



Little Deaths

Curated by Stuart Bailey
Artists: Lane Cormick, Hao Guo,
Andrew Hurlle, Rob McHaffie
Apartment, Melbourne
2–24 August 2008

Apartment, a gallery in a block behind offices in St Kilda Road, was the ideal venue for *Little Deaths*, a group show investigating the place of pornography in four artists' practices. Visitors had to walk up flights of carpeted stairs and find the right unmarked door—the whole experience was slightly creepy. Once inside, it became clear that the show was also serendipitously timed, opening in the wake of the Bill Henson controversy when the difference between pornography and art was the line in the sand everyone was looking for. Nevertheless, *Little Deaths* wasn't aiming to contribute to that debate, and instead used humour and tenderness to look at pornography as subject matter for art.

A recurring theme was fandom, particularly artistic homage to favourite porn stars. The artist book that accompanied the exhibition showed a selection of art works alongside found bits and pieces from porn magazines. In an interview fragment from *High Society*, a woman talks about the things fans have done for her, including one fan in jail who carved her picture into a bar of soap and coloured it using the food dye in M&Ms. Rob McHaffie's photographs of Sexpostars (one signed by 'the dirtiest girl in porn, 2007') and his incredibly convincing oil paintings of scrunched-up pages from porn magazines (*I found her and I*

found her again, 2003) also gave it a sense of the celebrity worship and desire.

Not only does this say something about creativity itself, but it brings to mind questions about the purpose of representing sexual acts: the copying of photographs from magazines essentially moves you further and further from the actual sexual event. Andrew Hurlle's ongoing investigation into the relationship between industrial printing processes and pornography is interesting in this regard. His work systematically clears out and degrades pornographic images and magazine layouts until all that is left is the topography of what was. For example, *Hard Core* (2000), showed the front cover of a porn magazine stripped of all text and images, leaving only the masthead, colour scheme, and emptied out rating-sticker. In another context, this work would be an opaque abstract. Here, the layout alone is coded as illicit. This brings to mind Argentinean artist Juan Tessi's painting series *Thumbnail Nail Gallery Post*, which depicted the thumbnails of videos on porn websites. Like Tessi, Hurlle's tiny black and white view of a horse's rear end abstracts an image at the edges of sexual appetites.

The focus on print media as a mode of receiving pornography suggests nostalgia, as it is safe to say that girly magazines have been outmoded by the internet. These days it would almost be quaint to have a stack of magazines under the bed, such as that depicted in Lane Cormick's *Untitled* (2007). A pile of painted magazine covers—a mixture of porn, Greyhound booklets, and Kawasaki catalogues—in a corner of the gallery evokes

teenage boys' bedrooms and the smell of old socks. Lane Cormick has reproduced the mess of a teenager in the same way that fans of porn-stars might fetishise their likenesses in fan art doodles. Here however, the longing is not for porn, but for youth and slackerdom.

At this level, *Little Deaths* betrayed itself as very Generation X in spirit, preoccupied with bygone modes of production and consumption and mournful of the passing of the 1980s and '90s. However, the exhibition was taken in a contemporary, more relevant, direction by Hao Guo. *Surgery* (2008), a digital print of a black man's penis superimposed on a white man's body, is an attempt to build the perfect male 'body-by-numbers' according to clichés based on race. The implication is that the masculine stereotypes presented in pornography can have negative implications on the individual's regard for his own body, and that despite the fact that many porn images take women as their subject, when men are included they are often depicted as sexually insatiable and without 'weakness'.

In a discussion of the status and effects of porn, it would have been beneficial to include a female perspective. But maybe that would have been a different show. What *Little Deaths* contributed was a humorous, playful and surprisingly gentle look at pornography from four male artists' perspectives.

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