

eX de Medici and Kelly Leonard

Australian Centre For Contemporary Art,
Melbourne

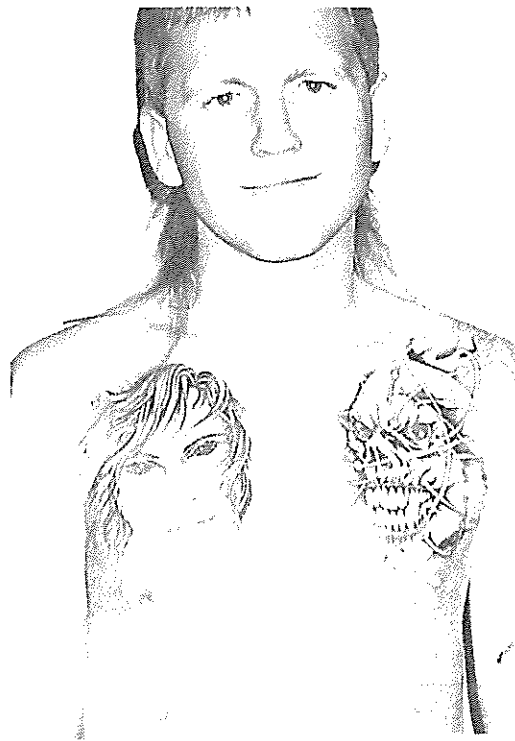
January 24 - March 2, 1997

In tattooist eX de Medici's "60 Heads" and her collaboration with textiles artist Kelly Leonard, "Indelible," a politics of inscribing the body is put

to the needle. Arrayed across a number of different media are eX de Medici's color photocopies of clients with newly acquired tats; a collection of blood-stained tissues (bearing the imprint of eX de Medici's work) hung in sandwich bags; working drawings for tattoo designs; and Leonard's fabric panels. Leonard employs devoré text and Puff paint to blister and wound the fabric, thus aping the scraping and scarring of skin wrought by the tattooist's needle. On each panel she has branded a word or phrase, including "mum said don't bring home a girl with tattoos," "marked two yards of skin," "slut," "hole," "bitch," "cunt," and "poof."

While there is a temptation to read these exhibitions as just another take on the overworked bad-girl orthodoxy, their real strength is in how the works combine to produce an overtly queer rawness. There's no tinkering around the borders of conceptual otherness here, and certainly no academic niceties concerning subaltern cultures to take refuge in. These are simply bad bodies made for bad boys and girls, paraded with guts.

Part of this effect can be explained by the nature of tattooing itself, which is the most literal means of visually claiming a place in culture. Moreover, tattooing is a practice where the subject's



marginal identity is augmented by painful stealth of the tattooist's needle. This is probably why eX de Medici includes the blood-stained tissues, even though she is clearly reticent about interfering in the documentation of her work. Slightly shabby and crudely lit, her clients are proudly posed bearing their new insignia like freshly opened wounds. Their appearance remains lumpen in the end, a non-ironic counterpoint to their museological context.

For Leonard, the tattoo is both literal (she has a few eX de Medici tats) and metaphorical. More to the point, she works in the given conflict between the cruelty of common invective and the "lame" feminine values of traditional textiles. If there is a language game at play here, it's not in the ostensible interpellation invoked by rebukes like "cunt" or "bitch," but in a sort of clandestine lexicon for reappropriating hate words. Like the term queer itself, these words turn into questions of definition and the ownership of language.

Queer politics has always involved the wrestling of language and images from their right-wing and normative contexts. So it is doubly significant here that eX de Medici has included a series of drawings based on the swastika and triskelion (its South African white supremacist variation). It's always possible to argue that the tattooist's stock-in-trade is so historically ridden by Fascist signs that the artist runs the risk of buying into, rather than rebuking them. But that would be too simplistic. While the tattoo is indelible and its imagery suspect, its economy is paradigmatic for how meaning and bodies are never intrinsically given, but made.

Robert Schubert