

‘Regarding the Gaze’ by Melinda Rackham

There is an implied wonder, almost a sense of romance to the gaze. As we look with steady intent, fixing our eyes with studious attention, eager to see, anticipating surprise. But when does a gaze shift from gentle admiration to a scrutiny that causes discomfort; to a glare that stares you down; or an ogle that becomes a lascivious leer?

This gaze of hardened intention, the surveillance of ownership and objectification of power is the gaze that predominates six centuries of western culture. From the canon of art history populated by naked women and grand estates, sexualised and capitalised property of male patrons and viewers; to googling contemporary spectacles of media consumption, this gaze, termed by British filmmaker Laura Mulvey in 1975 the *Male Gaze*,¹ is normalised and woven into the fabric of our society.

It's a given that *Venus* was born fully formed yet unclothed on a half shell in Sandro Botticelli's 1484 painting, or that Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* [1814], was criticised for her anatomical incorrectness rather than the work's celebration of sexual slavery. No one seems to question that the ladies have their kit off while the men picnic in their Sunday best in Manet's 1863 *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*; or indeed that when Jordon Wolfson's *Female Figure* [2014] (a seductively dancing, dirt-scuffed animatronic woman dressed in a negligée and thigh-high vinyl boots) catches our viewers eye, it is supposed to readdress the violence of objectification?

Despite multiple waves of feminisms crashing into the rocky constructs of culture, an internalised male gaze persists. Its most prescient evolution is in emergent artificially intelligent surveillance software that categorises and classifies humans. Ghanaian-American computer scientist Joy Buolamwini termed this algorithmic bias the *Coded Gaze*², one where embedded views are propagated by those who code systems - usually young white males. That AI software consistently misidentifies women and often does not even recognize women of colour has alarming repercussions for legal and human rights.

On other fronts intersectionality, interruptions and inversions have resituated women, people of colour, those of plural gender identities and abilities to be active participants who relinquish the social power embedded in the act of looking to a circle of many gazes - other, gay, black, asian, trans, queer, crip. Filmmaker Joey Soloway proposed in 2016 that perhaps a *Female Gaze*³ should seek to destroy all gazes, to become a multitude, undivided, a non-gaze, a gaze of truth, one that makes ways for being interconnected with human and nonhuman others.

Messing with the structures and strictures of the gaze is the common ground of painters Chris Aerfeldt and Chelsea Lehmann. Through disruption and distortion, contradiction and parody, exuberance and exaggeration they shift the relationship between the viewed and the viewer from a streaming spectator sport to an ongoing and engaging conversation. Using scale, sensation and surprise their works redress asymmetrical representation of the female form in art and culture as an eternally eroticised female nude.

Their oeuvres are filled with herstories, heroines and kick-ass sheros. Nothing is sacred as they scour the canon to subvert scenes from old masters; scrutinising cultural artefacts, classical antiquity, the late Baroque, Dutch genre painting, the Heidelberg School and post-World War I Suprematism. Goddesses and gods of Greek mythology, along with saints and sinners from Catholic doctrine, are harvested for revision. Whether naked or clothed their women own their bodies, stand audaciously, celebrating their intellectual and sexual power. They stare back at us demanding 'don't just look at my façade, my fracture – see my being, know my possibilities.'

Lehmann pays homage to the sensuous and dynamic eroticism of frescoes in her intensively layered, waxed and sanded *Modern Love in Pompeii (I, II, III & Leda)*, while delighting in destabilising the gaze in *Sondage* and *Brisé*. Riffing off Reni's *The Penitent Magdalene* [1635], she paints, then effaces, obscures, overpaints and scratches back the image to challenge habituated readings. Urging her imagery to the point of obliteration, teetering on dissolution, Lehmann allows us, the viewer, to regaze a fraction before it becomes unreadable.

Reinvented throughout history, Mary Magdalene has had a succession of fantasies projected onto her sexuality, devotion and repression. Various a prostitute, the 13th disciple and feminist icon, Lehmann focuses on connecting us with her humanity, her sensuous embrace and affirming gestures. Similarly rupturing a stereotypical image of sexwork, *Eupila* is many women, with

¹ Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (The Male Gaze), *Screen* 16.3, Autumn 1975 pp. 6-18

² Joy Buolamwini, <https://poetofcode.com>

³Joey Soloway, THE FEMALE GAZE, Toronto International Film Festival: Master Class - Jill Soloway, September 11th, 2016 <https://www.toppoleproductions.com/tiff-master-class-the-female-gaze>
transcript at <https://www.toppoleproductions.com/the-female-gaze>

graffiti proudly advertising her profession still visible in Pompeii today. Connecting female archetypes, icons and effigies across millennia, *A New Matriarchy* envisions perhaps a Marian society dedicated to loving nourishment of the mind, body and spirit.

In clearly calculated clashes of scale, context and environment, Aerfeldt challenges our repetitive unthinking gaze, inserting hand-crafted dolls as sheros in familiar art historical paintings. This is both humorous and shocking, as the dolls – already simplified, infantilised, desexualised abstractions of the female form – replace a nude model. Sourced from Etsy, dolls *Alice* and *Venus* were created by Thelma from Dorset (who follows their painted progress); while the rotund *Golda*, with eyes but no mouth, is crafted by Liliya in the Ukraine.

The intervention of these soft touchable objects carrying childhood innocence is particularly poignant in *Cactus-Girl shows what she's made of*. Recasting *Golda* as Daphne escaping the lustful intentions of Apollo, our doll-girl is transformed, not into the laurel tree of mythology but to a spikey cactus. This transposition from a sweet-smelling Daphne to an aggressively protective succulent seriously shakes up the privileged gaze of the past. Similarly, in *Alice isn't impressed*, *Alice* sits silently shocked in front of a compilation of Boucher's *The Abduction/Rape of Europa* [1733, 1747]; while fleeing in *Alice and her cats make their escape* from Boucher's *The Geniuses of Art* [1761], who, of course, are all male.

Their sheros' transfigurations are not just in subject matter. Daily labours, honed expertise, skilled deliberations and spontaneous decisions in the act of painting moves us as viewers into the realms of the sensate. Luscious and substantial, these paintings move us to feel their physicality. Working on the large *Venus from Las Vegas contemplates an uncertain future*, Aerfeldt mixes voluminous quantities of oil paint with sun thickened linseed oil and marble dust powder, creating a layered translucence that can appear abstract in close proximity, only to cohere into delicate lace and flaming feathers at a distance.

With the same painterly dexterity Aerfeldt pivots in the 13 works of the Malevich–Boucher series including *First Flight, Decision, Mindful* and *Suspended* to a dialogue with the geometric non-objective art of Suprematism. Kazimir Malevich proposed that the truth of shape and colour should transcend subject matter, opening an abstract space to experience our feelings and mysticism. Initially layering these geometric symbols as obstacles and blockages over cropped sections of Boucher's *Venus at Vulcan's Forge* [1769], a friction and frisson evolved between the strict sexualised gaze and the liberation of abstraction. Bouncing between these binaries, *Balance, Bubble, Diamond, Expectation, Hope, Mirror, Shift, Strength* and *Vision* are caught in a grid, encouraging us to look/move through them as portals into another realm.

But how far can you push the sensory overload of oil, enamel, aerosol on wax, linen, aluminium, board and paper? In more intimate works Lehmann shifts from erasure and deconstruction to hyper saturated sexualised imagery. In her emblematic *Swan (the flowering)* a recurrent working of Leda and the swan, there is no power play, no substitute for the male phallus. Rather it's all slippery, sexy corporeal pleasure. Carried by a surreal unicorn (every Princesses' friend) *Les Animaux (the Nudge)*, transmutes into animism.

Vibrant colour and rich textures honour the continuity between *The Ponds'* landscape and writhing forms, while a tender touch and the venerable tradition of female totems ensure fertility and fecund fields in *Demeter (the Harvest)*. Delighting in confusion of the gaze's coherency in the sexualised embrace, the entanglement of antiquity *Symplegma* fluidly dissipates into swirling, squishy flesh and organs. While the visceral *Internal Conflict* conveys the sweet surrender of going to jelly and losing our heads. Whose gaze is this simultaneously seductive shiver and restlessly repulsive thrill for?

While contemplating global concepts both painters return to the sandy beaches and bushy crevices of Australia. With gleeful irreverence, a statuesque *Golda* (in equally large underwear) approaches Rubens' *Three Graces* [1639] frolicking in all their big breasted and buttocked fecund fulsomeness in Aerfeldt's diptych *Golda and the Three Graces at Port Willunga*. Reminiscent of childhood seaside holidays, this setting harks back to simpler times of openness, freedom and playful adventure, liberated from the constant constraint of styling one's face and body for social media consumption.

In stark contrast Lehmann's *Australian Gothic* and *The Haunting* edge into disquiet and discomfort – that almost filmic sexual repression or violence which white settler cultures have equated to the land itself. A ghostly countenance masks the contours of the face and dynamism of the space. This vacant trope of horror prompts an interior seeing and urgent regard of our era's ecological and decolonial issues. Shifting the gaze onto conscious oppression and un-belonging is a powerful reckoning.

With each knowing gesture, subtle tear and luscious rip in the social fabric, contemporary Mistresses Chris Aerfeldt and Chelsea Lehmann unsettle and unshackle the power relations of the gaze. Their women, redrawn from the annals of art, mythology and theology, disrupt and discard fixed oppositional perspectives. Instead, through their expansive oeuvres, we feel and slip into multiple presences, human representations, emotional, intellectual, material and spiritual experiences.

Welcome to a painterly praxis of potentiality, delicacy, contradiction, pleasure, beauty, challenge, humour and open-ended engagement in an interconnected world.

Prof Melinda Rackham

Artist and Author, PhD Adjunct Research Professor UniSA Creative University of South Australia

**'Counter Histories' Chris Aefeldt and Chelsea Lehmann
PRAXIS ARTSPACE, 2021**