

Sex without synthesis sadly anti-climactic

VISUAL ART DARWIN WITH TEARS

Lyndal Jones. Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), 111 Sturt Street, Southbank, until July 20 (with further work at Anna Schwartz Gallery)
Robert Nelson Reviewer

THE work of Lyndal Jones at ACCA is obscure and obvious at the same time. The multichannel video installations and a cage full of birds are at times hard to follow. The image of a part of a Spitfire in flight, with soundtrack, for example, makes you struggle to find an interpretation.

On another level, Jones' work is a simple, almost reductive, celebration of life and sexuality. The installations are teeming with multiple views of nature, people, movement and erotic monologues that reflect on the images. There's a persistent depiction of the restless expression of hormones, a comprehensive sex drive that riddles nature with an erotic motive.

In one room we're even treated to a human groin with a penis growing stiff, just in case you missed the sexual references in the room before it, with its candid intimate women's talk and stallions with redoubtable members.

Linking sexual practice and nature may seem logical enough, but it belongs to a slightly antiquated romantic discourse, where the erotic is implanted in us as a basic instinct and we act upon it deterministically, as if we are horses.

This could be flattering in one way, but it takes the focus away from the cultural side of sex. Sexual practice is also subject to social conditioning and historical mores; it reflects power structures and is shaped by numerous templates in our fantasy, through myths and representations.

For most contemporary artists, the interest in sex is political. Through feminism and gender theory, we've come to understand that sex isn't merely natural — as if fixed, immutably predestined by the laws of our animal biochemistry — but cultural as well. So what humans get

up to isn't revealed in lessons concerning the birds and the bees. It's also full of cultural preconceptions that stimulate or deny desires and their fulfilment.

But Jones' work is not entirely regressive in this regard, because some of the works tease out the agonised quality of desire. In the *Aqua profunda* room, a woman is seen in portrait format, except that her visage is perturbed by flickers of anxiety. She is sweaty, counting, "in deep water", constantly moving, opening and shutting her lips, which drag against one another over strained breaths.

The reason for her agitation is

explained in the soundtrack: she's a knife-thrower, about to perform a cabaret gig where she lands her projectile blades beside a blindfolded, spread-eagled man. This dangerous form of drawing a man's outline is interpreted in sexual terms: she almost becomes orgasmic, though this dissolves in crying.

At times, the old masters seem to be cited, as when a triptych shows a wild garden and a young woman provocatively takes a fruit from above, revealing the uncanny equivalence between the shape of the fruit and the breast.

But the same triptych also

shows a road by the beach. The three screens each register the same traffic sequences seconds apart, making the experience happen again but in a different space. This repetition is at first

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curiously disorienting, but once you've worked it out, a disappointing fatigue sets in. You're left wondering what the road has to do with the garden and the woman fondling the fruit.

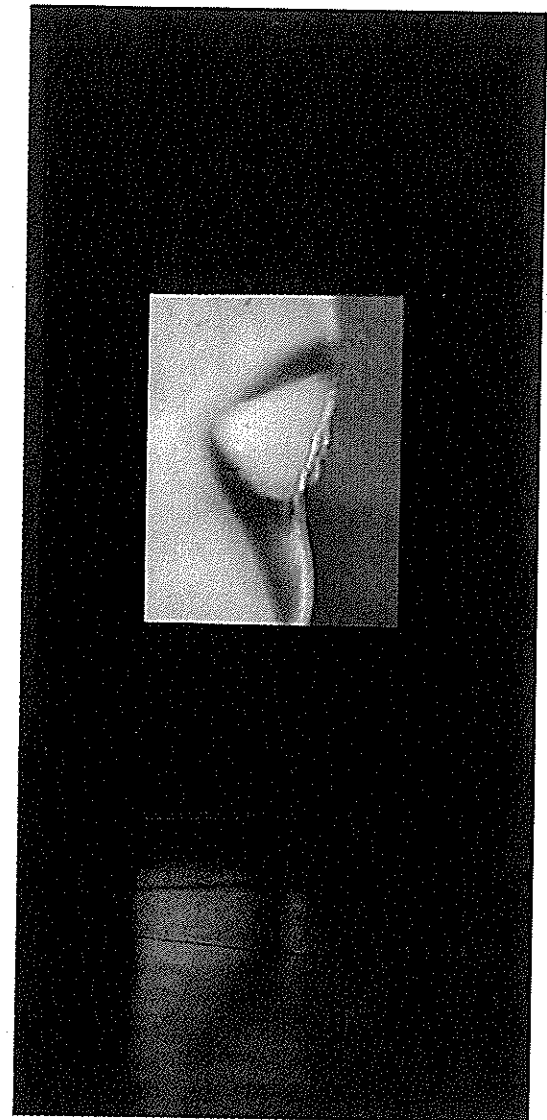
The video in a small booth showing a man, either naked or semi-naked, in a room appointed with a lavish Persian carpet evokes the fraught fantasies that arose between psychiatrist and patient in Freudian therapy. This work buys into the power relationships and improprieties that might arise on the analyst's couch, the problems of identification, seduction and exploitation. But they also invite our voyeurism; we succumb to the titillating narratives, and the field of moral judgement seems remote.

There are clever aspects, such as the set of slide projectors that

throw words up on the ceiling beside a video image of a ship's mast with birds keeping pace with the boat. Like the camera on board, we crane our necks upward to look at the text in the gallery's rigging, as it were. This is quite amusing, as you feel yourself implicated in the action of the small video nearby.

Though rich as decor, the vignettes don't say much to one another; they're either over-direct in equating sex with nature or impenetrable. I came away feeling that this leaves little room for poetic synthesis.

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MAIN PICTURE: Lyndal Jones' *Tears for what was done*. ABOVE: *Deep Water/Aqua Profunda*: Portraits of two women.