

## **Opening remarks for *Palimpsest***

On a recent visit to Adelaide, my wife and I were strolling around town, visiting haunts from student days. One of the places we visited was the site of the old South Australian School of Art in Stanley Street, North Adelaide. The institution no longer exists and the buildings have been replaced by a stand of private villas. Although we didn't overlap, Chris, Belinda and I spent some of our formative years in that place, beginning in 1966 in my case, through to 1977 in Belinda's, with Chris in between. Revisiting the site today can make you feel like a remnant of an earlier culture, a ghost in the landscape. You are confronted by both the architectural and the personal equivalent of a palimpsest.

Literally, a palimpsest involves erasure and rewriting over the same surface. By extension, it becomes superimposing one image upon another, which may partly wipe it out but also interact with it. Further extension takes us into archaeology. In an archaeological record, remnants in a cultural landscape form deposits that cover one another, forming successive layers of history.

The works by Belinda and Chris in this exhibition play on that idea. Overlay is everywhere to be seen. Still photographs and video are laid over one another; images, travel clips, and found footage are overlaid with symbol, text and soundscape. These overlays take us into explorations of history and culture, with often discordant and sometimes evocative results. To illustrate this "archaeographical" method, consider the images of graffiti superimposed over photographs of religious iconography, contrasting contemporary youthful expression and protest with traditional religious devotion and authority. The religious statuary may be of the past, but it still has presence, of course, being both cultural as well as historical, and so we have not only a temporal overlay but also the stamp of the officially prohibited upon the socially sanctioned. This kind of layering in their works produces both opposition and analogy, including contrasts and comparisons between the past and the present, the tension between spirituality and sensuality, between Thanatos and Eros, and contrasts the natural with the transcendental, as well as forming analogies between the transience of the traveller and the impermanence of memory and culture, and the age-old association between sleep and death.

Let us explore this genre in a little more detail through a couple of works. In *Arcadia—Endormie 2*, Belinda presents us with an idyllic mountain landscape containing a rough and weathered wooden cross on a hill in the foreground, overlaid by refined marble statuary, almost certainly funereal, of a young woman in repose—whether asleep or departed is, of course, hard to say. Imposed upon the mountain air is a passage relating to Major Thomas Mitchell's 1836 expedition of the interior of New South Wales and Victoria, extolling the virtues of "this Eden" that he had discovered. As with the landscape in the long reaches of geological time, so the cross in remembered time becomes weathered and worn; and yet it is a Christian symbol of victory over sin and death and decay, which is reflected in the nineteenth century romantic conceptions of enduring form in the woman in marble and the discovery of an Eden. Death is overlaid by the hope of endurance, corruption and decay by repose and timeless purity. The composition does not claim that these perennial human values overcome their adversaries. There is no erasure here. Instead we are left to contemplate the overlay of our ideals of purity and endurance on a natural world.

In the video/music work *She's Free*, Chris layers a group of young women freely dancing with an Albanian flag, black-and-white archival footage of American evangelical men performing an exorcism to free young women from the devil, a woman cloaked in traditional Islamic dress, free from the prying eyes of men, and the sporadic appearance of Jesus. The images are accompanied by a soundscape of drum rhythms and electronically manipulated instrumentation, occasionally punctuated by phone and fax signals and a rotating cross. Line by line, across the bottom of the screen runs a Chinese poem, a paean to the beauty of the emperor's concubine. Two intertwining themes emerge from this layering. The most obvious theme is freedom beginning with the title, *She's Free*, a line repeatedly used by the preacher as he supposedly frees her from the possession of the devil. This shocking treatment, ironically in the name of freedom from demonic control, contrasts with the underlay of the playful free dance of the Albanian women, which contrasts again with the effacement of the woman in the burka, so as to be free from the male gaze. The overlay of these diverse images thereby problematizes the concept of freedom, particular for women, albeit that some of the associated practices may well be seen as problematic themselves. Intersecting with this theme is the notion of the gaze, again particularly in the ways that women are regarded by men. The young women dancing are being observed by the videographer, of whom they eventually become aware; the woman being exorcised by men is before a large audience; the woman in the burka is hidden from the gaze of men, and even the consort "lightens for ever the Emperor's eye".

Various crossovers between the two themes suggest themselves. The freedom of the woman in the burka from the gaze of men is purchased by relinquishing the freedom to show herself in public. Is that a price she is freely willing to pay, or is it a social imposition? Given her faith, we may presume that the young woman being exorcised wishes to be free of what she thinks of as demonic possession. Arguably, however, the beliefs and social controls of her faith group are preventing her from breaking free of a pernicious and crippling superstition. In both of these cases, of course, we are invited to think about religious beliefs and practices, particularly in regard to the evangelical Christian footage (which is the longest and most confronting in the work) that is reinforced by the revolving cross and images of Jesus. The commands, exhortations and commentary of the exorcist broadcast to the gathering of the faithful are, however, counterbalanced by a secular musical soundtrack and the occasional intrusion of phone and fax signals. The banality of the latter presents a striking, even shocking, contrast to the confronting images that they punctuate. Yet such layers, incongruently spliced together, form the strata of our world.

I know that both of you, Chris and Belinda, have been battered by some storms in recent times and it would be surprising if that did not find expression in your art. As we go on in life, we inevitably have to deal with its difficulties and art is one way of working things through. It is a testament to you as a couple that you have done so together. As we walk around this exhibition we cannot help but be struck by the creative interplay between your bodies of work. On that note, it only remains for me to thank you for asking me to say a few words on the official opening of your exhibition and to wish you every success with it.