

# Feminism Never Happened

*Robert Leonard*

The title of this show is, of course, a conceit. Feminism did happen. Not only did it happen, none of the works in the show could have been made if it hadn't. Nevertheless, the title prompts you to consider the work here, if only for a moment, outside that frame. Why?

Feminism has always encompassed diverse, even polarised, philosophies. Some feminists align women with nature, others reject the idea as sexist. Some see gender as deeply contingent, a 'social construction', others assert it as fundamental. Some embrace 'femininity', others repudiate it. Some despise prostitution, others think it's the answer. Some reject middle-class values as patriarchal (preferring the rude, abject, and transgressive), others celebrate politeness and decorum (as though middle-class values were always-already feminist). Etcetera. Despite their diversity, in the 1960s and '70s feminists were united over urgent common issues: sexual harassment, rape, birth control, the 'right to choose', equal rights, equal pay, and childcare. But these days, after feminism has effected—and continues to effect—massive social changes in these areas, such core issues take a back seat. Today, more energy goes into problematic, 'grey zone' areas, particularly those to do with representation, sexuality, and desire, making feminism's philosophical diversity more apparent than ever.

Today, feminist art can adopt—and explore the spaces between—any number of philosophical positions. It can be deep and cavernous or shallow and cosmetic. It can be tightly patterned or monstrously organic. It can be confessional and true or feigning and duplicitous. It can be powerful or pathetic, abject or genteel, political or mystical. Rex Butler has argued that, as it can now take any shape, it is currently impossible not to make feminist art.<sup>1</sup> This raises the question of whether feminist art has any value as a category. A recent spate of historicising agenda-setting shows—including *Wack!*, *Global Feminisms*, and *elles@centrepompidou*—have argued the ongoing centrality of feminism to contemporary art, but, in doing so, have downplayed the antagonisms within feminist art.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, *Feminism Never Happened* wants to emphasise antagonisms. It gathers works by women artists from Australia and New Zealand that can be seen within the context of feminism, but can also be seen to put feminism (or feminisms) under pressure.

So, in viewing the works in this show as if feminism never happened, feel free to relish their ambivalences, ambiguities, and guilty pleasures.

Del Kathryn Barton speaks fondly of her rural childhood as an idyllic time during which her imagination ran wild. However, she also alludes to an unspecified childhood psychological problem—her 'thing'. In her paintings, she regresses into an enchanted childhood fantasy world. Her scenes are populated by wide-eyed children (who seem to have magical powers) and their animal companions (who suggest totems and familiars). Nature's fecundity, its over-abundance, is embodied in Barton's excessive, decorative painting style. This style owes much to those decadent Austrian old masters, Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, who famously framed women within the gilded cage of their misogynist fantasies.

While we can think of Barton's children as living in a delightful fantasy world, we could also imagine them as being victims of neglect or abuse. Barton's *Please . . . Don't . . . Stop* plays on this ambiguity. Three children, in various states of undress, look like they are involved in some fancy-dress play scenario. However, their bodies are emaciated and their skin pallid; buds and pudenda are exposed. One child seems to be part-animal, with bunny ears and possibly leprous skin. Another wears a sash with the words 'Please', 'Don't', and 'Stop'. Are the children begging for more ('Please don't stop'), or crying for mercy ('Please. Don't. Stop.')? But even when Barton hints at 'problems', as she does here, she overrides them. We are carried along by the appeal of the fantasy.

Indeed, Barton seems to want to exile notions of trauma and original sin altogether. Take her manifesto-painting, *The Garden of Eden*. It riffs off Christian imagery—Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, *Genesis*, and *Annunciation* iconography—but it's more neo-pagan. A big hand reaches down to finger a vaginal opening in an overripe apple held aloft by two small hands. This time it's God himself (or herself) who pops the apple's cherry and liberates knowledge. Vines spurt out, literally breaking through the frame. The raunchy atmosphere is not disastrous—quite the opposite. Returning to a prelapsarian moment, perhaps a time before her 'thing', Barton is gloriously shameless.

Although we have learnt to expect rich detail from digital photography, Pat Brassington works with low-res source images and crudely colours her images in a way that recalls hand-coloured photographs or early colour printing. In combining photography and collage, her images suggest a past that is partly remembered, partly constructed; a childhood that cannot be confronted directly.

Brassington specialises in suggestive short circuits. One image offers an upskirt prospect, gazing between a woman's legs at her pink-pantied crotch. Her old underwear (flesh-coloured, somewhat baggy stockings and suspenders) and the sepia toning of the image suggest vintage pornography. Here, Brassington recalls Freud's idea of fetishism (that men associate a sexual charge with the thing they saw just before making the traumatic discovery that women don't have penises). In titling her arresting image *Camera*, Brassington also engages Jacques Lacan's observation that the object of desire seems to catch us in its gaze—as though it were actively seeing or exposing us. As much as it addresses voyeurism, *Camera* stares back at the viewer.

Brassington's loaded images turn sexual politics inside out, alerting us to the possibility of power in submission, adventure in trauma, and feminism in misogyny. *Sweet Inspirations* features twin girls, whose Rapunzel tresses are draped across their faces, hiding them, negating them, blinding them—a hair-fetishist's fantasy. The viewpoint is high, suggesting their submission before us. *Font* presents an androgynous child, mouth open. Small red globes, like lollies, cherries, or pearls hover over this orifice. They could be invading, although Brassington's title suggests that the child's mouth is actually their source. *Dressed to Kill* toys with a male fantasy—the phallic woman. A lithe female in a silky gown brandishes a ruddy object that could be a weapon, a severed phallus, or something else entirely.

Kirsty Bruce appropriates images from glossy magazines, copying them into the watercolour medium. At first she focused on beautiful young women (models), but she increasingly introduced men (particularly military types in uniform). Recently, she began including children and seniors. Sometimes she presents her images full sheet, other times she cuts out the figures, liberating them from their contexts. Bruce blu-tacks her unframed paintings to the wall in groups, suggesting the fantasy space of a teenage girl's bedroom wall. The images read across one another, making the white gallery wall into their common background. They seem to float in this space: bigger images appearing closer, smaller ones more distant. Bruce's ensembles feel subtly unified. Not only does the artist bring a particular sensibility to bear in her selection of images, her treatment of those images also makes them feel all of a piece. Her subjects' eyelines direct our own gaze from one image to the next, suggesting relationships between figures who, until now, never shared the same space. While Bruce is attracted to ideologically loaded subjects with strong gender associations, she refrains from analysis or critique. She leaves that for the viewer, who, paradoxically, becomes interested in precisely what it seems the artist overlooked.

Jacqueline Fraser's big collages feature images of svelte and pouty models, which have been clipped and enlarged from fashion magazines. She dresses them up like paper dolls, accessorising them with scraps of fancy fabric (tulle, embroidery, sequins, netting ruffles, ribbon) and lengths of fake hair. These adornments suggest an arsenal of hyper-feminine sexual fetishes—a different kind of power dressing. The collages are shiny yet crude, solicitous yet noxious, trash yet bling. Rough-around-the-edges, they express a love/hate relation to fashion, beauty, women, and class. Fraser's ambivalence is underlined by accusative *Ab Fab* titles, such as *Those Giant Shamrocks Are Super-Glued for Extra Heavy Duty Luck*, *Baby and She's a Vile Gold-Digging Vanessa Beecroft Cut-Out*, *HUSTLER*. Do these titles represent utterances by their subjects or about them? Are the works expressions of iconolatry or iconoclasm? Is Fraser finding power or powerlessness in vacuous fabulosity?

Anastasia Klose's YouTube-style video, *Film for My Nanna*, finds her wandering around the Melbourne CBD in a wedding dress, carrying a handwritten placard explaining 'Nanna—I Am Still Alone!', and interacting with passersby. It's edited like a music-clip, to Don McLean's *Castles in the Air*. An unaccompanied bride is a surreal sight, especially one waiting unceremoniously in a train station. What's the explanation? Is she a jilted, traumatised Miss Havisham-type, condemned to walk the streets in her bridal gear, flaunting her failure, or is she sending up the very expectation that a woman needs a man? *Film for My Nanna* is about different generations of women. It is pointedly not addressed to her mother (from the feminist generation), but to her grandmother (from a generation that assumed that there must be something wrong with an unmarried woman). It may not represent Klose's own anxiety about being unmarried, then, but simply offer a portrait of herself as a failure through her grandmother's eyes—although one senses that Klose might take a perverse pleasure in this. In a more recent video, *True Love*, the artist enjoys a slow-mo backyard frolic with her cat, to the tune of The Hollies's *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother*. As the cat jumps into her arms and nuzzles her breasts, it seems that Klose has at last found true, mutual, unconditional love, albeit in the form of a pet. But would Nanna approve? For works like these, Klose has been labelled both pathetic and heroically honest. But she is neither. Her personal disclosure never gets that personal. It is always generic—stuff we can all relate to. Klose is an exemplary sufferer.

Fiona Lowry is known for painting 'the bush'—those unpoliced wastelands on the edge of civility; some of her landscapes are based on documented sites of violent crimes against women. Sometimes her landscapes are empty, sometimes peopled. She airbrushes her scenes in a romantic soft-focus manner, as if in ignorance or denial of their menace.

In the wide-screened *Anything You See in Me Is in You*, a girl's skirt is hitched up, revealing her buttocks. The picture's distanced viewpoint—and ours as viewer—suggests that of an approaching man who will have her. Painted in purples and reds, this pornographic scenario is framed poetically, as if through 'rose-tinted glasses'. While the title could be read as an accusation (from the woman)—suggesting the 'romance' might be a deluded-male projection—the effect is more ambiguous.

In the show where she unveiled this work, Lowry included a small, keepsake portrait. Its title—Richard—suggested that the artist was on a first-name basis with the subject, who was, in fact, 'the Night Stalker', American rapist and serial-killer Richard Ramirez. In prison, Ramirez famously had endless female admirers; the media called them 'killer groupies'.

Lowry's works imply dissociation: the dissociation of perpetrators, who romanticise their crimes and their relationships with their victims, and the dissociation of victims, who, being unable to process their harsh experiences, 'screen' them with happy fantasies. Thus Lowry's works suggest the ways that women might become caught up within—and identify with—'male' fantasies.

More recently, Lowry has put herself in the picture. In *Will You Speak Before I Am Gone?*, a younger, idealised, bare-breasted version of the artist finds a noose around her neck. She looks at us with an ambiguous expression, as though we might be her tormentor, her accomplice, her judge, her saviour, or some messy combination of them all. Perhaps she captures us within her fantasy.

At the heart of photographer Fiona Pardington's work are issues of female agency. In the late 1980s and early '90s, she made a name for herself with raunchy images that conflated feminist agendas with masochistic sexuality. While many of her photographs exemplified a feminist agenda to 'reverse the gaze', celebrating men as sexual objects, they also reinforced old binaries, romanticising the boxer and the clenched fist. Undercurrents of male violence permeated the work. One of Pardington's most iconic images, *Choker*, shows a woman's neck adorned with bruises, suggesting a necklace, love bites, or a strangler's imprint. It was easily read as a celebration of domestic violence: 'Look what he gave me!'

In the early 1990s, Pardington uncovered a trove of old proof-sheets of black-and-white photographs shot for a pornographic magazine decades earlier. Unlike the girls-next-door idealised by *Playboy*, the subjects of these photos were tarts. Impressed by the girls' enthusiastic performances and their pathos, Pardington selected, rephotographed, and enlarged individual frames and presented the images as her own. She printed them softly, perhaps to suggest the blur of

memory, perhaps to hide the fact the images were sourced from tiny originals. Some images were marked with crosses, indicating shots the original, unknown, presumably male photographer had rejected, but also implying the criticism or elimination of the women. In celebrating these pre-feminist slappers, is Pardington setting back the cause of feminism or finding an unrecognised dimension of female empowerment in pornography?

Photographer Yvonne Todd is known for her formal portraits of imagined women. Suffused in pathos, her characters typically suffer from some impediment, injury, or malaise, explicit or implied. Todd's works often recall forms of fringe, special-interest pornography. One senses that they have been tailored for specific tastes: for a viewer with a penchant for big-toothed girls, tweens dressed in Victoriana, homely Christians, or doomed beauties. They always seem to be addressed to someone else's desire, and this invisible implied addressee is as much the subject of the work as the women depicted.

Todd's work's relation to feminism has always been a question. The artist made her first nude—*Did Anybody Tell You That You're Pretty When You're Angry?*—especially for this show. A topless girl in green-lace knickers flaunts a matching parasol, and bares her breasts and her big (false) teeth. This cheesy, vulgar image works in tandem with its title, to suggest a patronising, chauvinistic response to feminist demands. It's as if, when confronted with a righteous feminist campaigner, deluded blokes could only see a sultry and available page-three girl.

But that still doesn't tell us whose side Todd is on.

Jemima Wyman's video-performance *Lady in Red* is part-appealing, part-annoying. Wyman dons some traditional tools of female seductiveness—big lashes, red lipstick, red dress, red heels—but goes overboard. She dances alone, on an empty dancefloor, singing along (badly) to the Chris de Burgh romantic standard, *Lady in Red*. At first, she holds the camera aloft, staring into it, occasionally plunging it down into her cleavage. Later, the camera is strapped to one of her legs, offering upskirt flashes. In both cases, Wyman's body becomes radically foreshortened in a manner that is comely but also grotesque. Men may be habitual perverts, but here, as an exhibitionist, Wyman imposes a voyeuristic viewpoint on her viewer, whether they like it or not.

As always, there are different ways to read the work. Some viewers invent a story around what they see: the woman has been stood up and is now drowning her sorrows, drunkenly dancing with and singing to herself, in a mockery of what might have been—wanting but failing to embody to the Kelly LeBrock fantasy. Others see it as taunting and teasing the viewer, who is placed in the role of Wyman's dance partner, becoming a passenger, taken along for the ride. Wyman, herself, describes *Lady in Red* as an exploration of drag. It scrambles male and female: she dresses hyper-female but sings a man's song. It also typifies homovestite drag: she dresses according to her gender, but in a way that is 'too much'. *Lady in Red* is at once about how we position Wyman and how she positions us.

1. Rex Butler, 'This Is Not a Cigar: On the Feminising of Mikala Dwyer', in Mikala Dwyer: *Hollowware and a Few Solids* (Melbourne: Barberism and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 1996), n.p. Admittedly, Butler was arguing that everything had become feminine, not feminist, but it is not such a stretch.

2. *Wack!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 4 March–16 July 2007; *Global Feminisms*, Brooklyn Art Museum, New York, 23 March–1 July 2007; and *elles@centrepompidou*, Musée national d'Art Moderne, Paris, 27 May 2009–21 February 2011.