not a postmodernist fairytale. This is not diversity offered as an alternative to master narratives. The artist dyes her garments, she manipulates their colour, their contour, their use. Until they are no longer garments to be worn. Transformed into pure artefacts, symbols, images, they are no longer useful in terms of original design. They have moved beyond, or defied, their ostensible purpose. This is, in a sense, what the artist must do. She must always go beyond the living of life into the business of translating it. She herself becomes in the process, an artefact, a symbol, an image. She emerges the artist, the maker of culture. She will inevitably become, at times, 'lost in translation'. But the illuminating backgrounds of her latest work confirm a sense that she is her own invention: it is the particularity of this place, of freedoms afforded by birthright not shared by her parents, that provides the possibilities for evolving conceptualisations, for reinventing histories, for theorising futures.

The clothes, at first seemingly nothing to do with earlier, deeply personal portraits, have this much at least in common with them—they move toward and finally refute the concept of identity. The fragmented family images which frame the children, women and men suggest identity is not fixed, bounded and immutable but rather embraces shifting perspectives, unaccounted for influences, the importance and irrelevance of family, residues of popular culture and history. The portraits are at once acutely artificial, with deliberate painterly qualities, and extraordinarily lifelike. The eyes live, staring with resignation, with knowledge of the kind one imagines is reserved for the ultimate transition. The knowing here is not compatible with life; it is too heavy, unbounded.

All this confronts and undoes my practiced passivity, my sense of reasonableness, of accord with my place. It makes things unbearable. It reminds me that there is pain and turmoil and sorrow, suffering which actually reaches beyond human capacity to endure. But the fact of the images, their existence, on panels, in frames, unframed, on walls, where once they inhabited only a single afflicted mind, brings me back, to dwell again, at the centre, that indeterminate space between knowledge of evil, of death, of despair, and luminosity—where love is.

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Ffion Murphy is a Brisbane-based writer. She is Co-ordinator of the Queensland Studies Centre at Griffith University and Editorial Assistant of *Queensland Review*. She is currently working on an ARC project “Regional Identities: Imagined places and the persistence of history” through the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Queensland.

Currently Dr Ffion Murphy is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing/Professional Writing & Publishing, School of Communications and Arts, Faculty of Education and Arts, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia.