NATALIE RYAN
MORTEM IN IMAGINE
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A LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art Exhibition

LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art, Melbourne
14 July – 5 September 2014

VAC | La Trobe University Visual Arts Centre, Bendigo
7 January – 22 February 2015
Natalie Ryan

Mortem In Imagine

I was talking to Natalie Ryan recently about death.

It wasn’t as macabre and melancholy as it might sound. The conversation was more philosophical – existential, phenomenological or ontological perhaps. It turns out her Dad and my Mum both died from cancer around a similar time. I shared with her an anecdote I’ve told a number of times – how my Dad, one evening on a depression-induced bender, took it upon himself to take my Mum’s ashes, together with those of his own Mother as well as those of his Dad, and mix them all together in the soil of a faux Japanese garden he had created in his backyard. While I rarely, if ever, spent time in deliberate and attentive proximity to the container that we brought home from the crematorium following my Mum’s funeral (in reality, her ashes were probably already mixed with small amounts of the remains of others incinerated in the same cremation chamber), that possibility had now been taken away from me. Some people respond to this story in abhorrent shock; others with incredulous amusement, almost always followed by an apology for laughing at a story about the apparent desecration of my Mother’s remains. Either way, the reaction is always bound up with a sense that my Dad had erred in judgement – that there was something disrespectful in what he had done (to my Mum, or those she left behind, I am still not sure).

I’ve always taken a measured and objective approach to loss and death. Sure, I was sad when my Mum died, but I didn’t feel the need to have an urn to spend time with or a gravesite to visit. Similarly, I’ve never been the sort of person who surrounds themselves with photos or mementos to remind them of those no longer here. I was therefore kind of surprised to find myself feeling a pinch of hurt, maybe even betrayal, when I heard of what my Dad had done. I guess there must have been some comfort in knowing that, even if I previously hadn’t felt the need to spend time with the vessel that held my Mum’s ashes, I knew where she was and the option to visit her was always there. My Dad’s impulsive gesture had brought to the surface a contradiction that I’d long buried beneath balanced objectivity and sober reason. It seems there was a need somewhere within me to fill an object or a space with emotively charged experience and memory.

Mortem in Imagine seamlessly intertwines these two ways of understanding and experiencing death. The cool, even-handed objectivity of the dissection table is merged with tenderness, fragility and the memorialised form. The nexus of anatomical cadaver for scientific ends and the deceased body laid bare for the offering of respect is disquietingly revealed in Ryan’s imaging of the lifeless form.

As in previous three-dimensional work by Ryan, the animal cadaver lies at the centre of this exhibition. In fact it is the foetal remains of several goats that are so peacefully and poetically represented and recreated. Unlike previous bodies of work, however, recognition of this is only achieved via an intimate encounter with the work. It is a vacuous sense of unoccupied space that first impresses itself on the viewer when entering the gallery. Unsettlingly, however, this emptiness couldn’t feel more weighty and loaded. At one end of the darkened room, a singular sphere of illumination punches through the space amid the enveloping black gallery walls. Bathed in this field of light, a stainless steel dissection table is recreated in translucent white wax. Upon approach, seven lifeless baby goats – eyes closed, limbs limp – lay randomly scattered on their sides, cast from the same matt milky stuff. The material gives the bodies a paradoxical quality of both substance and emptiness (being and nothingness) all at once. This form could be mistaken for sleeping bodies if it weren’t for the sinister shapes of the utilitarian surface they lay splayed upon. These ambiguous qualities aid the viewer’s ability to see beyond the prescribed perception of the works, allowing for a personal and interpretative experience.
the qualifying features of the creature and species, instead making space for contemplation of the dividing line between life and death. Meditation on such lofty questions inevitably leads to a projection of self onto and into these inanimate objects. The human audience is able to empathise – to see in the representation of the animal corpse a parallel of their own fragile and fleeting existence.

At the other end of the gallery, three photographs hang bordered by an aperture into a symmetrical adjoining space. Each individual work is itself enshrined by an ornate and elegant wide gilt frame. Contained within these frames are photographs of three of the lifeless baby goats. The drama of each composition echoes the expansive emptiness of the gallery space they sit within, fields of darkness and depth dominating each image’s surface, penetrated by the faces of the creatures resting in peace. Their adornment in gold emphasises the preciousness of the life/lifelessness represented within, recalling both the reverent treatment of old master paintings and the framing of a loved one’s image in a gold locket hanging from a chain. These are foetal portraits – valued, endeared, remembered.

By subtly playing with the expectations and associations of different contexts, Ryan dissolves the distinction between animal cadaver and human corpse. The reframing and relocating of these images of animal cadavers – both two-dimensional and sculptural – allows for the same longing, mourning and memorialisation usually reserved for lost human loved ones to play out in proximity to these lifeless remains – remains more typically framed as representative specimens rather than unique, singular beings. Rather than designating a corpse as animal or human, Ryan raises us above an anthropocentric frame of reference, instead simply embracing the idea of life (or lack thereof), somewhat contradictory allowing us to anthropomorphise these goat foetuses by pouring what we recognise in ourselves into their frame. Ryan provides us opportunity to recognise what we share, infusing the animal cadaver with the same capacity for spirit and sentience as the human body.

There’s a poetic parallel to this transference of sentiment, understanding and value in Ryan’s making process. Cast in wax from moulds taken of hand built sculptural forms, Ryan’s goats are literally a representation of the empty space of a receptacle, made positive, meaningful and whole through a pouring of substance into their latent form. The material is heated and melted down, made pliable and fluid. Coupled with the altar-like treatment of the surface and space of their presentation, there is a kind of ceremonial or ritualistic feel to this process – perhaps even cathartic. Reshaping. Reforming. Imbuing the substance with something that wasn’t there before. It might even be an action echoed in the mixing of ashes and soil.

Michael Brennan
Acting Senior Curator, LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art
Natalie Ryan, **Untitled #1** (2014)
Pigment print on archival paper, 28 x 35cm
Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne

OVERLEAF

Natalie Ryan, **Untitled #2** (2014)
Pigment print on archival paper, 28 x 35cm
Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne

Natalie Ryan, **Untitled #3** (2014)
Pigment print on archival paper, 28 x 35cm
Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne
Natalie Ryan, Untitled (2014)
Wax, wood, 180 x 100 x 85cm
Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne
Wax, wood, 180 x 105 x 85cm
Images courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne
LIST OF WORKS
All works by Natalie Ryan
All works collection of the artist

Untitled #1 (2014)
Pigment print on archival paper
28 x 35cm

Untitled #2 (2014)
Pigment print on archival paper
28 x 35cm

Untitled #3 (2014)
Pigment print on archival paper
28 x 35cm

Untitled (2014)
Wax, wood
180 x 105 x 85cm
EDUCATION
2013 PhD (Fine Art), Monash University
2007 BFA Sculpture (Honors, 1st class), Monash University
2005 Master Class in Facial Reconstruction, Victorian College of the Arts
2002 Bachelor of Fine Arts Sculpture, Victorian College of the Arts

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2014 Moriml in Imagine, LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art, Melbourne
2013 Imaging the Dead PhD Exhibition, MADA Gallery
The Ryan Sisters – Guess WhocT, C3 Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne
2012 EvaAnitaec, Dianne Tanzer Gallery
2011 End Stage, Switchback Gallery, Gippsland
2010 Pretty in Pink, Dianne Tanzer Gallery
Unnatural Selection, Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale
2009 Devil, Grampians Gallery, Sydney
Pretty in Pink, Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts.
Devild Matter, Dianne Tanzer Gallery.
2008 Statc, West Space.
A Keif, Kings ARI, Gallery.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2014 New, Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne
2013 Please Allow me to Introduce Myself, Strange Neighbour, Melbourne
Animalised, Hungry for Arts Festival, Sydney
2012 Where the Birds Always Sing, curated by Theodore Whong, Ausin Tung Gallery, Melbourne
2011 Salon Show, Switchback Gallery, Gippsland
2010 Melbourne Art Fair, Melbourne Exhibition Building, Dianne Tanzer
Who's Hot, Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne
Lot This, curated by Samne Westrom, West Space
2009 Nothing out of the Ordinary, Nelle Castan Gallery, Melbourne
Sex, Death and Violence, Blindside
Object, Michael Koro Gallery
Skin, Shifted Gallery
2008 Team Australia. Curated by Veronica Tello, Carlton Hotel
CRYPTOGYDIZ/LOG/ISM in the search of the missing link, Toyota Community Spirit Gallery
Convergence, Shifted Gallery.
The Devolution Project Curated by Simon Maidment & Mark Foary, West Space Project Melbourne & University of Southern Queensland
Debut IV, Blindside Gallery.
Fair Art, Zehl-Abegg “In Vent”. Technology Centre, Kunzelsau, Germany.

SELECTED RESIDENCIES, AWARDS & GRANTS
2014 Recipient VicArts Grant, Arts Victoria.
Recipient JUWIS Photography Award, The Arts Centre, Gold Coast
2013 Recipient Australian Postgraduate Award, PhD Monash University
2012 Finalist Australia China Foundation Residency Award, Austin Tung
Finalist Artcycle, Incurator Gallery
2011 Finalist WokaArts Small Sculpture
Finalist Judolation Contemporary Art Prize
Finalist Yering Station Sculpture Award
2010 Recipient Medical/Art Residency, Medical Department, Monash University Gippsland
2009 Finalist RBS Emerging Artist Award, Sydney
Finalist Toyota Community Spirit Travel Award

SELECTED ARTICLES & PUBLICATIONS
2014 Dan Rule, New, In the Galleries, The Age 24/5/14
2013 Pip Walks, Funny Games, Stamm, September/October Issue
2013 Dan Rule, Please Allow me to Introduce Myself – In the Galleries, The Age 14/9/14
2011 Dylan Rainforth, Desire to Connect, The Age 18/12/14
Nikita Vaz, End stage on Display, The Latrobe Valley Express, 21/4/11
2010 ABC TV, Exhibits: On Arts Nation Program, 22/6/10
ABC, Radio interview by Gerard Callihan
4MBS, Radio interview with Simon Gregg by John Sheridan
3MBS, Radio interview by Gerard Callihan
Robert Nelson, Rock Art but not as we know it, The Age 27/10
Edward Colless, Fine Display of Optimism, The Australian 6/8/10
Art gallery exhibits Unnatural Selection, Times Domain, 2/10
Nicole Cleary, A Fair to remember, Mx, 28/7/10
Robert Nelson, Upscale fair, scaled down range, The Age 6/8/10
Suzanne Boccalatte and Meredith Jones, TRUNK BOOKS Volume 1: HAIR.
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Cover image
Natalie Ryan, Untitled #1
pigment print on archival paper
28cm x 35cm
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