

“SMALL DISASTERS”

Marie Strauss



The Prostitute, 1980s, oil on canvas,
approx. 80 x 60 cm.



The Boxer, 1980s, oil on canvas,
approx. 80 x 60 cm.

I was awarded the first of two Monash/South Project residencies for 2006. Monash University, in collaboration with Craft Victoria, developed these residencies as part of their programme to create exchange opportunities for an extensive network of artists and cultural workers. The residencies function primarily as a vehicle for artists to explore ways of linking different cultures of the south – cultures defined by different languages spoken in South America, New Zealand, South Africa and Australia and people from different cultural backgrounds (for example, indigenous and settler); as well as furthering a dialogue on progressive art practice functioning away from the epicentres of the world. Artistic creation is very much dependent on the experience of cultural difference. To this end, the residency programme is being developed to enable artists to spend time within participating cultures.

My work always revolves around the theatre. I use motifs on a dramatic stage to create narratives within the boundaries of a frame and distanced from the viewer through the suggestion of a vertical proscenium or a horizontal ground. Other work calls to mind spot-lit cameo shots of stage *personae*. Some of these images are of such *personae* 'acting' in the public domain; while others are of *personae* busy in the domestic domain.

The narratives I endeavour to present in these later works – as well as in my earlier South African Art practice – deal with the reality of violence, whether it is physical or physiological, public or domestic. The paintings explore issues of people playing a part to fit into society, of the bruised and damaged, of the underprivileged, the dislocated, the lost and the victimised.

I deploy staged and costumed images of the Other – prostitute, boxers, Christ, children – thus making it possible for the work to be less subjective and personal as the *dramatis personae* bring the work to the public domain through their enhanced accessibility; it is not my voice speaking nor my subjective perspective.

For my recent work, I used similar methods of theatricality in creating an installation entitled “Small Disasters”, with “small” referring not so much to size but to the fact that so many acts of violence go unnoticed and are never brought into the public domain, as if they were too insignificant to notice. “Disasters” refer to the nature, the consequences and the effects of these acts of violence on people’s lives. The works are multi-media, ranging from video, drawing, painting, and ceramics to photography and combining these in my interarts practice.

As mentioned before, the works deal with violence in its many manifestations, from public humiliation, rape, gang behaviour, subservience in the domestic scene, to homophobic beatings and to home invasion. These depictions explore the reality of violence within contemporary postcolonial contexts of the South, which includes countries such as South Africa, New Zealand and Australia. European cultural dislocation and destabilisation in such contexts are closely aligned with psychic disturbances underpinning violent acts and scenarios.

I work to expose these issues through visualisation and materialisation. But, as my work is all about illusion and the setting up of scenarios, I try to retain the magic of the theatre performance and to seduce the viewer into this ‘other’ world, thereby inviting him or her to deal with the content on a supposedly ‘objective’, or at least a distanced level.

In the work I use animals acting as humans. In doing this, I am able to address issues of cruelty and truth much more directly. This is a strategy used by other artists, for example where Paula Rego dresses up her people as animals. By using animals in an apparently familiar scenario, they easily metamorphosise into the grotesque, acting out what we ourselves choose to suppress and ignore.

My interest in this type of iconography started when I was a young child spending a lot of time in the African bush. I became very familiar with animals such as monkeys, baboons, meerkats, rabbits, tortoises, hyenas, bats, and through visits to the zoo, with bears. As a child I was fascinated with the cartoons of Hannibal, a South African cartoonist who drew satirical pictures of a baboon community and published them in a magazine for kids.

I make use of animals that represent certain characteristics such as the hyena which purportedly has a bad and mean character; the bunny rabbit as a victim; the baboon acting as a powerful gang member. Artists whose work I continue to revisit and who influence and inspire my repertoire of actors are Otto Dix for his anti-Nazi drawings; Daumier for his cartoon characters; Grosz for his portrayal of brutality; William Kentridge for his theatricality and clarity; Paula Rego; Henry Darger; and lastly but mainly, Goya for his theatrical presentations of violence. These artists’ treatment of



Behind Glass, 2004, oil on glass, approx. 30 x 20 cm each.



Domestic Scene, 2005, from the series *If This Were a Perfect World*, ash and mixed media drawing on oil paper, 100 x 85 cm.

space suggests a stage and their work invoke all the excitement and suspense of the theatre.

The materials I use to create my work form an integral part of the concept. The storyboard paintings on reversed glass entitled *Behind Glass* need the material to be breakable, fragile, and accessible – in that it is not painted on canvas, but rather on two dollar shop cheap framed glass rectangles. This series of work involve a repetition of the same scenario in primary colours. At first it looks like a children's story but on closer examination it depicts three major social concerns, namely home invasion, youth suicide and child abuse. One also has the sensation – due to the use of glass – of being a voyeur looking in onto a brutal scene without been able to intervene.

My drawings are made on sandpaper and ordinary paper but with soot. The sandpaper and soot (which erodes easily) allude to our sense of erasure, of forgetting and suppressing. The titles refer to Goya's disasters of war etchings. The scenes are all staged with all but one of the spectators removed to the background, highlighting the impotence and vulnerability of the victims. The soot drawings are clear depictions of figures (and sometimes staged clay figurines) acting in a brutal event, painted in soot, a rubbish material associated with dirt, thus also stressing the lack of seriousness coupled with disgust with which domestic violence is often viewed.

My video work is the result of collaboration between Michael Morley, a New Zealand artist and musician, and myself. The work involves a slow moving image of hovering bats with a romantic and strangely haunting soundtrack playing on a loop. The aim of this work is

to materialise one's uncomfortable experience and sense of doom when inside the surrounding installation.

The ceramic part of my installation includes a display of figurines in narrative scenarios on plinths, where they perform and are then photographed. The use of clay as a material is motivated by the haptic sense of touch that the material engenders. Without wanting to sound like Grayson Perry, I also choose to work in clay with its history of figurines and useless displays that gather dust. Its reference to sweet sentimentality and its low position in the hierarchy of art materials also attract me. Because of the sheen of the glaze that bounces off too much light, I dipped the figurines in wax, giving them an icing sugar appearance at odds with the themes they suggest.

These figurines were then in turn used as material for my most recent work: large scale (100 x 83 cm) digital photographs also exhibited in the "Small Disasters" installation. These works are again theatrical in nature: scenarios are created and narratives of violence and brutality play out on a stage. And again, I work to seduce my viewers into a false sense of comfort so that they are drawn into the large scale of the works before they realise the tragedies being enacted; tragedies we so often turn a blind eye to; the sort of tragedies also highlighted by the artists I admire.

Marie Strauss is an interdisciplinary artist working with drawing, sculpture, photography, video, painting and ceramic media. She exhibits in New Zealand and Australia and was an artist-in-residence at Monash University earlier in 2006. She is also currently engaged in her Master of Fine Arts project on violence, vulnerability and the monstrous with specific reference to the work of Goya.



Small Disasters # 5, 2006, digital photograph, 100 x 85cm.



Small Disasters # 2, 2006, digital photograph, 100 x 85cm.