



360 Degree Self-Portrait 2009
digital video
10 minutes 42 seconds

JULIE RRAP — OFF BALANCE

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Julie Rrap has come full circle returning to her place of birth to exhibit three recent video-based works. Since the early 1980s, the photographic medium – both still and moving – has been witness to Rrap's ongoing unpacking of the representation of the female body. She has fractured the dichotomy of creator-representer/created-represented by positioning herself both in front of and behind the camera and by constructing imagery that playfully disrupts that relationship further. She separates herself from herself by depersonalising the female subject that appears in each image. Discussing her work, she uses the pronouns 'her' and 'she' to refer to the figure rather than 'I' or 'me'. It is a feminine body that is at once manipulated and self-determining. With this double agency, she poses questions and opens up ambiguities more than she prescribes answers.

Performing in front of the lens, Rrap initiates a dialogue about female archetypes and icons, often employing absurdist hyperbole. Two figures that appear in the Lismore exhibition, *Off Balance*, are

Marilyn and Medusa – idealised sex symbol and emasculating gorgon, respectively. They appear either explicitly (Marilyn) with Rrap appropriating attributes such as dress or implicitly (Medusa) by iconographic association and invocation of name. There is, however, another female icon that has a consistent presence in Rrap's body of work. This is of course Rrap herself. While assuming many guises, she does not disguise herself. Her appearance is unmistakable and images of her face and body over the years have become a force of their own in contemporary visual culture in Australia. In a career that spans thirty years, this recognition also becomes a story of how the body changes (predictably) over time or how, as in the case of the enduringly-youthful Rrap, it defies our expectations. By repeatedly capturing her own image in an analytical way, she has created a figure of herself that subverts the imperative for more aesthetically-driven, standardised portrayals of the feminine in art history, mythology and popular culture. Rrap weaves her own way and pleases herself.



<< *Outerspace No.10* 2010
digital print on archival rag paper

< *Outerspace No.7* 2010
digital print on archival rag paper

Escape Artist: Castaway 1 2009 >
digital print on archival rag paper

Escape Artist: Castaway 3 2009 >>
digital print on archival rag paper

Entering the exhibition, the viewer first encounters *360 Degree Self-Portrait* (2009), a large projection of a short, endlessly looping video. It is a stark frontal depiction of Rrap. The relationship of the camera to the face is fixed. We see her head only, closely framed and hair pulled back, her pale face against a black background. She is wearing simple makeup – lipstick, eyeliner. It is one of the few instances in her entire oeuvre where Rrap has offered her face to her camera when not in the guise of someone else. It is certainly the only example of this in recent years. In *360 Degree Self-Portrait*, the face is fully objectified like a specimen for the viewer's inspection. Rrap is relentlessly herself as she appears in the world beyond the camera lens in all respects except for the hair. Normally worn loose, in the video it is tightly tied back, invisible beyond the roots whose blackness becomes continuous with the void by which she is framed.

What takes place in *360 Degree Self-Portrait* is not obvious. Some invisible external force is at work.

Over the two minutes of the video's duration, the face slowly distorts asymmetrically on one side and then the other. At first it is as though she is about to smile. Then the lines around the mouth and eyes deepen further as though she will cry or perhaps vomit – something distressing and involuntary is taking place. The colour of the flesh reddens then loses its flush. A small storm brews across her face then calm returns without the storm ever breaking, as though the emotional realm – in restraint – had taken hold. But it turns out to be neither meteorological nor emotional. Off camera, Rrap and her video recording device are strapped to a large turntable mounted to a wall. Together they rotate the full 360 degrees of the 'clock's face' against gravity. The forces are physical and Rrap is off balance. Because camera and model travel in tandem, it appears that both are stationary and upright. Armed with this knowledge of her process, we can see that the face is at its most gestural when it is fully inverted. It is also at this moment when the grimace is at its most Medusan. With its tracing of a circle and strong chiaroscuro contrasts of flesh

against blackness, *360 Degree Self-Portrait* recalls the famous portrait of the decapitated Medusa by Caravaggio (1597), a startling female countenance that is both weapon and shield. Both images – Rrap's and Caravaggio's – are a long way from the feminine ideal. While Caravaggio represents a monstrous and untameable and repellent femininity, Rrap presents it as something that is also beyond our control, but which is ambiguous, mortal and inspiring of our empathy.

Moving through the exhibition, we enter an installation, *Escape Artist: Castaway* (2009), in the main room where we again encounter the gruesome 'figure' of Medusa. Here she brushes up against an unlikely ally or perhaps arch nemesis in the form of Marilyn equipped with her excess of femininity. A drift of sand has accumulated in one corner of the room and a loose timber structure in the shape of a splintered raft with mast and sail is marooned upon it. Against this situation a video is projected. Rrap, wearing a calico copy – a blank canvas version –



of the famous Monroe 'it' dress, moves disjointedly around building the raft. The video is an animation, a crude sequence of still images. The large gap between each frame disrupts the passage of smooth time, opening up the difference between the time of the viewer's space and that of the Marilyn figure to which Rrap plays host.

A further temporal disjuncture exists between Marilyn c.1955 and the icon of European art history from the first half of the Nineteenth Century around which she moves. Although it has only a ghost presence, Rrap's raft is inheritance from one of the great paintings in the Louvre, Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819). Nothing prepares you for the experience of seeing that painting for the first time. Its gargantuan scale addresses the horrific enormity of the tragedy that it describes, a story of great human suffering – starvation, cannibalism – at the hands of incompetent authority. Gericault's painting morbidly depicts larger than life survivors and cadavers. Medusa is present here only by association of her name. In Rrap's work,

the figure of Monroe tends to the splintered coffin of the Medusa, a dry, bone-like version of Gericault's raft. Locked into a dance of tragedy of a different kind, eventually Marilyn removes her iconic dress – as everyone has always wanted her to do – and ties it to the raft's mast as a sail, objectifying and making practical the thing that was previously so beguiling. (Rrap similarly unpacked the Monroe dress in a glass pattern version she made to accompany her *A-R-MOUR* (2000) series of photographs.) She then disappears off camera without revealing anything.

In the final room we find a third video projection. Like the other two works in the exhibition, *Outerspace* (2010) is monochromatic. The pictorial field is transected by many straps of black elastic in a pliable, three-dimensional grid full of irregular angles. Rrap negotiates this fractured but mutable constructivist space dressed in a generic black leotard, climbing through it, forging her way. Where she is situated in front of or behind each marker of physical space is difficult to judge. Time advances

erratically. It is impossible to pinpoint where she exists in relation to each axis as dimensions splinter and drop out along with fragments of her body with each advancing frame. She is dislocated but, by her movement, she works the malleable space, making it up.

Rrap's family left Lismore when she was an infant so the town has no significance for her as a place of memory or experience but it *is* symbolic as a beginning, a place to which she has now returned via the circuitous route of her life to date. She brings with her her own embodiment of femininity which is neither one thing nor fixed in the form of a large body of work about a body – her, she – that has been the medium for playing out a game of Rrap's own invention. Her game where feminine icons are given a new spin and feminine agency destabilises the given system.

Amanda Rowell, 2011