





15 June ~ 9 July 2005

Rachel Brown, Sara Givins & Jacquelyn Greenbank

The second second

A-MUSING ON ONCE UPON A TIME

by Sera Jensen

"THERE is today an interest in narratives, on the telling of stories."

Once Upon A Time presents the work of three artists who are connected by a fascination with fictionality, whimsy and desire. In celebration of multiple truths and copious lies, the artworks slip away from fixed readings and playfully entice the viewer to project their own stories and daydreams into the experience. For the artists – Rachel Brown, Sara Givins and Jacquelyn Greenbank – art (and the generative process involved in making art) offers a site to indulge and explore imaginative possibilities and fictional characters.

WHIM-WHAM

Placed on the floor at each end of the gallery space, familiarity is complicated by augmentation, scale and costume. Greenbank's Raleigh 20 fit for a Queen and Brown's pink pony ready to rock your world – these two vivacious whim-whams play dress-ups. A sense of childhood leisure is implicit in the works. Evoking thoughts of playtime in the rumpus room or riding down to the park after school as fast as you can, wind in your hair. The literal functionality of each object suggests the potential for travel and movement; to ride the bike or to mount the pony is to be carried on a journey that traverses the slippage between reality and wonderland.

Significantly, both works maintain a sense of the absent riders. This activates the mind's ability to compensate for what it perceives as a 'lack' (according to common expectations and understandings). A latent stirring occurs in the mind as we project ghostly riders onto the objects, our mind creates characters of its own volition. In a seductive *fait a compli*, reality is suspended and you have been taken, a couple of seconds have been lost in a hallucinogenic fancy – an abduction by benevolent play-nymphs. You awaken with the startling realisation – I am in a gallery looking at art and I have just experienced a moment of PLEASURE – flushed face with guilt, and a betrayal of distant, rational, objective JUDGEMENT.

*ROCKER-BYE-BABY

Mona the Moaning Pony, Rachel Brown's upsized rocking horse (for your pleasure) is candyfloss pink. The paint surface is so glossy and seamless it reads as plastic. Adorned with black, studded leather reins, saddle and a pink satin love-heart detail on the seat, this pony is reminiscent of sex shop fetish while referencing other kinds of toy-referencing-objects ("signs referring to other signs") from the realm of erotic adult fantasy. This rocking horse is built to tickle your fancy, and with stimulating surprise, the saddle vibrates underneath the rider.





**COLOURING-IN

It is refreshing that when walking into this show you are first struck by an unfamiliar, disarming and delightful use of colour. Givins's flat, stylised images splash bright, glossy, saturated colour everywhere in sharp contrast to the 'just pretend I'm not here' stark white walls. Similarly, each artist employs colour with an exuberant "jouissance". It is an assault on the eyes, an optical agitation – a happy eyesore. There are no strings attached, it is a delicious moment of sensuous and sensory experience. We are allowed to have those you know, when we look at art. In fact, the contemporary 'now' attitude in postmodernity affords us this luxury in its liberating unburdening of the modern neurotic search for meaning behind, below, above, beyond what appears.

"...suspicion, inherent in much modern thought...continual hunt for the underlying plan or rationale, the hidden plot or curriculum, to explain the vicissitudes and disorder of what manifestly appears...A postmodern attitude involves a suspicion of suspicion...focuses on the surface...an openness to the differences and nuances of what appears...a willingness to accept things as they are on the surface rather than to search...for Deeper Meanings." 4

EAT MY WORDS

Givins's long-standing love affair with literature and poetics has been instrumental in past and present works. The written or spoken word marks the generation of a visual expression for Givins. Designed specifically for The Physics Room space, representative and abstract forms consume the walls and a select area of the ceiling. Princesses, birds, flowers and drips float in vibrant, glossy colour landscapes transporting words and whispers. In the construction of a localised mythology where the heroine turns tormentor, Givins's tragedy alludes to the fictitious formation of the Canterbury terrain. Edibleland, the fairytale Givins has created is the blueprint for the production of vinyl-cut graphics that physically carry and visually illustrate the story. The utilisation of sign writing techniques reference Pop Art's debunking of 'High vs Low Art' and its manipulation of methods traditionally relegated to advertising and mass production.

In the story, themes of greed, desire and tragedy befall our princess as she gobbles up all she can see. Givins suggests that within destruction there is also the potential for creation. In repentance the princess's tearsflow in biblical quantities. All she has eaten, she cries out, forming the braided rivers of the landscape.



**WATCHING ROYALTY

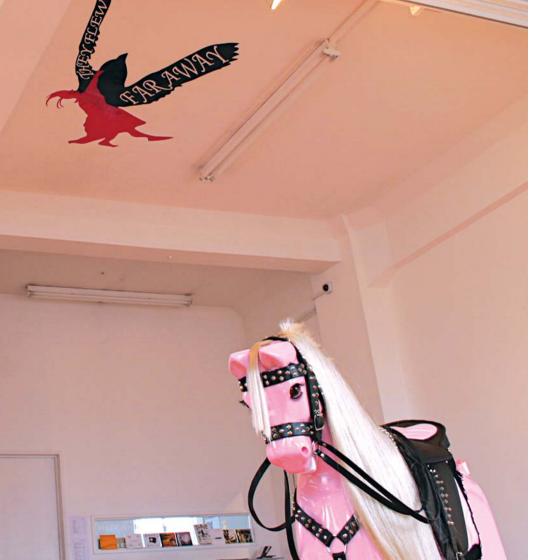
A transformed Raleigh 20 stands proudly to attention in a spectacular display of crochet prowess and celebration of kitsch. The Royal Raleigh Watchers is a further visual development in a fictitious "post-millennial Oueen's Royal Tour of New Zealand" that has preoccupied Greenbank's recent practice. Striking in primary colours, every inch of the bike and attached helmet is covered in Union Jack motifs and colour-coordinated detailing. The effect is flawless-mesmerising, obsessive, mind-boggling - how did she manage to cover those seat springs? No surface is left untouched or vulnerable to the discriminating, pedantic eye that checks underneath the mudguards.

*MIXED UP

The application of cut-and-paste knit fabrics and crochet work is analogous to the collage of artistic references this work engages. For example, the Duchampian precedent of everyday objects as art, a Surrealist transformation or subversion of the object, Pop Art's appropriation of popular symbols, High Art vs. Kitsch, and Craft and Folk techniques, are all manifest in this work. This mixing together of stylistic approaches exemplifies the postmodern context in which the work operates.

"Where modernists hoped to unearth universals of diversity and contradiction. A postmodern approach to art thus rejects the distinctions between Low and High Art forms. It rejects rigid genre boundaries and favours eclecticism, the mixing of ideas and forms. Partly due to this rejection, it promotes parody, irony and playfulness." ⁵

To assert irony onto Greenbank's work would be a misunderstanding. This bike and its maker's attitude are certainly not laced with a mocking sarcasm. Parody? Perhaps. Playfulness, most definitely. Enter a nostalgic reverie of Nana's toilet roll covers, tea cosies, 'Cloth-Kit' mail order clothes and homespun magic. Greenbank appropriates handicraft, while simultaneously acknowledging a sense of value and an appreciation for traditional origins and 'underdog aesthetics', an attitude rarely found in the overwhelming cynicism of many young contemporary artists.



THE END

Whilst one could apply all manner of theoretical and psychological propositions to the artworks in *Once Upon A Time*, the strength of the work lies in the arresting quality of its surface. The immediacy of rapture and thrill found in the experience of the work unites the artists approaches. And we do not have to seek to undermine the enchantment to be found within beauty (rears its 'ugly' head) and PLEASURE, nor should we feel shame at the urge to enjoy an artwork for *what it appears to be*.

"The image, the appearance, is everything; the appearance has become the essence." 6

- ¹ Kvale, Steinar. 'Themes of Postmodernity' from *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader*, ed. W. T. Anderson. London: HarperCollins-Fontana, 1996. Pg 21
- ² Ibid. See endnote 2. Kvale ntoes: "In a world of media, the contrast between reality and fantasy breaks down and is replaced by a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs. What remains is signs referring to other signs, texts referring to other texts." Pg 19
- ³ 'At a crossroads: Peter Plagens on the "postartist", *ArtForum*, Feb 2005. Plagens notes: "A postmodern approach to art thus rejects the distinction between low and high art forms. It rejects rigid genre boundaries and favors eclecticism, the mixing of ideas and forms. Partly due to this rejection, it promotes parody, irony and playfulness, commonly referred to as jouissance by postmodern theorists."
- ⁴ Ibid. See endnote 1. Pg 24
- ⁵ Ibid. See endnote 3.
- 6 Ibid. See endnote 3.

List of Works:

Rachel Brown, Mona the Moaning Pony, 2005, mixed media

Sara Givins, Edibleland, 2005, vinyl (dimensions variable)

Jacquelyn Greenbank, The Royal Raleigh Watchers, 2005, wool, card, Raleigh 20

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