

## We Used To Talk About Love

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Curator Natasha Bullock's attempt to narrate love's trajectory in the exhibition 'We Used to talk About Love' echoes something of our eternal search for *amour*. The work of 11 artists fills a labyrinth of rooms that Bullock has grouped into four states of love: 'To begin with the flesh', 'Expressive abstractions', 'An archive of feeling' and 'Filthy, crushing, ending'.

The accompanying catalogue with essays by Bullock, photography curator Vigen Galstyan, academic and artist Lily Hibberd, and fiction by writer Gail Jones, examines the transformational qualities of intimate love, its uncertainty and its tendency to both subsume and conjoin, much like the act of photography in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980). Like the camera, love also projects and reflects, ultimately creating a fractured and never-ending self-portrait. The universal desire to love and to be loved is thwarted by pursuit of this perfect other; to love is to risk loss. It is this constant yearning, this impossibility, that lies at love's heart. Love is therefore, as Bullock writes, 'a constant state of becoming and paradoxically so'.

Polly Borland's photographic series 'Smudge' (2010) bridges the start and end of the exhibition. Photographed against a flat natural light, solitary figures blend extreme and colourful dress ups (blow-up doll, plush animal, hooded assassin), with bulging hairy desire – fright wigs, hard-ons, false breasts, artificial facial genitalia – intensifying their state of longing and alienation. It is the intimate quality of these pared-down portraits that makes them interesting. They are ugly, funny and vulnerable, much like our ageing bodies and the act of fucking.

The potency of Borland's engagement with marginalized expressions of desire, from documenting real life cases ('The Babies', 2001 and 'Bunny', 2008) to more recently composing her subjects, comes from a symbiosis between herself, the photographer, and her subjects. It is this, the possibility of self-portraiture, that creates the intimacy and infiltrates the theatrics, offering a quiet naturalism about these surface extremes.

## About this review

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By Ruth Learner



Eliza Hutchison, *57 seconds* 2004, from 'Hair in the gate, a biograph', 2011–ongoing, inkjet print 36.5 × 54.8 cm

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Polly Borland *Untitled XXXII*, from the series 'Smudge', 2010, chromogenic print, 76 x 65 cm

Angelica Mesiti's video *Rapture (silent anthem)* (2009), is a portrait of young adults in heightened states of adulation in a mosh pit at a rock concert. Tightly framed and filmed in high definition at slow motion, Mesiti focuses on two or three devotees; bodies thrash in unison, heads pulsate, faces grimace and let go, glazed eyes pool in blind ecstasy, and lyrics are mouthed like incantations. These intensely private moments caught in an intensely public arena are composed through surging ethereal veils of sweat and water and, at times, floating, dancing hands.

As the work's title suggests, silence powers these passionate moments of rapture, and privileges the onlooker, the hidden observer, who is in turn enraptured. Influenced by Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St Teresa* (1647–52) and reminiscent of Andy Warhol's living portraits and Richard Lawrence and Lauren Olney's video project [[www.beautifulagony.com](http://www.beautifulagony.com)] *Beautiful Agony* (2004–ongoing), whereby participants' faces are filmed while they masturbate and orgasm, Mesiti's portraits capture an intense communion of human desire.

Eliza Hutchison's series of photographs 'Hair in the Gate, a biograph' (2012) perhaps express most acutely the prismatic nature of love and loss; premised on the notion of distortion, literally in the filming process whereby a fragment of celluloid may be caught in the gate (where the film is exposed to light) and alter the image, and metaphorically in the process of recollection, whereby memory becomes increasingly fictitious and blended to our present circumstance.

Hutchison's series of convulsed black and white images are disturbingly familiar, borne out by the works' titles. In *Family Conviction No 1*, 1970 three gleeful Manson women, their hair prison shorn, flanked by police guard, appear to liquefy as though their very sins are oozing through space and time. In a related image *Tate Funeral, Holy Cross Cemetery, Culver City*, 1969, faces of mourners merge and cascade into chasms of sorrow and, as though held by a centrifugal force, an accidental distended tear drop defies gravity.

These traumatic images, originated from newspapers and news stills, are included with quiet personal images, such as *Somers*, 2011, of the artist's daughter, and *Montrose*, 1998, of the conifer tree under which the ashes of the artist's grandmother are laid. Pixelated and colour saturated, these are transformed into remote screen images.

That mediated images of trauma have become the stuff of seminal memory, and vice versa, conveys something of the reflective and refractive dynamic of love and life. Memory here is configured and spent by trauma, those events which mark us and which we remember and remember, creating and recreating. In places, hung in triptych and diptych groupings, time is marked in episodes, and the work itself is embodied through time, an exposure of an exposure, distending and contorting, rending and fracturing, ultimately evoking a constant reinvention.

There are other works that shine, such as Noonan's collage series 'Images' (2005), whose disjunctions and associations achieve a quiet unease; incongruous landscapes that settle over us like those disturbing dreams of childhood, evoking time lost and a nagging melancholia. However, it is these parts rather than the whole that carry this overly-narrated exhibition. Love is multifaceted and for this very reason it is perhaps the philosophical insights that photography and video can illuminate upon it that offers an experiential cogency and not, as is offered up here and in the case of so many large themed shows, a more literal promise of a grand predestined journey.

**Ruth Learner**

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**Frieze**

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