

# Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

## Education Kit

Bettina Rheims - Modern Lovers

3 July - 15 August 1999

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Born in 1952, Rheims worked as a model and journalist in the 70s, and in 1978 began concentrating on portraiture, working for fashion magazines and as a photojournalist. She is known for her portraits of celebrities and for photographing women.

Rheims's father was a well-known art expert specialising in old paintings and much of her childhood was spent in museums and churches. She talks of her early fascination with religious subjects, with the works of Michelangelo, Botticelli, da Vinci, Fra Angelo and the fresco painters. She says these images are "always in the back of my head." <sup>i</sup>

The idea for **Modern Lovers** took form when a young woman appeared in Rheims' studio with the face of a boy. Rheims spent the next two years searching for suitable models, becoming fascinated by the sense of sexual ambiguity in young people - not so much an exploration of sexuality, but of the meanings and definitions of gender.

The compelling images deal with sexual ambiguity by dramatising trans-gender tensions. The works ask us to consider the instability of gender identity in a diverse group of young adults, and in turn question how identity is socially determined, how it is constructed and experienced.

The works are of exceptional quality. The subjects are posed against a shallow background, toned to match skin-colour, lit in a strong, even light allowing full play of tonal range and a minimum of shadow.

Judy Annear, Curator of Photography, Art Gallery of New South Wales, writes that "while the series reveals a relationship to fashion photography because of some of the clothes worn by some of the subjects....their direct gaze, the fact that they are always named, and the framing, which emphasizes the face and upper body, clearly shifts the reading of the image towards the androgynous nature of the people depicted... Rheims celebrates the artifice inherent in the body itself - her subjects may have been sculptured by the knife or by hormone-treatment: makeup and clothing..... ultimately are secondary. Rheims's photographs depict a fascination with the body as malleable - and artificial in itself - the adornment of previous decades is no longer needed in order to be fashionable." <sup>ii</sup>

**Modern Lovers** is a fashion story that blurs the boundaries between fashion and portraiture just as it blurs the distinction between male and female. Further it shifts between past and present by placing contemporary subjects within a visual framework referencing European painting of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The earliest record of the written use of **Androgyne** in 1552, indicates it to be a being of both sexes; an hermaphrodite, and thus later usage: Androgyny - hermaphroditism - Androgynous: as uniting the (physical) characteristics of both sexes. In fashion terms it indicates the melding or muting of gender-specific items of apparel and appearance.



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## Questions for discussion prior to visit

1. Discuss groups and sub-cultures where gender or human identity is fluid. For example Marilyn Manson. How can this 'look' be described? What is Manson about and what is he trying to express? An androgynous or alien look has been used by many performers and celebrities, musicians in particular - why might this be so?
2. Define maleness and femaleness. Are they defined by dress? Are they defined by the body? What are other codes or signs that define them? Give examples of how our social identity - our sense of who and what we are - is communicated through dress, hairstyle, gesture, expression, voice, ornament, or language?
3. How do these elements reflect our status in regards to class, age, race and gender?
4. Is it more socially acceptable for women to cross-dress than men? Why?
5. European fashion has many examples of styles where one sex, predominantly female, emulates the other. For example waistcoats, T-shirts, trousers, suits, work boots, base-ball caps, short hair, tattoos. Can you think of others? Can you think of any female fashions that have been emulated by men?
6. How is photography different to other art forms? Describe the difference in approach between sculptors, painters and photographers to portraiture.
7. What is a photograph? Is it evidence of reality? Can photographs lie? Do they allow us to see different perspectives, different truths - part of a truth, or neither lies or truth?
8. Discuss the differences formally and aesthetically between colour and black and white photography. Is colour photography more realistic than black and white?
9. Does a photographer dealing with portraiture deal with appearance only? What ideas or information do you think would be useful for a photographer to find out before she starts taking shots? How do you think she may make people feel comfortable before taking their photo? Is it necessary to make them feel comfortable?
10. Discuss the differences between subject, content and context in a work. How can the meaning of a photograph be changed by placing it in a different context? Give examples. How can a change in scale or camera angle change meaning?
11. What are the elements that capture mood, atmosphere or emotion in photos? Discuss the strength and source of light, how subject(s) are placed in the frame, which aspects to emphasize, how to convey status or relationship, focus.
12. List all the ways photographic images are used in our lives. Consider the photographers' intention in the following areas: billboards, the print media, fashion and cookery books, family snaps, police work, museums and galleries, schools, advertising. In which do subject(s) collaborate with the photographer?
13. Can a photograph be more important than its subject matter? Does knowing how a photograph was made increase appreciation of its content? Does a photograph reproduce what was seen by the photographer?



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IDEAS TO CONSIDER AT THE EXHIBITION 'A photograph is an equation of light, space and time'

1. At the time these works were made Rheims was also working as a fashion photographer. Discuss the differences and similarities in fashion photography and **Modern Lovers**. Consider expression, gesture, lighting, intention, titles, composition.
2. This series is called **Modern Lovers** and yet all the subjects appear alone. What is Rheims saying about relationships in the 90s?
3. Rheims described making this work as 'undressing angels' suggesting these models are not of this world, between worlds, ephemeral, difficult to define or grasp, androgynous. Define angel in both a religious and contemporary sense.  
Why are images of angels used so frequently in advertising? Discuss the concept that celebrities have become modern day saints and deities.
4. Is there anything to suggest that these photos were made by a woman artist?
5. Is there a difference between art created by men or women? What is the difference? Consider content, focus, composition, lighting, the concept of the gaze.
6. Would you respond to these photographs differently if they had been made by a male photographer? How and why? Would they have a different meaning?
7. Is Rheims' presence, and her values and attitudes, apparent in the work?
8. The images are either head or upper body shots and this has determined how the exhibition has been divided between the two rooms at ACCA. Why may this be so?
9. The works in the smaller room have been made slightly larger than life size. What effect does the scale have on your response to the works?
10. Why aren't these images full body shots - why has Rheims 'compartmentalized' the body? What other visual forms focus on only part of the body? Why?
11. Locate images of the same model and compare what is revealed in the differing poses. Compare two images where one looks out at you and another looks away - describe the difference. What effect does cropping the top of the models' head have?
13. What is the relationship between the artist's ideas and the way she has explored them aesthetically? For example the use of pictorial space. There is little extraneous space or detail to distract the viewer from focusing on the subjects. What ideas could Rheims be articulating about her subjects in the use of such shallow space?
14. The photos are strongly lit to allow full play of tonal range and a minimum of shadow. Is this photographic clarity at odds with the ambiguity of the subject matter?
15. Rheims spent much of her childhood with her father, an art expert, in museums and churches Rheims describes her work as baroque. Baroque traditionally means absurd or grotesque. Are there elements of this in this work? Consider images by baroque and mannerist painters, (these can be circulated), and discuss similarities.



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