

ANITA DESOTO: BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

Leoni Schmidt

pie in the sky was exhibited at a time which saw the recent publication of Umberto Eco's edited book *On Ugliness*, following his earlier *On Beauty*.¹ It seems apt to mention these two texts in relation to DeSoto's work, as the conjunction of beauty and ugliness is one aspect which makes her paintings performative of the neo-romanticism which they seem aligned to.

Eco's compendiums show us many examples of bodily beauty as based on harmony, elegance, appropriate proportions, smoothness and idealised limbs – the kind of beauty her audience has come to expect of DeSoto's seductive bodies in poses often implicitly sexual. Even her infants recall Baroque *putti* or Eros with his arrow or the pre-pubescent nudity of the urinating Belgian Manneken Pis.

Urine as a sign of abjection which disturbs order² and the socially acceptable beautiful body signals that the ugly is also present in DeSoto's work. We also recognise it elsewhere: carcasses of dead birds, severed body parts, a viscious black dog. But the carcasses are exquisitely beautiful; the body parts are dished up as exquisite fare or elegant wrist shrouded in a white cloth; the black dog is contrasted with clean linen and glass. Indeed, beauty and ugliness frame each other. Eco reminds us of the witches in *MacBeth*: "Fair is foul and foul is fair..."³

Neo-romantic⁴ painting in its present guises draws on the tradition of interspersing the ideal and the fearful, youthful beauty and heroic death, the beautiful and the sublime, the soothing and the unsettling – often through the use of juxtaposed fragments. DeSoto presents her models as if through eyes which desire their beautiful bodies *and* the cruel ecstasies they may harbour or inflict. The paintings remind one of a fragment written by an earlier romantic: Alfred Tennyson's lines⁵ in a poem for Eleänore:

*I would I were
So tranced, so rapt in ecstasies
To stand apart, and to adore,
Gazing on thee for evermore.*

Leoni Schmidt is Academic Leader: Research and Postgraduate Studies in the School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand. She holds a doctorate from the University of Johannesburg (RAU), an MA (FA) from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and a BA (FA) from the University of South Africa. Her research focuses on contemporary drawing as a critical practice and has been published, for example, as "Exposing Society: Contemporary Drawing as History Writing", *International Journal of the Arts in Society*, 1(3), 2007: 31-48; "Contemporary Drawing: Considering a Semiotics of Corporeality-Materiality", *South African Journal of Art History*, 22(1), 2007: 42-59; and "Interarts Performatives: Writing – Drawing – Architecture", in *Collision: Interarts Practice and Research*, 2008, eds, David Cecchetto, Nancy Cuthbert, Julie Lassonde and Dylan Robinson (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 276-295.

Professor Schmidt is co-editor of *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* www.junctures.org and *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics (Art)* www.thescope.org; and she is the Director: Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Art Educators Conference 2009 www.anzaae2009.org.nz.

- 1 These texts have respectively been published in 2007 and 2004 by Harvill Secker, London.
- 2 See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 3 Umberto Eco, (ed.), 2007. *On Ugliness* (London: Harvill Secker), 20.
- 4 See the "Encyclopedia of British Neo Romanticism" at <http://www.neo-romantic.org.uk/whatisneorom.html> as last accessed on 30 October 2008 for artists, images, key factors and strategies.
- 5 "Eleänore", in *Poems by Afred Tennyson, D.C.L., Poet Laureate* (London: Edward Morton, 1982, digitised on 9 October 2007), 78.