

Helen Gory Galerie catalogue essay, May 2006

'Flying Visitation'

*There was a little girl/ Who had a little curl/ Right in the middle of her forehead.
/ And when she was good/ She was very, very good/ But when she was bad, she
was horrid.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Working from her now characteristic digital manipulations of old master imagery and kitsch figurines or dolls, Aerfeldt paints with a consuming intensity and a palette that resonates with rich colour. In her latest body of work Flying Visitation, Aerfeldt inserts a painted rendition of a ceramic horse figurine into reproductions of opulent portraits by Anthony van Dyck and Nicolas de Largillierre. Van Dyck's aristocratic seventeenth century Englishwomen Lady Elizabeth Thimbleby and Dorothy, Viscountess Andover are groomed to a heightened degree, portrayed with an elegance that was a feature of the court of Charles I, their ringleted hair meticulously arranged in tight curls across the forehead. The figure of the horse cunningly displaces that of Cupid in the van Dyck original, with a degree of circumspection (note the unaltered positioning of the women's hands) that is a departure. For in Aerfeldt's paintings, interlopers such as the doll duo Wanda and Wilhelm -who annexed the central position, occupied by the Christ-child in El Greco's Adoration of the Shepherds (c. 1605) - have generally demonstrated little regard for niceties of scale or composition in the original artwork.

By placing her (male) ceramic horse with its curled forelock, decorated with a bow, into a seventeenth century painting of aristocratic women, Aerfeldt appears to be alluding to the curious seventeenth century phenomenon of the lovelock (or liefdelok and cadenette - to supply its Dutch and French equivalents). In another (more flamboyant) painting of the same period, van Dyck depicts the unmarried Henri II de Lorraine, Duc de Guise (c. 1634) holding an ostrich plumed hat and wearing a steel gorget (throat guard) beneath a lavish lace collar. Of greatest interest however, is his lovelock; a curled section of hair notably longer than the rest, which is draped over his left shoulder and embellished with red and white ribbons (typically favours from women friends). Needless to say, enormous effort was required to cultivate the required effect of cavalier insouciance. In a discussion of the comparable lovelock sported by the artist Rembrandt in Self

Portrait in a Gorget (c. 1629), Simon Schama observes that 'flamboyantly long hair was being singled out by the Calvinist preachers as an especial abomination in the sight of the Lord.'¹

Groomed hair - like the intricate coiffures of Aerfeldt's Baby owl is caught up in tangles, but whispers a soft song (2005) or van Dyck's aristocratic subjects - simultaneously signals vanity and a conformity to the dominant society (or at least the appearance of it), although as Schama has indicated any aberration, a stepping outside the perceived norm, has the capacity to arouse ire. By the time of de Largillierre's Family Portrait (c.1730) - painted during the reign of Louis XV - the wearing of wigs had become de rigeur and the public mask (persona) was complete.

Aerfeldt's earlier paintings referred to her Estonian heritage and she grew up in an environment that expected adherence to strict codes of behaviour and personal appearance. Old master paintings, royalty, the church are all symbols of authority and the viewer senses the liberating glee, with which Aerfeldt subverts their supremacy, mingling high and low culture and conferring irreverent titles on the resultant works.

Wendy Walker

Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, London: Allen Lane, 1999, p. 8

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Wendy Walker is an Adelaide-based writer and art critic. In 2004 her monograph *Beautiful Games* on photo-based artist Deborah Paauwe was published by Wakefield Press. Throughout 2006 she was the Samstag writer-in-residence at the University of South Australia.