

JULIE RRAP: SOFT TARGETS

Blair French

Julie Rrap continues to place herself firmly in the centre of the picture. For well over two decades she has been utilising her own body at the heart of her work in order to confront and play with the sometimes determining, sometimes uncertain gaze of her audience; to pick-away at, reveal and unravel much of the fundamentally masculine underpinnings of Western art; to explore the expressive potential of the body both as persistent trace and reminder of the basic fact of her being in the world and as a vehicle of imaginative flight; and perhaps more obliquely in recent work to track the relationships between changing photographic technologies, the body and experiences of selfhood.

Right through Rrap's practice, from the beginning of the 1980s to the present day, we can bear witness to a concerted exploration of female selfhood, ranging from its codification in masculine structures of social formation through history (and their imbrication within and continued drive by representation) through to experiences of unique individual consciousness, subjectivity, desire and the like. Rrap's work consistently travels back and forth between exploration of communal states of womanhood and the driving experience of the individual, from the public to the private realm and back again, perhaps seeking that point where the these poles might at least appear to dissolve momentarily into a singular state of being.

Whilst the photographic image has remained as core conceptual and representational touchstone for Rrap's practice, she has incorporated it within and worked across a wide range of media. She has produced installations of multiple photographs as well as quite self-contained images; large photographic prints that reassemble photographic fragments of the artist's body and expressive painted surfaces; combinations of photographic and painted imagery on canvas and free-standing screens; images in photo-emulsion on a variety of surfaces and often repeated modular forms (boxes, chairs, blinds); various 'sculptural' objects (body moulds, hand rails and towels embedded with human hair, kinetic ballet shoes); video work; public art work; and digital prints. Specific series or bodies of work frequently combine more than one of these elements. Right across this breadth of media Rrap has consistently foregrounded the materiality of the work and a palpable sense its spatial and tactile relationship to the body (both represented and that of the viewer). For all her investigation of photography as a culturally encoded system of representation, Rrap also returns again and again to the tactile character (or metaphor) of its indexicality—its condition as a direct imprint of nature—in particular mirroring this with sculptural forms moulded, for example, from her own body, producing sets of negative traces of its absent presence.

For the past five or so years Rrap has been working ever more closely with digital rendering and modelling techniques seeking the creation of images that provoke our imaginary capacities. In *A-R-MOUR*, for example, her 2000 exhibition featuring ten large colour images of herself assuming iconic feminine identities from cinema history, Rrap utilised digital modelling techniques to distort or exaggerate those elements of the images, scenarios or personas that have most lodged in public consciousness. The practice

of representation sits at the surface of these works, just as it did so potently in her photography/paint/collage rephotographed workings of images of women in European art undertaken through the 1980s. Artifice concentrates the rhetorical emphasis of the work – itself to a large extent an examination of the representational artifice upon which feminine identity is publicly built.

Just as some of Rrap's *A-R-MOUR* figures appeared to liquefy and digitally melt into or merge with their settings, her *Fleshstones* works of 2003 strangely welded the body to its environment. Here the artist digitally wrapped human skin around large rocks photographed in the Australian landscape (the skin of one male per boulder). Taking her cue from the sculptural work of Henry Moore merging human and other organic forms, Rrap produced images of a disturbingly peopled land, with large boulders now bearing wrinkles, blemishes, hairs, nipples and belly buttons evoking simultaneous and contradictory allusions and responses. The images presented human forms as both belonging to yet appearing hideously foreign to the bush, farmland or beach. Landforms were anthropomorphised, yet almost death-like – bodies reduced to limbless torsos, lumps of flesh perched precariously upon the land, or sinking into it, threatening to collapse in on them.

In a sense Rrap's use of digital imaging technologies constitutes an extension of her earlier practice both in so much as she continues to produce works in which the body is fragmented, distorted, reassembled and always pictured in expressive, performative terms and in the manner in which her digital works maintain her consistent interest in debunking notions of visual truth and order as played out in photography. Rrap has always toyed with the etiquettes of representation—the media categories of painting, sculpture and the like—to cast in relief both the material forms of and foundations to certain quite specific acculturated belief systems (or systems of social convention). Digital imaging technologies appear to simply allow her to intensify the pictorial sense of a world where the fantastical merges with a startling, momentary sense of the real, so granting the images their purchase on both imagination and experience.¹

Soft Targets (2004) is a suite of 13 large scale digitally manipulated photographs featuring the artist naked in a range of dynamic, contorted poses, often as if caught in a moment of gymnastic action, tumbling and twisting within a space that is indeterminate other than for its articulation by the often equally arresting shadow cast by the body under studio lighting. (Of course, the shadow is as subject to digital recasting as the body of the artist, only heightening its potential as an autonomous vehicle for expression, or a form of doppelganger.) Again the work is in part triggered by or recalls an art-historical reference point, in this case the work of painter Francis Bacon with his vital contortions of the human body acting as a projective theatre of the artist's psyche. Returning to an allusion to the female nude and posing herself again, as in much of her work from the 1980s, in the position of the traditional artist's model—the figure through and on whom a masculine subjectivity could find and give expression to its being—Rrap asserts her physical image as visual means of self-assertion.

The defiant attitude of this self-assertion, however, is mirrored by a sense of vulnerability, even threat to the pictured body. Just as with her photographic work of the 1980s, in *Soft Targets* Rrap responds to the critical equation of the gaze—the act of looking—with fundamentally masculine subject positions of

power, control, even violence developed in feminist poststructural theory. Rrap pictures her body in poses suggesting on occasion quite extreme moments of action, even physical distortion. Indeed, it is difficult to discern just exactly where the body has been further stretched, twisted and distorted by digital manipulation – where a play of light, action and analogue process ends and digital reworking begins. It is extremely difficult to make out the relation of the pictured body to surfaces or three-dimensional space. This effect of unstable and skewed viewpoints makes it difficult to get a solid visual fix on the figure in the photographs, to lock it into a discernable spatial relationship to us as viewers. Rrap evades entrapment in the gaze. And with her face rarely visible it is as if we are blocked out from the world of the images, denied access to the subjectivity of the figure at the same time as it also resists objectification within our own.

That is one reading at least.

Conversely this very sense of the artist absorbed in her own expressive actions within the images can convey an impression of her entrapment, of her being available to the objectifying effect of the gaze. She does not ‘look’ back. Her frenzied action and movement might be construed here as attempt to break the confines of the pictorial space (of the viewer’s gaze). Just as her earlier title *A-R-MOUR* conveyed a double reference to both the romantic cliché and seduction inherent in feminine cinematic stereotypes and to the idea of armouring or protecting oneself (of the adoption, even appropriation of such stereotypes as a form of emotional armour), so the title *Soft Targets* ensures that the assertiveness of the body in movement is doubled by a reading of its desecration within violence. Rrap’s ‘soft’ body, really simply is basis in flesh, is target of (or subject to) the hard violence of technology, equated in part to the gaze.

Again Rrap is working with a long-standing metaphor; after all it was Susan Sontag in the 1970s who most memorably equated the camera with weaponry and the act of photographing (thus immobilizing) a subject with the act of shooting. But this specific metaphor is clouded by the act of digital manipulation of images – by the fact that the body here has not simply ‘been shot’ by the camera but rather surveyed, downloaded and subjected to digital reordering. The wider allusion then is to technology’s more general assault on corporeal experience and the body in general, ranging from the analgesic to the outright violent, as well as to the use of language in attempts to ease the dehumanising condition of technology. In this regard specific reference is made to the violence wrought on the body by high-tech weaponry through individual work titles drawn from euphemistic military terminology associated with gun fire: for example *Boat Tail*, *Fish-tailing* and *Flyer*.² Again, the function and character of the terminology here is most important—the attempt to disguise horrors wrought via our use of technology through this banal language—rather than any literal conflation of weaponry and camera lens. After all, when computer systems are informing, guiding and operating weapon systems, technology’s implication within the acts of horror we inflict upon each other extends far beyond the immediate killing of individual subjects by individual weapons.

Soft Targets is perhaps a slightly unusual set of work when considered in light of dominant trends in current photo-based contemporary art practice. It bears no narrative content and any social reference made by Rrap through the work is oblique and metaphoric rather than literally pictured. There are

obviously no gestures towards the documentary or towards social anthropology as impulses. Nor are the images in any way locked into those conceptions of beauty and the photogenic that underpin media and general visual culture. Digital imaging culture feeds into both structure and appearance of the images, but they do not project a particularly digital aesthetic. Rather these are quite visceral and expressive images. Indeed, *Soft Targets* is a particularly sensual set of work. (In yet another subtle evocation of materiality—of the tangible form and feeling of the images—the ‘softness’ of *Soft Targets* is further heightened by Rrap’s use of textured rag paper—this is in contrast to the hard sheen of Rrap’s lexcen-mounted *A-R-MOUR* works.) The images’ experiential elements and wider fields of reference all ripple out from the body of the artist as both subject and authoring subjectivity. The images operate fundamentally via sensation – they are sensate works utilising digital technology in tandem with the body to create visceral as well as perceptual sensations in the viewer.

In this we can see how *Soft Targets* extends the performative impulse of much of Rrap’s work in the 1980s, which whilst appearing to operate most immediately as a pictorial intervention into the representational structures determining the picturing of women through history consistently sought expressive means by which to utilise the body as a form of mouthpiece for the female subject. In this later work, however, Rrap works with more ‘youthful’ representational technologies, arguably bearing less art-historical baggage, in order to seek ways to project a state of feminine imagination via the body. There’s little doubt, nevertheless, that this work maintains her long-term, head-on engagement with the constraining codifications of the feminine subject in art history, popular culture and social convention as they linger long after the supposed exposure of their fabrication (by feminist modes of postmodernism and deconstruction) within the gender-biased systems of Western society and culture.

Blair French is Associate Director, Performance Space, Sydney.

Julie Rrap’s *Soft Targets* work was exhibited at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 14 October – 13 November 2004 and ARC One Gallery, Melbourne, 5 – 30 April 2005.

¹ This is perhaps no more strongly felt than in *Stepping Out* (2001), Rrap’s Hermanns Art Award winning image featuring the lower legs and feet of the artist digitally moulded in the form of high heel shoes.

² *Boat tail*: Bullet of tapered base or truncated conical base design, which raises the ballistic coefficient factor by reducing the aerodynamic drag, providing greater stability at subsonic velocities. *Fish-tailing*: The result of the bullet base collapsing in the target, causing the bullet to bend and deviate from course. *Flyer*: A shot considerably outside a normal group on target, not representative of the rifle’s or load’s potential accuracy. From glossary of terms supplied by artist, ‘Julie Rrap: *Soft Targets*’, exh. room notes, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 2004.