

A glowing, horizontal oval light source is centered in a dark, almost black space. The light is a warm, yellowish-white color and has a soft, diffused appearance. The text "high light" is superimposed on the lower part of the light source.

**high light**

## High Light

High Light, as a staging of cultural and perceptual cartography, explores the use of light in contemporary art practice in the representation of ideas, identities and perception. By focussing on the use of light and dark, high light foregrounds the theatricality of representation and the subversive nature of theatricality when it is removed from the theatre.

In the 1960s, the American art critic, Michael Fried, was appalled at Minimalist art's "theatricality" because it problematized the conventions of spectatorship by focussing on time and space. By distancing the art object in time and space, the spectator became a subject and it was the subject's reflection of the work that conferred form upon the art object. The triad of time, space and spectator was "...nothing more than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art".<sup>1</sup> Theatricality characterized an in-between state in which forms had no essence and belonged to no specific artistic medium. For Fried, theatricality disturbed the autonomy and authenticity of art.

The idea of theatricality today has achieved an extraordinary range of meanings, making it everything from an act to an attitude, a style to a semiotic system, a medium to a message.<sup>2</sup> To unpack the notion of theatricality, we need to reconsider Fried's defence of the integrity of medium specificity and the value of an aesthetic experience that was independent of time and place.<sup>3</sup> This defence of medium specificity is redolent of Plato's denunciation of teatrocracy and mimesis in the *Laws and Republic*, where the history of music is cited as exemplary for the degeneration of liberty into licence and for the collapse of a state of law. Unmusical licence was the result of a confusion of forms: "They contaminated laments with hymns and paeans with dithyrambs, actually imitated the strains of the flute on the harp... By compositions of such a kind and discourse to the same effect, they naturally inspired the multitude with contempt of musical law, and a conceit of their own competence as judges".<sup>4</sup> Teatrocracy, as the rule of the spectator, was worse than a democracy for it had none of the confines of law and order that exemplified a democracy. It spelled the dissolution of universally valid laws and the social spaces inscribed within those laws. An unpredictable heterogeneity, a multiplicity of perspectives, a cacophony of voices and the disruption of theory were the apparent result of hybrid musical forms.<sup>5</sup> Plato's exclusion of artists and poets from the Republic is vindicated by their responsibility for the rise of teatrocracy. Is this the theatricality that Fried disparaged, one that prefigured post-



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modernist practices with their fusion of forms and inclusion of the spectator? Did he, like Plato, desire a space that was stable enough for the subject to know his/her place?

It is claimed that theatricality is the definitive condition of post-modernist art, but is this just the use of hybrid forms, time and space? In recent decades, we have witnessed a metaphorical expansion of the term theatricality in its cross fertilization with the social sciences. Its critical force in cultural production and representation has resulted in a wide array of definitions and possibilities. The metaphorical use of theatricality has been conceived in philosophy as a gesture of disjunctiveness which lends itself to making the unknown known and is particularly characteristic of transition periods in history.<sup>6</sup> Josette Feral defines theatricality as alterity: a process that recognizes the subject in process. It is a performative act that creates "the virtual space of the other" to make a disjunction in the systems of signification.<sup>7</sup> This process is a "permanent movement between meaning and its displacement, between the same and the different..."<sup>8</sup> Samuel Weber, in a consideration of digital media, regards the re-emergence of a "certain" theatricality alongside theory, strategy and politics as a place of uncertainty, a place of alteration and relocation. For Weber, the power of electronic media lies in its "technologies of dismemberment and the possibilities of reconfiguration that ensue."<sup>9</sup>

Through the medium of lighting, a theatrical component itself, high light performs a meeting between aesthetic artifice and social reality. How do the artists in high light use aesthetic artifice to effect? Does the use of light and dark foreground the uncertainty that Weber explicates? Can the light illuminate the dark to explore the gap between reality and its representation? In high light, complexity is confronted and new ways of being or perceiving are illuminated as the spectator is asked to reread the maps of our cultural, social and perceptual change.

Light, dark and shadows are heightened gestures of theatricality. This play of light is crucial in the work of Kim Demuth. His work, normally reliant on an eerie night vision, presents a "doorway" to the light which promises us truth or reality. Instead, the artist presents us with a concatenation of narratives that always leads back onto itself. The light leads us only back into the darkness. It is here that the anxiety and dislocation occur. Does this lighting of the material in our world offer a chance for reconfiguration, or are we merely left with Robert Frost's consternation?

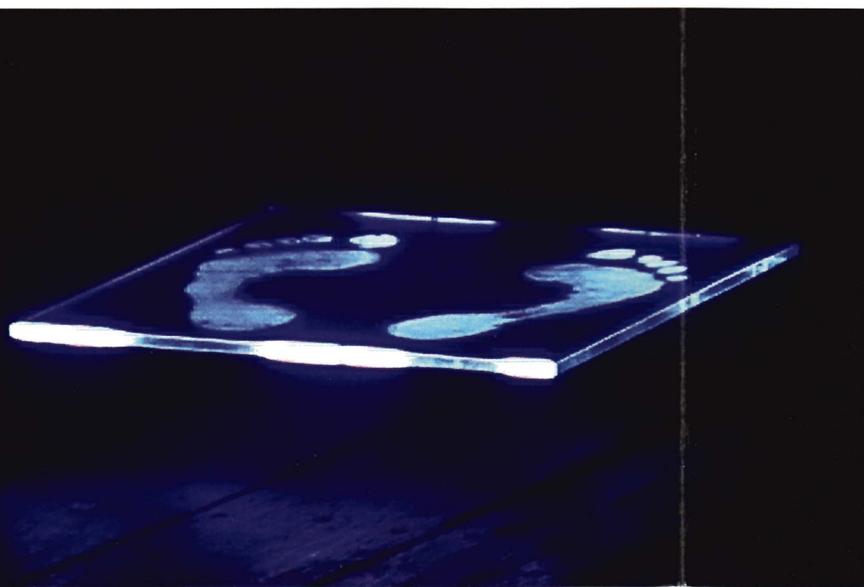
"Once... I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture, Through the picture, a something white, uncertain, Something more of the depths - and then I lost it.

...a ripple... Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness? Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something."<sup>10</sup>

Simone Hine posits mimesis in traditional cinema as a site for re-inscription in *Woman and Red Object*. The woman and the red object are highlighted to reveal the cinematic codes and conventions that are used to construct images of the feminine. The refigured concept of theatricality is pitted against the concealed theatrical elements used in traditional cinema. Through the use of lighting and colour, the artist isolates objects and actions that appear naturalized in cinema to focus on the formal construction of cinematic images. Although non-linear in presentation, a narrative is implied through the work's isolation of these elements to portray the evocation of atmosphere and emotive content that inscribes the

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female. Hine thus implicates narrative as a form dedicated to the past as it contrives to implicate the viewer in a determined projection of the future. 5

Selina Braine's text and light works illuminate ethnicity: dislocated fragments that the artist claims for herself as a "language within language" to perform a reconstruction of spatial and social parameters:

**"weak a**

- lacking strength; feeble; fragile; defenceless; easily influenced; faint – **weakness n.** (Collins Dictionary)

A rug sits on the floor. A light flashes. *white boys are my weakness.* The words appear on the rug, embedded in its weave.

*"I like white boys. I like their Aryan features and porcelain skin."*

Parental, familial and culturally specific constructions influence the articulation of cultural identity. In this work a more personal construction is created. A statement of a second generational immigrant woman is made. Her desires, her lust, her play on a kind of reverse exoticism.

*" I like white boys. I like I like the way they look at me."*

Making a statement such as white boys are my weakness denotes a certain fragility. The words reveal my vulnerability through the ethnic woman's fascination/ lust for something 'other', the white male, a private, personal desire. A desire that continues to be a somewhat taboo issue in contemporary society.

The words are embedded into carpet. Into a rug. Something that may last forever. The words are not fleeting. They are not spoken. They are not subtle. They cannot be erased.

The boldness of the words fills the space... The act of reading becomes a performance... The flashing light dictates legibility... A theatricalised space is created.

A rug sits on the floor. A light flashes. *white boys are my weakness.*" <sup>11</sup>

Jose Da Silva's restages images from the theatre of war in Iraq in *Untitled (Unter Männern)*, part of a series of photographic works that responds to the proliferation of web based imagery of soldiers that circulate within a context of gay male porn/eroticism. The image, of British soldiers showering naked in the Iraqi desert, is part of a broader project entitled *Unter Männern* that takes its name from a film by the German porn-video company Cazzo and translates to "among men". *Unter Männern* is part of an on-going practice of conceptual photography and video that critiques the construction of gay male subjectivity and its interpretation within a social, political and aesthetic experience. Structurally it uses elements of repetition, seriality and appropriation with a strong emphasis on exploring photographic form and content through re-photographic procedures.<sup>12</sup> The work investigates the blurring of the distinction between mediated representation and reality as we witnessed in the theatricality of the Gulf War. In the act of reproduction, there is always the possibility of change, of differentiation, of invention.

Ben Murrell seeks to create objects of light, not just the dislocated, cathedral window lightboxes he crafts so beautifully, but the diffused light that emanates from these objects. He is "...constantly seeking to transform this light to a point where it emerges (as) a sufficiently transparent and diaphanous structure or object, that can be observed or experienced just as a solid structure would be." The glow from the light object intensifies its dislocation from traditional architectural spaces to release its potential from its previous confines of formalistic representation.

Chris Comer and Conan Fitzpatrick utilize light in order to highlight sound to articulate the intersections of gender, voice and embodiment in Western representation. *Untitled (Hello)* explores the duality of body and language. Theatricality is intimately bound to a relationship of tensions between the two: an unstable balancing act in which the two poles unceasingly join and separate. As Josette Feral writes, "The body gives itself over to the other, is aware of itself as other, while remaining the same. Theatricality emerges from it as a play of ambivalence, which makes theatricality scandalous—a scandal seen both at the level of language and of the body. Seen thus, theatricality is that matrix of differentiation-unification, of disjunction-conjunction upon which rest not only theatre but any spectacle, no matter its nature. This differentiation is also seen at the level of voice; the body becomes voice, the voice that is the body."<sup>13</sup>



Post-modernist art performs a plurality of forms, genres and aesthetic criteria that are not static but entwined, interacting, conflicting, and playing off one another. It encompasses the theatricality of representation, where theatricality is the antithesis of "reality". It is inclusive of a multitude that has, not a conceit, but the competence of judging for themselves.<sup>14</sup>

### Chris Comer

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Fried, M., *Art and Objecthood*, 1967,
- <sup>2</sup> Davis, T. and Postlewait, T. (eds), *Theatricality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002, p1.
- <sup>3</sup> Harrison, C. and Wood, P. (ed), *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 1992
- <sup>4</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 111, 700a-d, transl. Taylor, E. A.
- <sup>5</sup> *opcit*
- <sup>6</sup> Balme, C., *Metaphors of Spectacle: Theatricality, Perception and Performative Encounters in the Pacific*, 2001
- <sup>7</sup> Feral, J. 2002. *Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language*. *Substance*, 31: 2 & 3.
- <sup>8</sup> Feral, J. 2002. *Foreword*. *Substance*, 31: 2 & 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Weber, S., *Displacing the Body*, 1996
- <sup>10</sup> Frost, Robert, *For Once, Then, Something*.
- <sup>11</sup> Braine, Selina, 2005
- <sup>12</sup> Da Silva, Jose, 2005.
- <sup>13</sup> Feral, J., *opcit*
- <sup>14</sup> All other quotations are from artists' notes to the author, 2005

Kim Demuth  
Jose Da Silva  
Simon Hine  
Selina Braine  
Ben Murrell  
Chris Comer  
Conan Fitzpatrick

## High Light

27 October - 12 November 2005

Curated by Chris Comer

### *Images:*

1. Selina Braine  
Untitled, 2003  
Fluorescent lighting and text
2. Kim Demuth  
Trace, 2004  
Mixed Media
3. Chris Comer & Conan Fitzpatrick  
Untitled, 2005  
DVD and sound
4. Simone Hine  
Type, 2003  
Installation view at The Farm - Brisbane
5. Jose Da Silva  
Untitled (Unter Männern), 2004  
Ultrachrome Print 30 x 40  
Edition of 5 + 1 AP
6. Ben Murrell  
Untitled (wall relief) #11, 2004  
Perspex, MDF, Enamel, PVC tape, Lights



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