

## Is this not a love song?

For the 21<sup>st</sup> Century artist, the question of love, whether romantic, platonic, amorous or ironic, is indeed confusing and challenging. The heart has always had its challenges, but today the representation of love is so firmly in the grip of popular culture that serious responses seem illusive. Even so, many are drawn by the siren song of romance. This can be seen in 'Project 12: This Is Not A Love Song'<sup>1</sup>, at Anna Pappas Gallery, Melbourne, where fifteen artists from Australia and abroad have tackled the fecund and visceral coupling of love and popular culture.

Many of these projects are interactive even where they are limited to no more than two individuals. Via the World Wide Web some for example have expanded their projects to invite numerous participants, such as those who might otherwise have never been connected. For **Heidi Holmes** her approach entails a detailed analysis of hers and her husband's past love lives, the period prior to their being married, with the results presented in the gallery. For **Malcolm Whittaker** his task of choice was to connect with strangers through lonely hearts web columns and advertisements, asking willing participants the question "What Would You Love Someone to Love About You?" For **Ben Coonley** a strange kind of romance is revealed. His avatar is an amorous cat named Otto, whose voice is akin to the computerized speech of physicist Stephen Hawkins. Equipped with this augmented locution he tells how his amorous and heart-felt yearnings are posted on Internet dating sites, all in a bid to 'connect'. The issue of connection is equally apparent in the work of **Lucas Grogan**. His needlepoint work 'Private Island' both speaks to the idea of seclusion and equally to its seeming near absence in contemporary life; no man is an island and now we are all on-line. **Darren Sylvester** has conjured a world of success and pleasure. Aboard the mighty Concorde his hero is in thrall to a narcissistic kind of love, ignorant it seems of the downfall that is destined to come. Next to this all too material vision, the work of **Zoe Scoglio & Cait Foran** is distinctly ethereal. With the aid of a little technology they reveal the energetic and magnetic frequencies that any two people might share.

Here we note that amorous couplings are also part of the scene. From the Netherlands, artist **Irene Hanenbergh** has drawn her inspiration from Japanese prints from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Historical depictions of 'Shunga', the making of love, are conflated with her own contemporary response. From Brazil, **Marco Paulo Rolla** is also inspired by images from the not too distant past. His animation work 'Con Muito Amor' (With Much Love), 2011 incorporates historical figurines engaged in a conquest of passion.

For **Danae Valenza** love is nothing if not a sensual experience, redolent of things like music and touch. In this instance she has appropriated the tactile Braille script, evoking a space where language gives way to sensation and feeling. The text she has chosen is a poetic yet anonymous phrase, which states, "It's just a matter of deciding where to begin". In Braille form this phrase becomes the scroll of an old-fashioned music box, so what we hear are notes (the sounds of love) and not the words.

Perhaps it's just me, but artist **Sue Dodd** seems somewhat cynical about love and popular culture. One of her sculptures consists of a DIY kind of phallus made from cardboard and silver insulation tape. No 'Monument to the third International' here; instead a vertical salute to fetishised sexual display. And there, at its tip, a tiny little screen, with Michael Jackson sending out messages to his

legions of fans. The work is as the artist suggests: "A dream/nightmare of a teenage fan's desire,... a very real kind of horror."

Amorous allusions to pop culture icons are also apparent in the work of **Salote Tawale**. Her work is a kind of altar or shrine and its presiding deity is the actor Jonnie Depp. His image sits atop a television monitor, which plays excerpts from a video. Regarding this piece the artist explains: "The photographic image represents the pop cultural ideal of a handsome movie actor. The video is a representation of the self through cultural and social transferences. The sculpture represents interpersonal relations. My intention is to make a work that understandings and misunderstandings traversed whilst in communication with another person."

And then there are works with a darker tone. **Tony Garifalakis** has created a piece that he has titled 'Anonymous'. It consists of .38 calibre rifle cartridges, each engraved with the phrase 'Will you marry me?' Sex and violence all rolled into one.

**Ross Coulter & Meredith Turnbull** are in many ways the counterpoint of this exhibition, for the love they share resides not in the glow of popular culture. Rather they are interested in what occurs when artists, bonded by love, decide to collaborate. Their lyrical works feature clay impressions of their bodies, wedged side by side in the intimate act of creation.

And there we have it. Love, above all human emotions reveals just how mutable our perception of things really is. One minute it is utterly all consuming and the next, it is as distant as a passing cloud. Love arrays its defensive weapons and the artists in 'This is Not a Love Song' have responded to the challenge.

**Damian Smith, 2012**

---

<sup>i</sup> In his post Sex Pistols years John Lyden and his newly established band Public Image Limited entered what some might describe as a period of no small cynicism. Lyden had already begun to work with the founder of Virgin Records, Richard Bransen and the group's better-known lyrics were couched ironically in the negative. 'The written word is a lie' became as much their leitmotif as did that other pithy axiom 'this is not a love song'. Though the latter derived its inspiration from a hit by the Flying Lizards, the transliteration so forcibly entered the vernacular that today it is quotably iconic.