

nicola loder

wild thing

Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne
11 April – 10 May 2003

In recent exhibitions, Nicola Loder's photographic and video work has evinced an interest in the humanistic concerns of its subjects: large-scale, low-angle shots of heroic children collaged against a gallery wall; videos of intimate negotiations between strangers locked together for the first time. In her most recent work, *Wild Thing*, Loder complicated the expectation that this would be a strangely familiar foray into another's subjectivity.

Eight 'Photoshopped' collages were hung on two walls of the front room of Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP). Four bucolic panoramas, each four metres by seven centimetres, spanned one wall like historical timelines. Here, Arcadian fantasies of expansive, undulating landscapes blipped with trees were observed by two freshly shorn sheep. On the adjacent wall were four square collages of innumerable tourists happy-snapping their way through the five-star sites of *piazze* in Florence, Siena and Venice. Both series had been digitally recomposed: the panoramas were not only seamlessly and excessively elongated, but indexical details (such as other sheep) had been deleted for dramatic effect; the collages consisted of scores of photographs of small groups of people, taken at high-angle from atop tall *campanile*, all jumbled together for the impression of teeming throngs of humanity locked together in the squares.

A number of easy interpretations could be made about *Wild Thing*, but they just seemed, well, too easy. Apparently conceived during the hey-day of Dolly the Sheep, the cloning threat Number One, *Wild Thing* obviously questioned the reasoning behind cloning (using 'Photoshop' clone techniques) as the over-abundant human population depicted tried to clone their memories through tourist photography. Alternatively,



Nicola Loder, *Detail, Wild Thing*, CCP, Melbourne, 2003. Courtesy the artist and CCP.

there was the overt self-reflexivity of Loder's 'photography of photography', the tiny tourists oblivious to her camera surveying their every move à la Thomas Struth's museum photographs. Connect the digital manipulation of these images with the threatened surveillance of our every move on the Internet and you have the spectre of paranoia in the digital age.

Nonetheless, I felt a fascination towards *Wild Thing*, lured by the wealth of interpretations rather than by the rather negative takes on photography or metaphors of digital and genetic modification. Loder's square collages, juxtaposed with the traditional horizontal landscape popularised in Australia by national icons like Arthur Streeton, suggested a different kind of panoramic form or mode of address, one based on layers of space rather than simply its elongation. Both formats rely on an abundance of minute and fine details, dominating the viewing space and provoking a

viewer's curiosity about the possibilities of what they can see—whether that be a bird hidden in a bush or a hideous outfit worn in Florence's Piazza della Signoria. In this work of Loder's, I found myself linking figures across the boundaries between collaged photographs, seeking details of social interaction between people in different photographs even though that sociality never actually existed. Figures seemed to face each other, or even be caught moving towards each other, across the flat, grey expanse of the piazza. The fact that this social interaction in a public space was fictional, because digitally manipulated, was quite obvious in the different tonalities of the flagstones and the varying directions of the shadows which were dependent on the different times at which the photographs had been taken.

Ultimately, I found myself negotiating between photography's twin purposes of documentation and fiction: the possibility and, in *Wild Thing's* case, the falsity of public sociality. This was an internal dialogue, different from Loder's previously depicted dialogues and negotiations between people set to interact with each other on the spot. But it was a dialogue that asserted a desire, or maybe even a need, for sociality between otherwise atomised individuals in the public sphere. The caution of its constructedness, however, prevented it from becoming a lovey-dovey utopian desire of 'why can't we all just get along and communicate'—Loder suggests that broader reflection is needed before that desire can shift from represented metaphor to our present reality. Nevertheless, that desire raised hopeful possibilities as I stared through the broad windows of the CCP (curiously, about the same size and shape as Loder's square collages) and out onto the teeming throngs pacing up and down busy Johnston Street.

anthony gardner

note

See the catalogue essay for the exhibition by Stuart Koop, *Wild Thing*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 2003.

paul knight

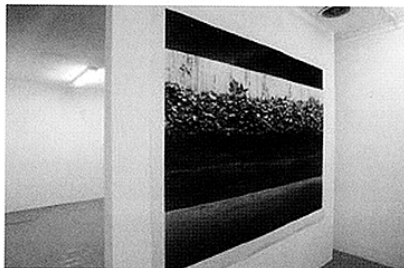
untitled portrait (as proposition)

Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne
6 – 28 June 2003

Paul Knight's photographic installation *Untitled Portrait (as proposition)* at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, used the upstairs studio space in an inspired way. By constructing an artificial partition near the entrance, Knight confronted the spectator with an unexpected division, forcing close proximity to the photograph. His large print dominated the artificial wall, leaving the rest of the room empty, except for the stenciled message: 'a few small words amongst something vast'. These words could be read in an ironic way, since the space was far from expansive. Nevertheless, the message would be easy to overlook, sitting unobtrusively amid a white void.

The photographic print itself depicts a series of barriers—a wooden planter box containing an abundant ivy hedge which stands out vividly against a timber paling fence. The area between the top of the fence and the ceiling appears as a kind of optical illusion leading the eye to the implied space beyond. The space behind the fake wall in the gallery mimics the trajectory of the photograph, only we discover words on the other side rather than a dreary concrete zone we expect to see, effectively confusing the distinction between inside and outside.

At first, the boxed garden seems an innocuous subject, so familiar as to be beneath notice, but intriguing details reveal themselves gradually. The garden appears to be out of place in this indeterminate



Paul Knight, *Untitled Portrait (as proposition)*, 2003. Installation view. Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne. Courtesy the artist.

location, a failed attempt to soften the barren surroundings. The shoots of ivy which have inched their way up the wall behind have been poisoned as a way of restricting its growth. While decorative, the plant is not allowed to overreach its designated location as this would constitute a kind of trespass within a strictly delineated cityscape. Snail trails glisten on the wooden surface suggesting that insects appreciate the greenery even if most people do not (the photographer excepted). The pavement in front of the hedge is also marked with other tracks of traversal, indicating a perpetual flow of movement. We imagine the photographer as one of these passers-by, snapping the shot in a seemingly accidental encounter, even though in reality the process is much more laborious.

Knight's photographs of mirrored sex-venues, illusionistic murals and trompe l'oeils also register a fascination with false perspectives, allowing glimpses of other worlds. By pointing his camera at these interstitial locations, he directs our attention to things we normally would not look at twice. Many of his works feature representations of fertile abundance in sterile settings, placed there in a vain attempt to suggest restfulness: most notable of these is *terrarium (Paris)*, an image of an indoor jungle within a French mall, hemmed in by glass architecture on all sides and lit by blue and pink overhead spotlights. Similarly, in *Hospital Trompe L'oeil*, a Tuscan pastoral scene sits above a hospital bed in a curtained cubicle. As these works suggest, greenery is often used to ameliorate our environment, often at the expense of the plants themselves. After all, casualties of neglect can be seen everywhere—indoor plants are frequently acquired as well intentioned efforts to improve human conditions or as décor accessories, without any commitment to their care. The are pruned within an inch of their lives and poisoned by the toxicity of our emissions. In *Untitled Portrait (as proposition)*, the plant is the central focus of the viewer's gaze yet it also causes us to reflect on the people who have manipulated it. As with Knight's other images of caged foliage, this photograph exhibits an extremely controlled scene and it is the banality of this human-made order that is most disturbing.

brigid magnier