

# Photofile 88 - Post-Feminism?

**Editor:** Ashley Crawford

In 1975, the date of the United Nations International Women's Year, American arch feminist guru, Lucy Lippard visited Australia, and helped galvanise artists such as Bonita Ely, Elizabeth Gower and the Women's Art Movement, which had been founded the year before. Now, in the new millennium, with the plethora of female figures working as artists, curators, critics and dealers, it's hard to imagine women having to battle to be heard. But such were the times.

Those times have, without doubt, changed. The almost militant necessity of a feminist stance in the visual arts world in the '70s was felt globally and, at least in a number of Western countries, to considerable success. That is not to say that in broader societal terms there are not major issues still to be addressed. But today, at least within the boundaries of the Australian art world, it seems the issue is not so much one of being 'feminist' in its strictest terms, as one of what it means to be 'feminine.'

These are, of course, thorny terms. The Encarta World English Dictionary definition of 'feminist' remains perfectly apt for any age: "belief in women's rights: belief in the need to secure rights and opportunities for women equal to those of men, or a commitment to securing these." However the definition of 'feminine' makes one cringe: "conventionally associated with women: conventionally thought to be appropriate for a woman or girl." Indeed, 'conventional' and 'appropriate' are two classic terms that refute what many would consider to be the core of feminist ideology.

Featuring such artists as **Belle Bassin, Jane Burton, Pat Brassington, Tacita Dean, Chantal Faust, Mimi Kelly, Justine Khamara, Hannah Raisin** and **Kellie Wells**, this issue of *Photofile* explores the extremes of the female as both subject and practitioner, and touches upon both the psychology and physiology of the feminine. To be sure, clichés of the dictionary definition of 'feminine' run through many of these artists' works - lipstick, underwear, the pretty dress - but the 'feminine' in this context often takes a

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decidedly 'inappropriate' and 'unconventional' twist.

Kellie Wells' initially seductive video work portraying a meticulously coifed model - the artist herself - is at first beguiling. The sense that there is something wrong about the image is bluntly explained by the title: *Trying to look beautiful while my hand is burning*. Wells shares with Raisin and Kelly the notion of artist as (tortured) protagonist - as Phip Murray notes they have achieved the self-empowerment of taking over the maxim of 19th Century French playwright, Victorien Sardou, who was famous for advising aspiring writers to "Torture the women!"

And indeed it is difficult to look at some of the 'self-portraiture' of Mimi Kelly who at times looks overtly corpse-like, her perfect body clearly having succumbed to forms of abuse only barely concealed. Similarly Pat Brassington's strange morphings of the figure in her recent series, *A Perfect Day*, distend and deconstruct the body *in extremis*.

At their extremes, artists such as Jane Burton and Chantal Faust are no less kind to their subjects. There are times in Jane Burton's oeuvre when the body is bruised and engulfed in fetid, strangling growth and Faust's abstracted (self) portraits are entombed beneath the glass of the flat-bed scanner. This is very much the prerogative of the artist and this in itself is testimony to the potent effects of the feminist movement of the 1970s. Women have long been the muse of the male artist, but in recent decades, and most especially in the new millennium, it is women who have taken the reigns.

That is not to say the battle is over. Statistic presented on the website <http://countesses.blogspot.com/> suggest that statistically women remain seriously under-presented in both editorial coverage and curatorial representation. Indeed, when *Photofile* recently established an editorial board, the initial list of advisors were all male - clearly the result of complacency and a matter that is being addressed as of this issue.

Whether it is the hand or the heart burning, or at times the licentious burn of the libido, the artists featured in this edition of *Photofile* are, amongst other things, exploring what femininity means in what might be dubbed a post-feminist (art)world.

IMAGE © Jane Burton *Ivy* #10 2009

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