

ICONOLOGY IN SECULAR TIMES: TRUE STORIES

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iconology: noun. *The branch of art history that studies visual images and their symbolic meaning (especially in social or political terms).*

Webster's online dictionary, www.websters-dictionary-online.com/definition/iconology

As a practising artist and writer living within an incrementally pervasive graphic art environment – a commercially-driven media culture bombarding the world with ever-increasing reach – I am interested in some of the resonances around the intersections that occur between professional visual art and mainstream pop culture. In an era dominated by discourse on postcolonialism, post-feminism and even post-humanism, real-life issues around the creation of and responsibility for image-making prove complex, problematic and enduring.

This small collection of writings includes a story involving iconography versus ethical advertising; an illustration of the punctum within the photograph from a personal perspective; and a review of iconography from recent Anita De Soto paintings. Coincidentally, all three pieces deal with imagery of the female body and the relationship between image and viewer. With the spirit of Hannah Höch (s)nipping at my heels, this montage is hopefully intended to inform, stimulate, entertain.

THIS IS NOT A LOVE SONG/ HUNTSMAN MEAT-LOVE

Picture this: a newspaper ad in the centre of your mid-weekly, Dunedin-produced *D-Scene* magazine, issue 18, February 2009. A 13 x 21 cm colour reproduction, in a two-page advertising feature directly targeting the newly inducted Otago University student market over Orientation Week. An advertisement for a commercial dining establishment designed for family patronage. Featuring an oval-shaped photograph of a naked and very pale-skinned, lank-haired blonde woman posing limply against a garish yellow background, holding two larger-than-life, almost glaring red, raw beef-steaks in front of her own bare breasts.¹ She does not look very happy to me.

"HUNTSMAN STEAKHOUSE ..." it proclaims,

"Under new ownership

THE BEST STEAKS IN TOWN

Talk to your parents about our great pre-pay Steak a Week and Steak a Month Deal!!!

...COME IN AND STEAKYOUR CLAIM NOW!"

An image of a naked woman advertising meat? Well almost; a steakhouse (not a butchery, as I had first thought) advertising women? Women advertising wot? My brain attempted to unscramble the mixed messages (not to mention bad puns) inherent in this text-and-image storm in a d-cup! The text suggests parental guidance might be

necessary to facilitate decision-making at the same time as it invites gastronomical colonialisation: Steak that claim!? What territories ARE we taking here? Whose fantasy is this, I wonder? Why aren't those students not insulted?

By now, feeling creeped and disturbed by this strange horror vision, it wasn't until several weeks later that I remembered to try and track the original image down. Strangely, the Huntsman advertisement seemed to have disappeared – it had only been seen once, and was rumoured to have been pulled out of circulation after public complaints were made. I locate the *D-Scene's* local office, and find a copy of the ad in the last issue at the bottom of the stack of the archive stand.

I talked to the staff and discovered that the Huntsman Steakhouse had in fact just that day lost an objection case that was won through an Advertising Standards Authority appeal instigated by individuals from the local community, effectively shutting the ad down. The warning story for the press turned up several weeks after the initial ad was published, in the Monday 25 May 2009 issue of the *Southland Times* and on Channel 3 news.² The results of the Advertising Standards Authority's investigation – *Complaint 09/106 vs Huntsman Steakhouse* – were also published in their entirety on the ASA website on 20 May 2009.³

The ASA Complaints Board is a media authority put in place to act as a mediating forum between advertising media and the general community. Their Code for People in Advertising is concerned with meeting standards of public acceptability. The areas the board covers and crosses include the ethics of offensiveness (decency) and human rights issues.

Objections to "offensive and socially unacceptable" standards in the Huntsman advertisement formed the basic dialogue for this case.⁴ The ASA ruled that "the image in the advertisement of a topless woman holding pieces of steak in front of her breasts used sexual appeal to draw attention to an unrelated product and degraded women in general, thereby breaching Basic Principle 5..."⁵ Taking into account "the product, audience, context and medium and in particular, the association of the image of the woman and meat products," the majority of the board "was of the view that the advertisement crossed the threshold to be likely to cause serious offence..."⁶ The ad was rejected on both a Code of Advertising to People principle and a Code of Ethics rule.

This story is a current example of both the potency and dilemma posed by an image, expressly in this case a photographic image of a naked female, here multiplied by the mass media for general delivery, and some of the reactions and mechanisms engaged in this debate. Deep issues of female representation (self-determinism), consumerism (marketing), and fetishism (desire) intersect at the crossroads of sexuality and advertising.

Manly meat or meaty mammaries? According to one objector, "It is clearly sexualizing meat." This complainant seems confused: If anything, I had thought the ad was mostly about over-objectifying and commercialising women's bodies.⁷ The steakhouse owner not only mistakes 'his' mammary glands for meat, he also tries to demonise and belittle his detractors by calling them "a small group of activists."⁸ Taking responsibility for image-mongering is a serious issue.

This cautionary tale ends with a sad curly tail. In the ASA transcript, the Huntsman Steakhouse business owner steadfastly upholds his version of the moral majority, never apologises and partially lays the responsibility at his business team's door. The *D-Scene* publisher apologises to the public, deflects some of the heat onto the general manager of the parent publishing company, Fairfax, and attempts to diffuse the issue by pointing in the direction of its own in-house advertising production team. Fairfax's general manager even publicly assures us that the ad has since been deleted from the archive files of *The Southland Times!*⁹

So even though justice is seen to be done, I wonder: "Not only is this ad degrading to women but it further entrenches the heterosexist notions circulating within society." This was the final quote from one objector:¹⁰ It refers to a view that is so entrenched that by putting two such basic images together (even *sans* text), the message is: women are meat (dead or live). I find it sad that Mr Huntsman and Co. find this attitude so acceptable and normalised.

Endnote: As a self-volunteering operator in this charade, the female restaurant floor manager was both co-designer of the concept behind the photograph and the consenting naked model in the ad.¹¹ I doubt she is aware of the multiple jeopardies of appearing in this way. Not only has this female employee put herself in a vulnerable position (professionally, let alone physically), she is also posing as 'every (white) woman,' a fairly crude concept to start with. There is an additional conflict of interests inherent in the situation for, although full consent is implied, the work context for this agent (without cover) is complex. Resolutely mute and nameless, her (personal) agency is implicit, but simultaneously seriously undermines her own intent.¹²

This restaurant manager has multiple agency: a) in her role as instigator of the enactment, as acting manager providing a service. She is also an active agent: b) as a worker on the floor, consenting to put her body forth as a metaphor for an item of product display that happens to be meat. The over-identification and consumption of woman in service, and woman-as-commodity (to be in turn re-consumed) is a multiple abuse of power. The conflicting statuses of her roles are unequal and, as perpetrator, she has in fact colluded in her own demise twice over:

In our time, crude metaphors linking women-flesh and meat-flesh are no longer socially acceptable or ethically responsible, as the active (image-consuming) community has indicated. I wonder if the model gets an apology? I wonder if she got to apologise to herself? I wonder if she's OK?

BROKEN BREAST/ ST AGATHA REVISITED

An introduction: My new client, a small elderly woman, wise, brown eyes owl-enlarged by large-lensed specs. In command of her own kitchen; inquisitress, giving me the third degree; friendly, feisty and large with humour:

*Where do you come from?
I live out of town ...
O do you know ...?*

I know a friend, a hospital work colleague of hers. Dunedin is so small ... gaining trust by proxy; I'm in with a grin ...

Quiet cul-de-sac, immaculate house, sunny kitchen. I am employed as domestic help; there is not much to do ... a retirement life circumscribed by diminishing returns. A raspy cough, the ubiquitous cigarette, a way to pass the time and muse on memories ...

This charge is active, alive, but compromised. A lifetime of smoking, a wrestle with lung-disease. Tally: one lung down, but alive to tell the tale. A spotless house; my task, with damp cloth, to keep control of invisible dust and fluff disastrous to a body with one lung. ... Not to mention, have another cigarette ...

Another round with Auntie Death, this time a breast, a near miss, an operation, a severance. Confidentiality and confession:

Come over here. Have a look at this ...

Before I know it, I'm seduced by the invitation, hooked, lined and sunk. Produced from inside a handy nearby kitchen-table pile of books, papers, cigarette packs, asthmatic nebuliser; she matter-of-factly hands me a glossy A4 full-colour photographic print. A near life-size breast, half-severed from the chest. A slash, a gash, brutal and mid-operation: full-bleed print. Resolutely honest, opened-up, exposing layers of fatty tissue, lobules and ducts. In all its gory glory, an unidentifiable scrambled necrotic mess. A matter-of fact, semi-detached, pragmatic throwaway observation:

Look, it looks like creamed corn ...

My horror. Too late. A split-second glance, I try to look away; too late. My hand tries to shield my eye. I can't undo what's already done. A document, an event, a moment taken in. This image now becomes my memory too.

Why did you do that (to me)?

I want to ask. Her modus operandi, her status: an in-house request. For momento or a fascination with the macabre? A confession, an exhibition of intimacy? Selective; a privileged status, mine? Document or evidence? Proof of lives lived, a dice with death: survivorship. She tells me she wanted evidence, to show her friends and family. Proof, for herself as well, I think. Over-identification with personal trauma, I wonder? A picture of a scar would suffice surely. I want it stitched up, contained, a neat or ragged zip (she has that too):

You wicked thing, I say.

She laughs. She tells me she is without vanity. The doctors still give her a hard time about her smoky habit. She says she is concerned at the rate young ones are still taking it up, her teenaged granddaughter included. She tells me they give the younger family member a hard time whenever she lights up:

Woops, there goes a lung ... there goes another breast ...!

Speaking from experience ... she can.

Still impressed, metonymically, by this photographic event I cannot forget, I think about the intention, acquisition, the collection and presentation of this image. Not a family album picture. This is an unusually commissioned institutional document obtained for private consumption. Not a revelation (sharing) or revealing (intimacy) of one's glory days. More a lasting legacy, a war-wound. A trophy, perhaps. Momento of a battle fought and won.

Barthes, memory and disruption ...

ANITA DESOTO/ SKIRT REVERSED



Figure 1. Anita DeSoto, *War Widow* (2008), oil on canvas, 214 x 167 cm.

Figure 2. Anita DeSoto, *A Jesus of Your Own* (2008), oil on canvas, 103 x 76 cm.¹³

Anita DeSoto is an accomplished local Dunedin painter engaged in a personal iconography containing myth and metaphor, with an autobiographical narrative told through a post-feminist lens.

Many of her photographically detailed visions focus on strong figurative symbolism, with references to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century religious iconography as well as surrealist-influenced styles. Frequently employing self, family and friends in naked or semi-clothed poses, persona and body are used as a metaphor for larger themes in life. Forming semi-realistic tableaux rendered with an idealising 'smoothed-out' painterly trademark style, Anita's subjects frequently inhabit a space situated between cruelty and seduction, transcendence and sublimation.

Although I am not a photographic practitioner (as most of my 'community of practice' referents are), a recent painting of Anita's, *War Widow*, seen in the "Art in Law" group exhibition in the Law Faculty building, Otago University, August- September 2009, engaged me on several levels. As an example of a contemporary, feminist, and semi-nude portrait, also employing Dadaesque strategies of survival (for example, layers, inversions, and juxtapositions of both form and theme), an unresolvedness within an otherwise technically assured composition lets me know this is an invitation to query, that a dialogue is being opened ...

War Widow features a three-quarter-sized woman's half-clothed and half-exposed figure, suspended upside-down in space. The inverted pose alerts us to things being not what they seem. The woman hangs in mid-air; gloved arms outstretched in a reversed crucifixion pose, her naked body both revealed and concealed by a wedding dress falling downward.¹⁴ The skirt covers her torso and face, but reveals her naked lower half, her feet encircled, caught in a beribboned funerary wreath.

The entwined greenery, with the inverted skirt, refers to the burden of shame and grief (veiled) and speaks for the plight of the war-bride victims of the Anzac wars. Trapped, feet bound, caught in a dilemma not of her own making, this war widow represents the martyred plight that war brought to the womenfolk left behind. Without men – in some instances a whole generation of young men was annihilated – the young war bride is condemned to a solitary fate, thwarted in her prime.

Initially a kind of shocking icon, this upside-down travesty is painted in Anita's seductively beautiful 'airbrushed' style. I was interested in the feedback this image may have generated for the artist. Given that Anita frequently represents her self/own body in her paintings, I wondered if she had encountered any negative feedback on this image, especially as it overtly links symbols of national war iconography with a naked female form (complete with bridal accessories), transgressively combined with a religious pose – the placement and juxtaposition revealing a female-centric critique of the futility and tragedy of enforced patriotism.

In conversation with the artist, in front of the painting displayed in the hallway of the Law Faculty at Otago University, Anita revealed something surprising – contrary to expectation, this large and iconographically complex painting had survived without incurring a backlash. Instead, it was the smaller neighbouring painting of hers, *A Jesus of Your Own*, featuring a eurocentric version of Christ portrayed with naturalistic, long, slightly straggly hair; engaging in a direct and possibly suggestive gaze with the viewer; naked torso situated beneath a bell-jar; hands in supplication mode, pushing out against the opaque wall of confinement that had caused a reaction.

In fact, between the hanging of the work and the official public opening event, a formal complaint had been made to the dean of Law, about *A Jesus*, from a senior law student who appeared to be disturbed by the anti-religious sentiments perceived through the formal reading and interpretation of the title of the painting. The dean, to his credit, had initiated a meeting between the artist and the unhappy viewer.

A *Jesus of Your Own* refers to the Depeche Mode song "Personal Jesus" (the version covered by Johnny Cash). The lyrics include the lines:

...
Your own personal Jesus
Someone to hear your prayers
Someone who cares ...

I'll make you a believer
Take second best
Put me to the test ...

I will deliver
You know I'm a forgiver
Reach out and touch faith
Your own, personal, Jesus ...¹⁵

It seems a home-grown version of Christ still proves too disquieting a dilemma for a twenty-first century audience – but maybe we are mature enough to accept the awkward inversion an alternative tale of the sanctity of war reveals.

These three tales look at some of the issues involved in the interpretation and functions of visual art. Private viewing versus public ownership – both aesthetic arenas arrive with questions unavoidably entangled with politics. As with these real-life samples, a study of the complex interpretations of the underlying iconography within its contextual setting can reveal the practice of art to be an ongoing cultural discussion.

Jane Davidson has had a varied art career including over 20 years of art training, practice, exhibition, and event and gallery work. In 2011 she completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Visual Arts at the Dunedin School of Art, these examples from her writing incorporate themes relevant to the ongoing issues of viewpoint and self-representation from a feminist perspective.

- 1 On a second look, the yellow foreground surrounds the model, providing an underlying uneasiness by suggesting a key-hole, 'peeping-tom' viewpoint.
- 2 www.3news.co.nz [accessed 23 May 2009]. Channel 3 is D-Scene's Fairfax-owned parent company.
- 3 www.asa.co.nz/display.php?ascb_number=09106.
- 4 Advertising Standards Authority pdf, "Decision: Complaint: 09/106" (2009), 4, accessed 25 May 2009.
- 5 Ibid., 5.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Deductible from *ibid.*, 2.
- 8 Ibid., 3.
- 9 Ibid., 4.
- 10 Ibid., 2.
- 11 According to several statements made by the owner of the ad.
- 12 This woman's name, words or opinions were not identified, expressed or defended once in the entire saga.
- 13 Photographs reproduced with kind permission of Alan Dove.
- 14 Thanks to conversation with the artist on 10 September 2009, I have been alerted to a more detailed symbology of the upside-down posture: the inverted crucifixion as a symbol of martyrdom was traditionally represented by the Christian disciple and apostle Saint Peter, who was crucified upside-down at his own request (hence the Cross of St. Peter), as he did not feel worthy to die in the same way as Jesus.
- 15 "Personal Jesus" was originally a dance-floor electronic pop hit written by Depeche Mode, UK, 1990.