



*Hannah*  
*Kellie*

**RAISIN**  
**WELLS**

Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale  
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[wellington.vic.gov.au/gallery](http://wellington.vic.gov.au/gallery)

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Hannah Raisin and Kellie Wells  
RAISIN+WELLS  
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*The Heart of Gippsland*

## RAISIN+WELLS

*RAISIN+WELLS* presents a kaleidoscopic frieze of video works, in which artist protagonists Hannah Raisin and Kellie Wells reflect on cultural representations of femininity and identity. Their works – startling, honest and compelling – reach deep within the rites of everyday society to affect a fearless interrogation of the sometimes oppressive nature of contemporary gender roles.

Locked into specific female guises the artists develop characters by which to objectify their physical outer shells. Wells becomes the beautified female stereotype: subservient and silent, chemically enhanced with makeup and mascara. Raisin is similarly glorified in *Rose Garden*, and immerses deeper into the role as a nubile nymph in *Flowing Locks* and as Botticelli’s Venus in *Sugar*.

Well’s austere and frequently harrowing works are offset by the playful and darkly humorous demeanour of Raisin, who hams it up outrageously in front of the camera. Common, however, is an exploration of body as muse and matter, and of skin and tissue. While born of present concerns the artists work consciously within

a long and established canon of performance art, and of the body as art. We may think of seminal female artists such as Carolee Schneeman, Jill Orr, Yoko Ono and Cindy Sherman, but there is also an acknowledgement of Yves Klein’s performance works of the 1960s where women were used as ‘living brushes’; smeared in paint before being dragged across the gallery floor. Similarly the body as canvas in Mike Parr’s confrontational video works is referenced, but the emotional intelligence Raisin and Wells bring to their respective practices is singularly unique.

The embers of Feminism’s fiery halcyon days still glow in these contemporary works. They make apparent the levels of expectation that are still placed upon women, and in their films Raisin and Wells willingly condescend to popular tastes for womanhood to drive the point home. Where television programs such as *Ladette to Lady* enforce the notion of an idealised female who is well-mannered and compliant, Raisin and Wells penetrate the mould and smash it open from within.



The women we see on screen are slowly breaking from the fission of oppositional forces; having inhabited a particular character they then rupture the façade through silent acts of resistance.

Kellie Wells’ practice is based around acts of physical endurance. Her videos are difficult for us, as audience, to watch but a patient viewer will be rewarded with an insight into both her situation and sensation. In *Trying to be beautiful while my hand is burning* we feel a visceral convulsion as we watch her face, her eyes meeting directly with ours, flinching from a pain that is cropped out of shot. While on the surface she does her best to maintain a visage dictated by the genetic happenstance of her gender, underneath she is crying out in mute agony. Is it the flame searing her flesh or something completely off our radar? Her resolute self-control is put to the ultimate test – the test of conforming to the role of ‘woman’ in her everyday appearance and countenance.

In *The Transformation of The Martyr St Julia (Hanging Head)*, Wells paints her face gold to represent the iconic saintly face

of the Catholic martyr St Julia, who was hung by her hair and then disembowelled in the fifth century AD. After attaching chains to her hair for over an hour Wells attempts to hang by her hair by lifting her feet for the duration of Fred Astaire’s *I Concentrate on You*. In placing herself in this role Wells seeks to give a face to the sufferance of women before her. *Embellir* is imbued with a keen awareness of early feminist artworks where female artists used their own bodies in performance work. Here, Wells’ physical appearance gradually disappears beneath a semi-opaque veil of line drawing and wound thread, forging a new topography of the face where identity becomes obscured.

Hannah Raisin’s *Rose Garden* offers a close-up of a young woman’s face, dressed in pretty attire and holding a bunch of red roses before her. In makeup and restrained composure, she appears to be everything a proper young lady should be until she unexpectedly leans forward and bites the head off a rose. In breathless horror we watch and she devours the roses, one



by one, pausing only occasionally to vomit out of shot. As in Wells’ *Trying to be beautiful*, we are helpless spectators as the inner conflict of womanhood manifests in outward bodily impulse – here, in an act of anti-romance; a rejection of the feminine typecast.

*Flowing Locks*, filmed provocatively in the forecourt of the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, Melbourne, is Raisin’s defiant and celebratory homage to her body hair. She proudly models exaggerated armpit and pubic hair as it flutters freely in the breeze, while a flesh coloured body suit smoothes over everything else. The work engagingly expresses a concern over increasingly unnatural and sterile notions of socially acclaimed beauty.

*Sugar*, meanwhile, sees Raisin become progressively disoriented as she spins within an oversized clamshell. This mock staging of Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (c.1485) plainly asserts the absurdity of feminine ideals and virtues, in an entertaining re-enactment of Renaissance propaganda. Surrounded by empty milk cartons and her body covered in Fruit Loops, Raisin’s work is also

a thinly veiled critique of our socially accepted standards and gender roles. Every girl’s ideal of womanhood – from the ballerina to the Little Mermaid – slowly unravels on camera, until the artist finally collapses in a pool of futility and full cream milk.

Both Wells and Raisin employ a degree of shock within their presentation, while challenging us to rise above its initial effects. They bludgeon us out of mute apathy, and our willingness to be desensitised to violence and human suffering. Here, what we witness is real – women going to extreme measures in order to be heard. In this they are profoundly moving, but in the lengths they must go to capture our attention they appraise not only wider society and its continual enforcement of gender roles but our own taciturn acceptance of them.

Simon Gregg  
July 2009

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Inside Front Cover  
[Top]  
Kellie WELLS  
*Trying to look beautiful while my hand is burning*,  
2007 Video, 2:30mins

[Bottom]  
Hannah RAISIN  
*Rose Garden*, 2009  
Video, 5:06mins

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[Top]  
Kellie WELLS  
*The Transformation of The Martyr St Julia (Hanging Head)*, 2008  
Video, 8:10mins

[Bottom]  
Kellie WELLS  
*Embellir*, 2007  
Video, 6:46mins

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[Top]  
Hannah RAISIN  
*Flowing Locks*, 2008  
Video, 0:21mins

[Bottom]  
Hannah RAISIN  
*Sugar*, 2009  
Video, 8:11mins